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HOUSING, CHARACTER, AND ARTIFICIAL LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Portrait of a Lady, Henry James claims in his preface to the New York edition of the novel, originated in a “slight ‘personality,’ the mere slim shade of an intelligent but presumptuous girl.” James marvels at “how absolutely, how inordinately, the Isabel Archers, and even much smaller female fry, insist on mattering.” James makes the girl matter through a process of “logical accretion” that begins with a “square and spacious house” that “*had* to be put up round my young woman while she stood there in perfect isolation [my emphasis].”¹ The author writes that he sought to “append” to Isabel the “high attributes of a Subject” by building up layers of material support: including her domestic house, a network of characters, her structural position as a “smaller female fry” in a cultural field that conventionally reserves such lofty attributes for masculine figures, and her hefty “ado” of a novel, the form of which James famously describes as a large house with many windows. Though James is well known for complex portraits of interior consciousness, this dissertation expands on his more superficial and Gothic impulses, his wonder at the “mystic conversion” that moves a “slim shade” of a character into sustained and artificial liveliness. James identifies “detail, of the minutest” as his material for both channeling readerly interest and for accumulating Isabel’s character “brick by brick.” Although James begins with a sense of Isabel’s character, it is through inhabiting a body contained in a house embedded in a character network within a novel that her liveliness unfolds. These intersecting levels of what I am calling imaginative housing move her character to a life that James confesses exceeds his understanding.

By attending to the aesthetics of imaginative housing, or dynamic forms of inanimate containers, this dissertation delves into ongoing negotiations of what gets to count as human and as

¹ James, Henry, *The Selected Novels and Tales of Henry James*, 24 vols. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1906 – 8, p. 171.

animate. I track this concept across a historically broad array of American fiction and film from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) and Nathaniel Hawthorn's *House of the Seven Gables* (1851) to Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2001) and Steven Spielberg's *A. I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001). In attending to "housing" in these texts, I seek to understand how aesthetic forms can unsettle the relationship between interiors and exteriors in ways that bring the distinctive characters populating these texts to life. Each chapter isolates and names particular instances of houses and structures that disrupt static or passive containment, a critical move that builds on Diana Fuss's study of modernity's sensuous and formative imbrication of material spaces with internal, psychological structures. Where Fuss specifically attends to how interiors have shaped writerly imaginations, this dissertation shifts focus to how material surfaces put characters into animating relations.

Ultimately at stake in attending to the relational construction of artificial characters is illuminating the constructed nature of human character; in other words, housing can help show human character to be the artificial—and animate—product of intersecting types of structures normally understood to be inanimate. I focus on domestic spaces, for literary mediations of domestic relations have proven rich grounds for expansive possibilities for both representing and reimagining how bodies relate to each other and to their own, intimate conditions of embodiment and liveliness. Home ownership is a particularly provocative site for exploring how genres of imaginative housing have warped familiar settings to generate unfamiliar effects and new possibilities. When structure quickens character, access to and ownership of housing constitutes an ideological battle over the reproduction of life itself.

The importance of stylized containers and material surfaces in moving fictional personalities to life suggests a contemporary phase in human understandings of artificial animation. Unlike the

pre-modern Galatea, a manmade form filled by divine spirit, and unlike the modern chess-playing Turk, a mechanical structure moved by human will, the characters I have chosen to analyze are not mimetic humans. Rather, the characters of my archive comprise material armatures that produce and sustain a mysterious animation that their creators often explicitly claim to neither control nor understand. This dissertation, then, might also serve as a literary history of what Ian Hacking has called “Neo-Cartesianism.” Although Descartes’ name evokes a hierarchized dualism of mind over matter, Hacking’s contemporary update on the classical philosopher updates the ghost controlling the machine with animated machines that generate ghosts. The dualism of Neo-Cartesianism imagines the body as a form of housing that animates, reconstructs, and regenerates character; the familiar Cartesian notion of a monolithic will moving dumb matter has been replaced by the notion of imbricated development and emergent consciousness. The scenes of animation in my archive dramatize this changing notion in their emphasis on the narrative unfolding of an artificial form’s character: there are few spectacular births in this dissertation; interiority instead emerges through accumulated details and narrative progression. The lively artificial people populating American literature have generated—and, I argue can continue to generate—a wealth of modes for reimagining embodied relations with not only human but material and ecological worlds.

The five chapters constitute five stories of the often ornate, sometimes florid styles in which the overtly artificial small fry of American fiction have persisted and of the often obstinate, sometimes creepy ways in which they have insisted on mattering. The characters of my archive have surfaces that mimic the corporeal exteriors of persons whose humanity has been historically challenged or denied. Each chapter asks why these fictional small fries are housed in seemingly mimetic forms even when their content is impossible or irreducibly nonhuman—as in the cases of reanimated corpses, man-eating houses, clairvoyant children, and anthropomorphic robots. The

types of housing I investigate include material structures including domestic houses, crypts, and character bodies; and social structures including marriage, nuclear families, and religious belief. Though each of these structures have typically been associated with stasis and rigidity, identifying when they act as housing shows how each can instead be provocative and enlivening.

I show how the domestic house acts as housing when its interior exceeds the material limits of its exterior; or when its associative significances and characters outweigh structural support, as in James's architecturally constructed characters, Danielewski's morphing mother-house, and Louis Sullivan's sculptural skyscrapers seething with unseen liveliness. Crypts act as housing when their decaying structures move individuals to eschew patriarchal inheritance and pursue unsanctioned appetites: the vitality of the living in the case of Poe's reanimated Madeline Usher, monetary gain in the case of Hawthorne's aristocratic Hepzibah Pyncheon, and extramarital desire in that of William Faulkner's straight-laced Addie Bundren. Character bodies act as housing when their superficial appearances contradict, restrict, and paradoxically queer the development of "interior" personalities or psychologies, as with Spielberg's little boy bot David. And social norms act as housing when their coercive prescriptions prompt individuals to shift genres, as illustrated by Ira Levin's Rosemary Woodhouse transforming from happy housewife into determined detective. These interactive and mutually informative relationships between containers and characters effectively unite feminist intersectionality with Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory by showing that not only social collectives but individual identities are assemblages of human and nonhuman actors.

The structure of the whole is divided into two parts: the first focuses on material, domestic houses, and the second shifts emphasis to the metaphorical structures of social constraints and programming. This setup represents a methodological blurring of the lines between material and social structures. Such a method supports my aim of narrating the queer modernisms that have

existed alongside and challenged aesthetic minimalism through excessively detailed prose and stylized generic conventions and narrative tropes. The first half looks at literary versions of modernist transparency first in James and Danielewski and then in Poe, Hawthorne, and Faulkner. I show character interiors to be an uncontainable atmosphere of effects that emerges from the constantly shifting and expanding social significances of decorative material surfaces. The second half focuses on social structures in *Rosemary's Baby* and *A.I.*, which depict a housewife and a robot boy outgrowing the housing of their domestic, intimate spheres in novel ways. I juxtapose Rosemary's imprisonment within a seemingly impenetrable interior with a mid-century Tupperware campaign promising to "lock in freshness" and with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's post-partum protagonist who loses her mind while sealed inside a floridly decorated room. Finally, I conclude with a coda in which the trope of the "fixer upper" comically inverts the usually horrific relationship between inanimate housing and animate characters; although the tone differs dramatically from horrific housing, the end result is consistent: the fixer upper adapts to and with characters and their social ambitions, showing character to be the lively product of inanimate structure and uncovering the ideological structures that tie social and material structures in mutually formative relations.

INTRODUCTION

I made it on the bevel.

1. There is more surface for the nails to grip.
2. There is twice the gripping-surface to each seam.
3. The water will have to seep into it on a slant. Water moves easiest up and down or straight across.
4. In a house people are upright two thirds of the time. So the seams and joints are made up-and-down. Because the stress is up-and-down.
5. In a bed where people lie down all the time, the joins and seams are made sideways, because the stress is sideways.
6. Except.
7. A body is not square like a crosstie.
8. Animal magnetism.
9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel.
10. You can see by an old grave that the earth sinks down on the bevel.
11. While in a natural hole it sinks by the center, the stress being up-and-down.
12. So I made it on the bevel.
13. It makes a neater job.¹

Cash's list of reasons for beveling his mother's coffin in *As I Lay Dying* both captures the activity of housing and the adaptive nature of the effects produced by inanimate structures. The bevel is a figure for the motion of the inanimate and its slippery distinction from the living. The animal magnetism of Cash's account is a force he attempts to control with his carefully constructed coffin, yet once enclosed in this beveled housing, Addie's corpse is moved back to a form of life as this newly formed life-in-death drives her entire family on a formative and dangerous journey. "Life" in this puzzling novel is no singular event but an ongoing process of rebirth and reconstruction through material means. This dissertation tracks narratives about housing in order to argue that intersecting levels of presumably inanimate structures produce the effects we know as character. In what follows, I investigate *housing* through a variety of domestic houses—from the family estates in

¹ Faulkner, William, *As I Lay Dying: The Corrected Text* (New York: Modern Library, 2000, PDF e-book), 76.

Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James, to the fashionable apartment building in Ira Levin and midcentury modern abode in Steven Spielberg—as well through domestic social structures and character types—from oppressive nuclear families, insane patriarchs, and revolting matriarchs, to scheming siblings and creepy dependents. I demonstrate that normative structures as those associated with middle-class domesticity ultimately queer their inhabitants. In other words, housing moves in curious, unpredictable, and often unsanctioned directions instead of containing or metonymically representing its contents. Poe’s waifish Madeline Usher rises with superhuman destructive powers after being entombed in the family crypt in the basement of her ancestral estate. Hawthorne’s Hepzibah Pyncheon’s seven-gabled house becomes a medium for refusing the very aristocratic heritage that it seemed to promise. Levin’s happy housewife transforms into a determined detective once she finds herself trapped in an apartment attended by a demonically tyrannical social sphere. Such animating and queering capacities transform structures from mere houses into *housing*.²

The critical questions of this project are threefold. First, I ask what the form of housing in and around modernism can tell us about the form of fiction—and vice versa. This conversation is routed through literary architecture studies, wherein formative scholarship by Diana Fuss calls for evaluating metaphorical qualities of built structures and the material conditions shaping symbolic

² In her book *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai writes about the affect “animatedness,” which she defines as “being moved” by an agency outside one’s self. While Ngai ties this affect particularly to racialized bodies, and reads stop animation as depicting those bodies “being moved,” my attention to housing means that I will be paying more attention to the mover than the moved. Since my movers are primarily domestic houses, they are often gendered feminine, as womb-like receptacles, yet because of their animating powers these containers are anything but passive. See Ngai, Sianne, “Animatedness,” *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004. PDF e-book), loc. 989 – 1390.

relations.³ Fuss, like Ellen Eve Frank, assumes that the metaphorical qualities of built structures metonymically represent—but also shape—the interiority of the humans inhabiting them. While this approach accounts for the autobiographical works of Fuss’s interest, there is also a need to account for the often strange, sometimes flat, overtly artificial characters of fiction that thematizes the living qualities of inanimate structures. I thus turn to a second critical conversation to ask what forms of housing and fiction can tell us about characters who do not achieve the representational depth or mimetic authenticity that E.M. Forster famously claimed was requisite for believable fictional characters.⁴ Such inconsistent characters are the subject of Omri Moses’s study of modernist characters written by, among others, Henry James and Gertrude Stein. Moses sees these characters as being without steady integrity or consistently individualized interiority.⁵ For Moses, such supposedly flat characters become models for maintaining an adaptive and open relation to changing material circumstances and social relationships.⁶ Finally, I ask what investigating the formal structures producing those artificial characters can tell us about the production and reproduction of human character and ultimately animation. This final question shares the philosophical stakes of neo-Cartesianism as developed by Ian Hacking as well as of the vitalist understandings of the

³ Fuss claims to locate “the emergence of modern interiority in the join between mind and matter, where an interior can refer to either a mental or a physical state, and usually both at once.” Fuss, Diana, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 16.

⁴ Frank argues that literary architecture is a work of artistic seeing or cognition. In short, imaginative architecture is a work connected to human minds. In Frank’s words, “the reader distills images into an understanding of mind; the artist issues forth from consciousness images, builds (out) from mind into literary art.” My project moves in the opposite direction, taking imaginative structures as themselves building something like mind, or more specifically, character effects. Frank, Ellen Eve, *Literary Architecture: Essays toward a Tradition: Walter Pater, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Marcel Proust, Henry James* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 186.

⁵ Forster, E. M., *Aspects of the Novel* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1985.

⁶ Moses, Omri, *Out of Character: Modernism, Vitalism, Psychic Life* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. PDF e-book), 2014.

material world as developed by Graham Harman and Jane Bennett. Hacking asks scholars to seriously reconsider Descartes' seemingly tired proposition that consciousness is housed inside bodies while Harman and Bennett ask us to consider all matter—including humans—as equally capable of entering into vibrantly animate assemblages. I engage these neo-Cartesian debates by attending to the power struggles at play in certain forms of housing and between beings struggling over limited resources using unevenly potent ideological tools. I have thus selected to focus on the over-wrought, the creepy, and the uncanny, a focus which makes the historically marginalized and ontologically contested the center of my studies.

My archive presents paradigmatic examples of housing and character effects in the form of vengeful women haunting suburban houses, peripatetic corpses occupying decaying family estates, penetrated wombs sealed into mysteriously locked rooms, and a queer little being developing inside child-shaped automation. Each chapter embeds a piece of twentieth-century American fiction within “substrata” of literary, pop, and visual culture productions. I thus track generic conventions over time and across media to demonstrate how genres—themselves structures that might seem to contain or deaden their contents—sustain and evolve their effects.⁷ The resulting textual clusters may seem at first like odd groupings—like Danielewski with architectural polemics and Henry James, or Levin with a Tupperware ad campaign and Charlotte Perkins Gilman—but they highlight the slippage between material and social worlds, the ways in which social structures have material

⁷ Mark McGurl built on that model by arguing for a “telescoping” perspective that can zoom in and out of micro and macro scales. My approach to genre might be seen as applying these zoomed-out models of literary history to what Pierre Bourdieu termed “fields of cultural production,” which he argues are the immediate landscape of shared formulae. See Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006; McGurl, Mark, “The Posthuman Comedy,” *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 533 – 53; and Bourdieu, Peter and Randal Johnson, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

impacts and the ways in which material structures have been constructed on the basis of ideologies. In my archive, housing creates effects that are unprecedented and nonrepresentational—my subject is, in essence, artificial life. Looking at the construction of artificial lives uncovers by analogy the seams in the construction of human character.

Forms of Housing/Forms of Fiction

The first conceptual question driving this dissertation asks what forms of housing can tell us about literary forms—as well as vice versa. This formalist question is one taken up by literary architecture studies, which considers how represented structures bring aspects of the external world—including human psychology—into imaginative worlds. Fuss gave this line of thought period specificity in her influential *The Sense of an Interior*, in which she argues that “modernity is simply another name for the reign of interiority, that moment in history where exteriority is driven indoors by the domesticating passions of the bourgeoisie.”⁸ In Fuss’s work, psychology and housing do not simply reflect one another, but both mutually form one other, meaning that psychological interiors are as colonized by sensuous materials as the external world is wrapped in metaphorical interiority. She thusly relocates the sensuous outside in a period once characterized as downplaying the material world in favor metaphorical significance. For Fuss, literary architectures teach us about the historical formations of human interiors, which themselves reflect and respond to architectural interiors.

⁸ Fuss, *Sense of an Interior*, 12. David Spurr takes a different approach to modernism, claiming that its characteristic architectural metaphor is homelessness, or a lack of being at home in the world. For Spurr modernists may be indoors but they are not at home due to architecture’s severed ties to traditional meaning-making systems like religious belief. For Fuss, the psychological interior has brought the exterior world inside in modernism; for Spurr, the superficial exterior world has lost any sheltering weight; for both, literary architecture is a figure for how external structures shape and are shaped by internal imaginative structures. See Spurr, David, *Architecture and Modern Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

Fuss tracks the ways sensation brings material exteriors into psychological interiors, a move which broadly characterizes how literary architecture studies have understood the relation of literary forms to forms of architecture, as well as of fictional content to external and material referents. In *Literary Architecture* Ellen Eve Frank challenges readers to approach Henry James or Marcel Proust (or even her own critical writing) in two steps: first by paying attention to “internal architectural structures” like “cathedrals which symbolize character, temples which organize memory, or dwelling-houses which are settings for action.”⁹ Second, she challenges readers to “notice the same or similar structures outside, in the physical, external world.” From this comparison she wants us to not only catch “echoes or correspondences between internal and external structures” but also to see that “‘internal’ structures are also structures of consciousness, conventions of perception, systems of belief, as well as the activities of thought and feeling.” Anthony Vidler argues that there are no uncanny buildings, but only “a representation of a mental state of projection” which for “particularly periods” have been invested with recognizable “cultural signs of estrangement”: in other words, uncanniness in architecture is a culturally and historically specific genre.¹⁰ This recognition of the significance of immaterial forms influences my own attention to the historical resonances in the imaginative structures within my archive, such as the echoes of slavery in the floorplan of the Gothic family mansion in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *House of the Seven Gables* as well as in the styling of futuristic robots in Spielberg’s *A. I.: Artificial Intelligence*. The structures within a work bring echoes of external reality inside imaginative worlds, demonstrating that decorative structures are not empty of content but are inflected by historical patterns of recognition and thought. Literary architecture figures the way

⁹Frank, *Literary Architecture*, 1979.

¹⁰ Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 11.

imaginative structures bring in and rework social patterns in addition to figuring the ways human attention brings material exteriors inside.¹¹ Literary architectures are malleable, and the specific qualities of a writer's depiction of houses are more than purely ekphrastic: they also constitute ideological orientations toward the social and psychological structures that shape their formal qualities. Where literary architecture studies look at which ideologies get embedded in forms and how those ideologies shape both imaginative forms and imaginations, literary housing intervenes by asking how those forms impact character specifically.¹²

The details of how housing impacts character gets worked out in surfaces and ornament, meaning that I also turn to scholarship on such stylistic minutiae. For D. A. Miller, style is that which draws attention to its formal qualities and superficial details for their own sake, an ideological stance

¹¹ Judith Fryer reads Edith Wharton and Willa Cather to argue that those writers create fantasy structures in which women can record and store their own experiences independent of masculine ownership and self-definition. Marilyn Chandler argues that there is an “architectural habit of mind that designs and builds a house both to reflect patterns of life within it and to configure life in certain patterns,” but she also reads in imaginative architecture “what the author conceives to be the essential structures of our lives.” Fryer, Judith, *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) and Chandler, Marilyn, *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 3.

¹² William Gleason also tracked historical patterns in both imaginary and actual architecture in his study of built spaces in the American south paired with literary architectures from slave narratives to scrapbooks. Gleason focuses on how systems of race and class have restructured both built spaces and imaginary ones. In his chapter on slave narratives, Gleason shows how escaped slaves recast the figure of the house to construct imaginative homes independent of the material master's houses they had left behind. In this work the entanglement of immaterial interiors with material exteriors had and has the purpose of restructuring imaginative possibilities for collective living. In a similar vein, Anne Cheng looks at Adolf Loos's purely speculative plans for Josephine Baker's house to show not only how this imaginary space was structured by and decorated along racialized patterns of voyeurism but also to show how Baker herself integrated her own ideas about embedding and implicating the supposedly external looker inside the performative scene. Gleason, William, *Sites Unseen: Architecture, Race, and American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2011) and Cheng, Anne Anlin, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

that is queer in its stakes, for such surfaces keep attention away from a self that would be unacceptable and shameful. Miller reads insignificant details like that of a toothpick in a Jane Austen novel as the “paltry content” that “intensifies our sense that the container contains *nothing*” that it is “the insistence of a self-containment where what is contained amounts to a little more [. . .] than the container.”¹³ Naomi Schor, in contrast, tells us that the content of ornament and detail has been ideologically gendered as feminine—hence for Schor, attention to ornament is specifically feminist in its stakes.¹⁴ This dissertation is both queer and feminist in stakes. Literary housing looks at marginalized character types and asks how their formal containers become the means for their queer development—their houses that are bigger on the inside than outside, bodies that obscure or hide character, rooms that seal in and amplify presumably external elements, and rigidly mechanical bodies that produce adaptive and growing desires. My evaluations of the decorative details of housing—Gothic flourishes, minimalist or ornamental materials, and wrinkled faces—constitutes and evaluation of ideological responses to the superficial details that determine what counts as human.

In addition to forms of housing showing us that material surfaces are what constitute humanity itself, housing can also teach us how narrative plots both deploy and exceed generic conventions. Imaginative housing has a way of generating plots wherein people and houses lose their shape. Warren Adler’s *War of the Roses* (1989) and Edgar Allen Poe’s “Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) are representative in their respective stories of how crumbling familial relations bring houses crashing down. Through close attention to such scenes of disturbed forms, I demonstrate the power of literary forms to produce visceral experiences of watching someone lose their structures—be they material, social, or psychological. There is a notable absence of new

¹³ Miller, D. A., *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 13.

¹⁴ Schor, Naomi, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

construction in this dissertation, only decay and destruction of structures built by or inherited from others—even the suburban house in Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* is a previously owned, Neo-Colonial house, a structure built by other people in a borrowed style. If “to build is in itself already to dwell” as Martin Heidegger claimed in his essay addressing a German housing shortage, then living in structures already built by others poses a problem that is solved in American cultural productions by the activity of formal disturbance—building happens through reconstructing extant and borrowed structures. In Danielewski’s novel, Will and Karen Navidson reforge their romantic intimacy in direct response to their house physically warping and eventually collapsing. Losing or warping structure constructs fictional form.

The importance of entangled internal and material structures in understanding the development of gendered and sexed subjects has been central to feminist thought since the Black feminist movement developed intersectionality as the study of the entangled social, political, material, and economic structures within which identities are embedded and shaped.¹⁵ The effects of these structures are irreducible in their impact on human identity and social position, particularly for those whose identities unfold at the intersections of race, class, and gender. That gendered social structures are reworked within internal, imaginative structures is the subject of Penny Sparke’s research. Sparke makes the case that the modern interior and the decorative arts ought to be studied not only as material realities but also as abstract constructs where the identities of inhabitants are historically constructed and reshaped.¹⁶ Sparke’s research, then, considers the decorated home interior as an internal structure.

¹⁵ Kimberle Crenshaw codified the term in her influential 1991 essay arguing for the irreducible impacts of structures of race, class, and gender on women of color. See Crenshaw “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241 – 99.

¹⁶ Sparke, Penny, *The Modern Interior* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).

The material house by contrast, and its imbrication with internal structures, is Delores Hayden's subject. Hayden argues that spatial prescriptions for houses during the 19th and 20th centuries made gender into "the most salient feature of every citizen's experience and aspirations."¹⁷ Research in literary and internal architectures demonstrates that though human identities are shaped in material structures, they are also reshaped on an ongoing basis. Imaginative houses are active and formative, playing a narrative role described by Chandler as "not simply [. . .] historically accurate settings or stage props but as powerful, value-laden, animated agents of fate looming in the foreground, not the background, of human action."¹⁸ Frank describes the literary house as "*alive* [. . .] a body with a soul," and characters inhabit their lively bodies as much as they inhabit dynamic houses, homes, and fictional forms like novels, short stories, and films.¹⁹ Such liveliness of structures is the foundation for literary housing. Housing departs from literary architecture in claiming character as its product—housing is not a body with a soul to paraphrase Frank, it is a medium that relates to other bodies and materials to form souls.

Forms of Character

Mieke Bal has argued that "a person's housing is especially connected to his character, his way of life, and his possibilities"; in other words, character does not exist in pure isolation, but unfolds in reciprocal relation to external, material ways of life.²⁰ Material ways of life are always shifting, ever unstable—whether in interpretive meaning or in formal shape. I use literary housing in the most obvious and literal sense as an internal structure entangled with material houses and ideas of home;

¹⁷ Delores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: the Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 42.

¹⁸ Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text*, 3 – 4.

¹⁹ Frank, 21.

²⁰ Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 138.

but housing is scalable to include the very inhabitants of those material and social structures. By scalable I mean that characters not only inhabit houses and homes but also their own bodily forms, and just as internal houses are complexly imbricated with external actual built architecture, character bodies are entangled with human bodies. Not in a referential relation, but in a reflexive relation that inflects the meanings and significances accorded to material bodies. In other words, housing is an internal structure that conceptualizes fictional characters as internal structures—and like internal, imaginative houses, imaginative characters exist in dynamic relation to external, material structures.

Hence in my first chapter, Mark Danielewski and Henry James accumulate both internal (descriptive) detail and external (printed) form to create ghostly characters haunting the domestic houses of their fiction. The second chapter shows how being restricted to her feminine, diseased body reanimates Madeline Usher to rise and bring down her Gothic family estate, literally ending her brother's story. In the third chapter, the locked room mystery genre illuminates how the character created by Charlotte Perkins Gilman opens the possibility of an outside by “losing” her mind when sealed into her overdetermined sex inside her floridly decorated room. And the final chapter looks at the mechanical housing of a child-shaped robot to argue that encountering and negotiating the rigid cultural associations with the child form drives Spielberg's David to “grow” queer desires in excess of his programming to be a domestic dependent. In each chapter, formal imaginative structures including bodies, houses, and plots move characters to action and give them lives, if not rooms, of their own.

The materiality of fictional character is at the forefront of the ontology of literary character: the very terms “character” and “type,” as Dierdre Lynch has noted, are terms that can refer to both beings *in* fiction and to the fonts and print that house them.²¹ Lynch's study of character in nineteenth-

²¹ Lynch, Deidre, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

century British novels calls on literary scholars to disassociate the history of fictional character from the specific histories of human interiorities. This project is closely related to Bal's exhortations to think of character not in terms of psychological roundness or flatness, as the modernist E.M. Forster popularized, but instead in terms of their structural functions.²² Bal defines characters as actors (a structural position) endowed with human-like characteristics, and he describes these "complex semantic units" as "fabricated creatures made up from fantasy, imitation, memory: paper people, without flesh and blood."²³ Housing, as referenced at the beginning of this introduction is, for Bal, a crucial factor in endowing actors with characteristics to produce characters. Alex Wolloch sees these paper people as made up of narrative resources including descriptive language, plot importance, and relational significance.²⁴ Wolloch determines that protagonists rise to structural prominence out of competition with other characters over these resources. Bringing such structural understandings of character to the study of housing is a way of moving beyond studying the interior subjectivities of characters and toward studying the structures that intersect in ways to give rise to them. Housing and character effects do not indicate a subject-object relation but rather a thing-thing relation, with housing retaining its own mysterious animation and the characters it produces retaining an uncanny, thing-like artificiality.²⁵

²² Bal, Mieke, "From Actors to Characters," in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 114 – 31.

²³ Bal, *Narratology*, 115

²⁴ See Wolloch, *The One vs. the Many*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

²⁵ For "things" as distinct from subject-object relations, see Brown, Bill. "The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism)." *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2, (1999): 1 – 28. The uncanniness of fictional characters is attributable to their closeness to things made of paper and ink while also resembling humans. The repressed thingness of character always threatens to return when the very liveliness of those characters is narratively threatened.

Though this dissertation attends to the material and inanimate structures that give rise to characters, this study does still have something to tell us about human character. The relationship between fictional and human character in this study is that of analogy between parallel construction processes: both fictional and human character are the result of ongoing reconstructions of and adaptations to given housing. What seems a common thread is that housing—especially when old—has its own character with which others must compete, compromise, or cooperate. The writers in my archive variously approach the givenness of housing on an evaluative scale ranging from oppressive to utopian—Nathaniel Hawthorne complains that “dead men’s houses” devitalize the development of new lives; whereas the contemporary fixer upper comedies featured in my coda utilize old houses as media for idealistic reconstructions of self and family.

Whether new inhabitants evaluate their relation to their given housing as overwhelming or as a welcome foundation for reconstructing themselves into new characters, housing seems to have a way of producing unprecedented liveliness—or character effects—which also tells us something about how details of humanity are negotiated in the external, material world. Looking at the details of literary housing including the bodies of fictional characters utilizes the insight from literary architecture studies that fictional structures renegotiate the external structures they bring into literary worlds. In her book on artificial women Julie Wosk notes that the “female” version of manufactured products is signified by *adding* decorative details onto structure, like eyelashes, projections, or bows.²⁶ The “stripping” of ornament under modernism constitutes an attempt to get to the “neutral” human form, which has neither femininity nor color. What we learn from artificial structures, then, is how an aesthetics of housing is also a re-evaluation of who or what gets to count as human.

²⁶ Wosk, Julie. *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eyes*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), xii.

The characters of my archive are animated actors, but they are not human subjects—quite literally in the case of Steven Spielberg’s mechanical robot—yet attention to the very artifice of these characters nonetheless reveals important truths about the ways human character is constructed. Though a typical literary study might read “beneath the surface” of a fantastic story about a robot to interpret David as a metaphorical representation of a human child, I resist that impulse and linger instead on what happens when we take David’s narrative artificiality seriously, when we attend to his mechanical housing as an internal, imaginative structure. Approaching fictional character by emphasizing its artifice illuminates the artificiality or constructed nature of human character. My archive is also full of characters who may at first appear to be straightforward representations of human characters—yet as Henry James puts it when talking about the process of bringing Isabel Archer to, he sought to “append” to her the “high attributes of a Subject” by building up her material supports, including her domestic housing, her network of supporting characters, and her status as a “small fry” female in a field of cultural production that conventionally reserves the “high attributes of a Subject” for masculine figures.²⁷ Isabel Archer, in other words, *seems* to achieve subjectivity, and that only after James has assembled around her the accumulated details supporting those attributes. It is through inhabiting a body in a house in a novel that Isabel comes to life.

In a preface to his early novel *Roderick Hudson*, Henry James claims that the potently animated figure of Christina Light required her formal opposite to balance the narrative, an opposite which he wrote in the form of Mary Garland. The author praises Light as having “even more life than the subject required,” but he bemoans Mary Garland as a failure, even despite “the later patching-up of the girl’s figure” in later revisions of the novel. James claims that Garland failed because “the ground

²⁷ James, Henry, *Portrait of a Lady* in *Complete Works of Henry James*. (Delphi Classics e-Books, [1897] 2012, PDF e-book), loc. 33435.

has not been laid for it, and when that is the case one builds all vainly in the air: one patches up one's superstructure, one paints it in the prettiest colours. . . *the building nonetheless totters* and refuses to stand square [my emphasis]."²⁸ Garland's housing, in other words, was not fully embedded in a network of other housing. In contrast, Light was "all firm ground"—a "multiplication of touches"; and, "wound-up with the right silver key," she would "go on a certain time by the motion communicated."²⁹ Where Garland's foundationless building fails to cohere or produce a lively character, Casamassima's firm foundation of formal detail transforms her into a veritable proto-robot, an artificial life that maintains itself beyond the pages of *Roderick* until James "waylay[s] her at some turn of the road to come" and houses her in yet another novel.

Like Garland's tottering structure, and like the cyclical crashes in housing markets, the house of American fiction is repeatedly falling, failing. Even the comedic note on which this dissertation ends features houses that fall on their inhabitants—the fixer uppers of Buster Keaton, Warren Adler's *War of the Roses*, and of the recent television series *Arrested Development*. Comic reprisals of the tragic fall of Poe's house of Usher or of the imagined demolition of Hawthorne's seven-gabled house, I argue that at work in these falling houses is an instability of human character and its ideological dependence on domestic housing. In her critical study of the American dreams invested in material houses, Delores Hayden claims that "dream houses got out of control economically, environmentally, and socially because they carried unacknowledged costs" like "large amounts of energy consumption," "unpaid female labor," and "they were often unavailable to minorities."³⁰ Hayden writes that these

²⁸ James, Henry, *Roderick Hudson* in *Complete Works of Henry James*. (Delphi Classics e-Books, [1875] 2012), loc. 11399.

²⁹ James, *Roderick Hudson*, loc. 11425.

³⁰ Delores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: the Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life*. (NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 42 – 43.

costs eventually “overwhelmed the institutions that had traditionally financed” home ownership. The collapsing housing of American fiction is in part an internal figure for this external institutional failure. According to Hayden “the home is such a total parasite [. . .] the occupants experience themselves as victims or, at best, ineffectual ciphers in a large, impersonal, centralized system,” but the repeatedly falling house is a fictional trope where Americans have reworked attitudes toward house and home, sometimes taking pleasure in their failure, often claiming agency in reconstructing the scales of their dreams.³¹ It is in imaginative housing that Americans have long demonstrated an awareness of housing’s animating influence on the American character and the necessity of reimagining its features to negotiate alternative lives and more expansive definitions of the human.

Artificial Lives

That the characters featured in this dissertation are moved to life by uncannily familiar styles of housing and that those characters often look so human points to a crucial lesson that I argue literary texts have long been trying to teach us about the natural world: that the phenomenon we call life—including and perhaps especially that referred to as “natural” life—is artificial, a fiction comprising the gossamer threads of human attention captured by material forms. To call life a fiction is not to suggest that it is unreal or inauthentic, but is to suggest that fiction is vitalizing; narrative forms give continuity to changing tropes and prescriptive plots connect one thing to another, linking, enclosing, and animating the relations that comprise worlds.³² Considering characters as inhabiting not only houses

³¹ Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream*, 48.

³² Worlds are themselves fictions constructed out of what Leo Bersani calls connections and what Peter Sloterdijk calls “biune intimacies.” If housing holds together animating relations, it might be a more general term for what Peter Sloterdijk has termed the *sphere*, or “the place that humans create in order to have somewhere they can appear as those who they are.” Sloterdijk claims that life begins not at conception but at intimacy, and he uses the bubble as the figure for how intimate relations create the effect of interiors. See Sloterdijk, Peter, *Spheres: Microspherology*. (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2011), 28.

and homes but their very bodies is a way of seeing in isolation the relational effects of structures. Approaching fictional characters as comprising a dualistic relation between structure and effect allows housing and character to remain relatively independent from one another while animation—or the enduring impression that fiction produces something that seems alive—is mysteriously dispersed between both. Ultimately, I argue that attention to the aesthetics of housing in and after modernism uncovers ongoing negotiations of what gets to count as human.

The final section of this introduction delves into the broader philosophical implications of the argument that character effects are produced in relation to housing. Can attention to the artifice of artificial lives in narrative fiction provide insight into the so-called natural life animating our own, human bodies? Does thinking *through* rather than against the dualistic terms implicit in the term housing (interior and exterior, surface and depth, ornament and function, form and content, mind and body) productively complicate the ways subjectivity is deployed in literary criticism? How might displacing subjectivity as the center of literary analyses complicate the directionality and causality of relations between subjects and objects, content and form, and interior and exterior? And, to connect this final line of inquiry back to the first, can reconfiguring these literary terms deepen our understanding of how unfamiliar or unexpected forms of life can demand empathy and response? That this dissertation's character cast consists of the insane patriarchs, cranky crones, suburban housewives, and creepy robots of American culture demonstrates how retraining our attention to familiar texts can bring out less familiar characters and relations. And that this character cast comes to life in relation to stylized houses and adorned bodies anticipates contemporary trends in philosophical thought.

The philosophical stakes of this dissertation relay between two seemingly polar philosophies: on the one hand that of flat ontology—in which there is no substance outside of materials and their

internal characteristics and in which all matter is equally capable of entering into new relations with unique qualities.³³ And on the other, that of “Neo-Cartesianism”—in which material bodies contain subjectivities (or in terms of this dissertation, character effects) which remain relatively independent epiphenomena from the materials that originated them. Where Object-Oriented Ontology conceives of the characteristics of objects as only internal to material relations, Neo-Cartesianism accounts for qualities that are uniquely external to material assemblages, such as human identity and attention. Both philosophies, however, emphasize the formative and animating capacity of material and inanimate worlds. The sense of an interior is in these philosophies displaced by inanimate matter humming with lively potential and an understanding of human consciousness and identity that does not rest on assertions of superiority or uniqueness. Both philosophies instead understand human consciousness as the product of specific assemblages of nonhuman materials and forces.

Ian Hacking defines contemporary understandings of life and animation as “Neo-Cartesianism,” a philosophy of the separate but intertwined ontologies of material substrates and animation effects.³⁴ Hacking clarifies that he does not follow Descartes’ understanding of the human soul as substance, and states that “I do not think of the soul as some immutable center of being but

³³ For a definition of flat ontology, or as Graham Harman terms it, “object-oriented ontology,” see Harman, Graham, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago, 2005). This philosophy levels humans with animals with material objects and asserts that all are equally capable of entering into relationships. Objects, in Harman’s philosophy, consist of the relations between materials and the qualities that result from their union. Jane Bennett develops a similar argument when she argues that seeing agency as a quality distributed across complex webs of assembled matter lays the foundation for a politics that steers away from blame and toward a more ecologically sound assumption of widely shared responsibility. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

³⁴ Hacking, Ian. “Our Neo-Cartesian Bodies in Parts” *Critical Inquiry*, 34 no. 1 (Autumn 2007): 78 – 105. Although the dualism associated with Rene Descartes may have been a hierarchical and even denigrating philosophy, Hacking’s point is that bodies, in culture and science, have been increasingly given their own space to occupy—they can and are treated as distinct from the concept (if not literal substance) of an individual soul or character.

as *character evolved* in contact with a world full of people, things, and events [my emphasis].”³⁵ Hacking argues that contemporary advances in medical treatment of the body has returned us “to an increasingly mechanical view of the body” in which parts of our bodies can be separated while we maintain a sense of a continuous self—much like the wax of Descartes’s meditations, which drips and loses bits even as the viewer perceives continuity in the substance.³⁶

Only now instead of the human constituting the subject perceiving continuity in an exterior material, in Hacking’s Neo-Cartesianism, the human now observes its own body as the changing yet continuous substance. This changing view categorizes the body as a material capable of entering into and leaving assemblages. Hacking writes that as a consequence of our perceptual shift, “our bodies are likely to become more other,” but rather than perceiving this othering of “our” bodies as deprecatory to the human experience, this shift provides an opportunity for expansive empathy, for recognizing the otherness of external materials within our own material bodies and hence creating the possibility for recognizing the potential in others for something resembling our own sense of selves.

In a similar vein, Leo Bersani returns to Descartes’ meditations to argue that “the world seen as differential otherness is a misrecognition of the subject’s perception of a differential otherness within himself.”³⁷ In other words, moments of recognizing difference in the external world are actually moments of recognizing external otherness within the self, the thinking thing which reaches out to the world to know it, to make the external present within. Where Hacking emphasizes the body as housing for easily alienated and mechanized parts, Bersani emphasizes the mind as housing for a “thinking thing” with processes of thought and attention that normally remain hidden from the subject

³⁵ Hacking, “Our Neo-Cartesian Bodies in Parts,” 80.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 78.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 7.

who houses this unknown thing. If our bodies house characters or subjects that house thinking things, then we have a model for perceiving other material assemblages—such as the bodies of animals and the containers of artificial intelligences—as capable of producing irreducible and lively effects parallel to, if not the same as, what we think of as human subjectivity.³⁸ In short, what makes us human is precisely that which is external to humans.

Hacking and Bersani both wrote against a tide of scholarly vehemence against Cartesian dualism, but other scholars have come to recognize the potential productivity of such binary thinking. Alison Landsberg writes about the ways body part liveness distributes subjectivity across embodiment and about the ways mass media and technologies enables empathy for outsiders within previously insular identity groups.³⁹ Landsberg argues that independently alive body parts and inanimate technologies act as “prosthetics” that endow subjects with previously unprecedented awareness of the outside world, which effectively reproduces them into new subjects. N. Katherine Hayles, whose influential *How We Became Posthuman* was vehemently anti-Cartesian, has recently written that although she previously “struggled to avoid the Cartesian mind-body split” she “could not escape the dualistic thinking that clung to [her] regardless of [her] efforts to avoid it.”⁴⁰ She notes the “pull,” for those trying to conceptualize embodiment, of “proprioception, the internal sense that gives us the feeling we *occupy* our bodies [my emphasis].”⁴¹ Her revision of her previously adamant anti-Cartesian message

³⁸ Another way to think if the opportunity provided in the experience of the strangeness of our own bodies is a model for the sort of “access” that Ian Bogost argues ever recedes from human understanding of animal and material worlds. See Bogost, Ian, *Alien Phenomenology, Or, What It’s like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

³⁹ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁴⁰ Hayles, N. Katherine. “Flesh and Metal: Reconfiguring the Mindbody in Virtual Environments.” *Configuration* 10, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 305.

⁴¹ Hayles, “Flesh and Metal,” 230.

tiptoes a little closer to dualism while still rejecting incantations of the philosopher synonymous with it. While mind-body dualism is not the only way to think about embodied experience, the irresistibility of Cartesian dualism is incontrovertible, and the thinking of this long-dead, oft-refuted philosopher continues to haunt our best efforts to escape him.

The dualistic conception of animation has implications for how modern subjects relate to other people and the world around them. These implications are illustrated by two unrelated yet strikingly parallel scenes from contemporary fiction: Roman Polanski's 1976 *The Tenant* and Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* (2012). In Polanski's film, the character Trelkovsky drunkenly asks his love interest Stella at what point an individual ceases to be who he thinks he is, and he elaborates by imaginatively deconstructing his body: "If you cut off my arm, I say me and my arm. [. . .] take out my stomach, my kidneys, assuming that were possible, and I say me and my intestines. Now, if you cut off my head. What would I say? Me and my head or me and my body. What right has my head to call itself me?" Trelkovsky here rhetorically enacts the strangeness that Hackings says modern medicine has brought to our bodies, yet the fictional character does not stop at the medically possible but spins out a fantasy in which even the brain becomes separable from an individual.

Indeed it is his mind that Trelkovsky eventually loses in the film; the pressures and demands from close living with other tenants, and the individuality-suppressing aspects of his employment gradually drive him out of his mind: what is left in the end is a body that dresses and unconsciously acts like the previous, female tenant of his apartment. If it is his body that produces the resident character, then the penetrability of that body—its porousness to the sounds and smells and influences of other people—means that that character can be displaced or replaced by other characters. Bechdel makes a similar yet distinct claim about embodied identity—in *Are You My Mother?*, the cartoon Bechdel gradually amputates bits of her body until what remains is a head on a pillow proudly

proclaiming “still me!” By granting her head the right to call itself “me,” Bechdel spins a fantasy in which there is no more room for other characters: stripping the body as inessential to identity is to both conceive of character as separate from the body, but also to remove the body’s unpredictable impact on that character—a way of stripping the organs and appendages that bring in the external influences of others. What literature provides that philosophy does not is viscerally impactful narratives depicting people who lose or are trying to rebuild their structures.

When the strangeness of human embodiment can provoke empathy for the embodiment of strange others, subjectivity ceases to be an a priori concept for understanding the aims and results of narrative production and criticism. Emphasizing character in place of subjectivity means eschewing reference to any universal being and insisting on effects that are singular and self-referential. A self-containment that makes it a study in the materials and structures that construct character rather than the content of character or identity. In response to what Hayles described as “the feeling we occupy our bodies,” each chapter represents a different style of occupation. Haunted housing features suburban houses and bodies that become “possessed” by the aspirations that move them. Gothic housing inverts this relationship: the decay and decorative excess of ancestral homes disturbs and provokes into animation the bodies of its inhabitants. In locked rooms, sealed and inanimate housing encloses and consequently amplifies outside threats. Automated housing features fiction wherein artificially animated houses vitalize the characters they contain: the superficial stylings of these artificial architectures so determine the movements possible for their characters that they induce a radically singular and independent liveliness.

This artificiality shows that the structures left us by others constitute habits and genres of normality that make it possible for people to be animate in a vast collective of forces that are necessarily irreducible to any individual human. Neither real humans nor fictional people inhabit

worlds comprising the attention of any one individual, but rather we all inhabit worlds brought to life by the attention-suspending, habituating forms of others. It is in understanding how the forms of others animate certain styles of living that we can identify ways to revitalize narratives beyond their racist, sexist, or ableist origins and into fictional worlds that enable us to see and consequently revise the problems of those origins in ways that we could not see in real life. The problems of the real are far more vast than attention can grasp, but the problems of fictional worlds are contained and framed, finite “locked rooms” that produce the effects of the constructed fiction of causality (the fantasy of *if-then* or *it follows that*, the fantasy that actions predictably cause rather than simply correlate with reactions). But just as thematically the locked room is sealed and yet already penetrated, formally the locked room of fiction is a self-contained world that is always penetrated by the influences of the real—for it is the attentions of readers external to the work that move the forms to life, as Roland Barthes recognized in his extensive treatment of “a reader” as the collective knowledge and experiences of all those who might encounter and actively produce a text beyond the mere dead work of type on a page.⁴² The character produced by housing is spectral, yet its spectrality has heft insofar as it is based in material housing. Yet fictional housing depends on the evanescent presence of attention and so it too is as spectral as the character it produces. It is in its malleability and instability that lies its promise, for the house of fiction opens up and warps based on the attentions of readers, and hence is open to reinterpretation, adaptation, emendation. Unlike the material forms of the real human world, the gossamer houses of fiction are as persistent as they are shapeable, and studying specific forms of these houses means that we can look at historically specific assemblages and how they contribute to an ever-changing sense of what it means to be human.

⁴² Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

Haunting the House of Fiction from Mark Z. Danielewski to Henry James

This chapter asks what reading Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2001) as a Gothic haunted house novel can tell us both about the novel's experimental, self-consciously postmodern form. This perhaps simple approach leads me conclude that the novel accumulates superficial details to assemble the effects of artificial liveliness. Scholarship on the novel, including N. Katherine Hayles's investigation of the novel's layers of remediation and Mark Hansen's resistance to reading it as a postmodern hermeneutical void, are both important foundations for my reading. Yet I depart from consensus conclusions that Danielewski ultimately develops new means for representing human subjectivities.⁴³ Instead I argue that characters like Johnny Truant and his mother Pelafina Lievre come into ghostly animation gradually through decorative materials in a way that resists any easy categorization of humanity or recognizable interiority. The character Truant names his own artificiality when he writes that he suspects that the haunted house he is writing about "has created [him]."⁴⁴ The novel thematizes this creation of artificial life by turning it into a struggle over limited narrative resources—in the end, the dead Pelafina Lievre displaces her fictional son when he disappears from the narrative and the novel is followed by a lengthy series of appendices dedicated to Lievre and her material mementos. This reading claims *House of Leaves* as part of a modernist experiment in literary animation, and to develop this critical stake, I read it alongside Henry James's haunted houses.

⁴³ Hayles's study of *House of Leaves* argues that the novel is primarily concerned with remediation, but that its layers of remediation constitute the novel's medium for assembling "subjectivities coherent enough to become the foci of the sustained narration" see Hayles, Katherine, "Remediation in House of Leaves," *American Literature* 74, no. 4 (December 2002): 781. See also Hansen, Mark. "The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski's 'House of Leaves,'" *Contemporary Literature* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 597 – 636.

⁴⁴ Mark Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), 370.

Where Danielewski writes characters who narrate their own genesis in housing, Henry James reflects on this process in his own voice. When describing his efforts to bring a character to life, Henry James claims that he began with a “vivid individual,” and assembled around it the situations, settings, and the “*house* of the novel [my emphasis].” James imagines his character as an adaptive, growing entity, one who he carefully avoids labeling a referential human or even *a priori* subject. Instead, James emphasizes the uncanny mystery of Isabel’s existence by referring to the “lurking forces” behind her animation, and he marks his character’s strangeness by describing her growth in terms of plant life (an association of literary form with plant life that Danielewski duplicates in his house of *leaves*). Exploring this modernist experiment in literary artificial life helps illuminate the artifice of human character; characters quickened by housing show us the importance of superficial material details in assembling the appearance of animate subjectivity. Together these haunted houses bookending the twentieth century narrativize character as a relational phenomenon—relational between persons, things, and immediate environments.

Reanimated Women and the Gothic Houses of Bundren, Pyncheon, and Usher

Gothic houses in William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *House of the Seven Gables*, and Edgar Allen Poe’s “Fall of the House of Usher” depict housing that in opaquely concealing its characters produces the illusion of interiority. Developing a special case of the first chapter’s story of character as a relational construct, this chapter emphasizes that the interiorities produced out of these relations need not be comprehensible or even disclosed to be a potentially animating force in the text—they need only the mediation of material housing. The housing in this fictional tradition are decaying containers inherited from oppressive patriarchs, yet housing also manifests in the aging or dying bodies of dyspeptic women from Faulkner’s Addie Bundren to Hawthorne’s Hepzibah Pyncheon to Poe’s Madeline Usher. Each character is in her own way a

member of the walking dead, and each text uses animal magnetism to thematize her as an artificially quickened, inanimate structure. In addition to sources on animal magnetism, this chapter looks at research on domestic housing policy for widows in nineteenth-century America, as well as at Horatio Greenough's architectural polemics decrying the neo-Gothic in nineteenth-century American architecture. These sources help me build my case that housing forms that conceal or obscure their contents animate an interior that is also subversive and inappropriate.

Though strands of scholarly inquiry have attempted to explain and grasp each of these characters—as the objects of incestuous desire, as metaphors or foils for their masculine relations, as frames for oppressed human voices—I seek to allow the uncomfortable absence of their interiority to remain present. Where Bundren scowls and silently muses about her unspoken affair, Hepzibah Pyncheon heaves grand sighs that Hawthorne never explains for his readers, and Madeline Usher smiles her maddeningly mysterious smile in death. These feminine characters are marked by decorative excess, which is itself a moral condemnation of so-called superficial desires and inappropriate appetites, including Addie's and Madeline's affairs and Hepzibah's ventures in capitalism. These decaying and decoratively excessive female bodies are each central in animating the network of character relations and trajectory of narrative progression in their novels.

Locked Wombs and Porous Rooms in Ira Levin and Charlotte Perkins Gillman

I read Ira Levin's Gothic apartment in *Rosemary's Baby* as the setting for a locked room mystery. Both novel and film begin with the upscale apartment's impossible penetration, which frames the novel's central mystery: how Rosemary's womb was implanted with a monstrously foreign fetus despite her pious confinement of intercourse within the sealed bounds of her marriage. Whereas the first two chapters looked at housing as a medium for the relational construction of character, this third chapter looks at housing that mediates the proximity necessary for such relational construction. Where

the first two chapters looked at dynamic material surfaces that produce character, this second half of the dissertation looks into the insides of static and stable domestic housing. My reading of *Rosemary's Baby* shows the horror behind what Fuss claims to be the colonization of the exterior by interior, private worlds. When these worlds become so thick that any outside seems to have disappeared, the characters produced within those thick interiors become demonic in impact and influence. Although demonic in name and affiliation, these neighbors ultimately amount to little more than a nosy, overbearing old couple with reaching and important social connections, the type of people who might in reality belong to a tightly knit, exclusive social collective, or to what Peter Sloterdijk might call a group with a “shared inside.” *Rosemary's Baby* is a mystery that begins after the love story's end—and love stories, as Sloterdijk postulates, “are stories of form” in which “every act of solidarity is an act of sphere formation, that is to say the creation of an interior.”

This chapter vividly stages the scalable and interlocking nature of housing—Rosemary's womb is housed within her marriage, a bond which is housed within her domestic apartment, which contained within a larger building is housed within a social sphere, which is itself housed within an urban setting. That each scale of containment is penetrated by invading supposedly external forces belies the fiction of the ideological promise of locks and seals. The room is locked in the same way that a womb is locked—which is to say it is not at all impenetrable, but only thick with ideological promises that make it seem like the outside has disappeared. To track housing's thickness in ideology only, I read *Rosemary's Baby* alongside not only detective fiction, but also in the context of Tupperware's midcentury marketing campaign as well as with Jane Jacob's midcentury publication *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, where she argues that though “borders are thought of as passive objects, or

matter-of-factly just as edges” they actually “[exert] an active influence.”⁴⁵ These multi-media sources track a consistent gnawing awareness that locks and seals do not contain but rather bring people, animals, and things into animus-inducing—and consequently animating—proximity.

“Desiring Machines in Automated Housing in Spielberg’s *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*”

The final chapter of this dissertation turns to a less immediately obvious narrative of domestic housing—that of Steven Spielberg’s *A. I.: Artificial Intelligence*. Though a futuristic work of science fiction, the unsettling film unfolds a robot’s artificial psychology primarily in relation to his domestic dreams. David’s dreams are housed in both his child-shaped robotic body, and in his midcentury modernist-styled domestic dwelling. By setting the construction of a fantastic artificial psychology in quiet domestic housing, the film provides a recognizable alternative construction of subjective interiority that is deeply disturbing in its damningly slight differences from familiar human variations. To make this argument, I analyze the film through its three primary categories for indicting contemporary American constructions of human realness: childhood, domestic interiors, and automation.

Confrontations with such human institutions queers David’s trajectory, sending him down wayward paths after inappropriate, impossible, or incomprehensible desires. Just as the women of my second chapter demonstrate that interiority need not be represented or comprehensible for it to be animating of fictional character, David shows us that interiority need not be at all human. David’s interiority is the artificial result of relations with people, things, and institutions—it is not his interior subjectivity but his relations and trajectories within his world that is queer, a concept that builds on

⁴⁵ Jacobs, Jane, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 259.

Sara Ahmed's assertion that queerness is not in internal, static quality of individuals but a dynamic and phenomenological orientation within immediate worlds.

In contradistinction to a dominant trend in fiction and theory on artificial intelligence, *A. I.* is unconcerned with policing a structural divide between real humans and artificial ones. I contextualize and support my readings by situating this film within a historically deep tradition of American speculation on those categories of human artifice. This tradition includes Stanley Kubrick, Dean Koontz, Ray Bradbury, Philip K. Dick, and Isaac Asimov; popular television, and SF films like *The Jetsons*, *The Terminator*, and *Jurassic Park*; as well as commercial marketing in American periodicals and mass media. The film's style supports the historical revisionist project of this futuristic film. The revisionist project being a reimagining of the scale of American consumption: by returning to the aesthetics of yesterday's houses of tomorrow, *A. I.* asks us to imagine a world in which intimacy between people and their things is not a threat to humanity but rather a potential solution to the problems attendant with waste and overproduction. At stake is not only exposing the artifice underlying human realness but also proposing an ethical model for valuing emotional attachments between humans and nonhumans. My focus on the intimacies between people and the nonhuman objects of their attachments aligns with my larger stakes in destabilizing the categorical binary that so many have so confidently assumed separates humans from the nonhuman worlds we inhabit.

CHAPTER ONE, Haunted Housing from House of Leaves to “House of Fiction”

Form follows function. The rallying cry for minimalist aesthetics has preached to countless consumers and producers alike that ornament is not just aesthetically, but even morally suspect. Austrian architect Adolf Loos famously pronounced ornament a “crime” against taste, a waste of labor, and a driver of obsolescence.¹ Yet ornament persists. In fact, ornamentation seems a vital practice for the architect often credited with coining the phrase, Louis Sullivan, in his 1897 essay on skyscraper design.² Reacting against the contemporary architectural practice of severing ornament from other building types and pasting them onto the façades of downtown skyscrapers, Sullivan wrote that the skyscraper—no less than the church or the house or even the human or the tree—could have a form that would natively express its interior functions. “It is the pervading law,” Sullivan proclaims, “of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman [. . .] that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function.”³ My question here is simple: given the well-known, minimalist “glass box” aesthetics of the international style Sullivan inspired, how is the so-called father of that movement responsible for buildings that look like the Carson Pirie Scott building in Chicago (see figure one)? Or, to use Sullivan’s own terms, what function could the curling, cast-iron vines and intricate, blossoming forms possibly be following?

¹ See Loos, Adolf, *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays, Studies in Austrian Literature, Culture, and Thought*, trans. Michael Mitchell, ed. Adolf Opel. (Riverside, Calif: Ariadne Press, 1998).

² Sullivan, Louis, “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered.” in Athey I., ed. *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings* (New York, 1947), 202 – 13.

³ Another American polemicist credited with originating the functionalist formula was Horatio Greenough, a sculptor who wrote in the mid-nineteenth century. Anticipating Sullivan, Greenough emphasized growth and movement, and like Sullivan, Greenough utilized sumptuous decoration in his design practice. See Greenough, Horatio and Harold A. Small, *Form and Function: Remarks on Art, Design, and Architecture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947), 60, 62.

The answer lies in Sullivan’s rhetoric. Minimalist invocations of the architect’s dictum elide an important modifier from the original phrasing: “*ever*.” This adverb literally distances form from function on the page and brings to the epigram a sense of motion. Form may follow function, but in



Figure 1. Detail of corner entrance, Louis Sullivan, Carson, Pirie, Scott Building. Chicago, 1899 and 1903-04 (photo: Chris Smith, CC: BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Sullivan’s rhetoric and practice, it follows *ever* a step apart. “All things in nature have a shape, that is to say, a form, an outward semblance,” Sullivan reasons, and these forms “express the inner life, the native quality of the animal, tree, bird, fish.” Sullivan turns to nature not to represent it, but to learn from its functions to create a *living* architecture capable of adapting to growth, for the life functioning within *ever* exceeds the dimensions of its formal container. In a time witnessing the birth of unprecedented social functions requiring new building types, Sullivan sought a form capable of keeping up with these transformations. The purpose of Sullivan’s ornaments is to entice “the

people” through a “beauty and sumptuousness of the outworking,” and their forms follow the ebbs and flows of human bodies and commercial exchange set in motion by the building. “The moment we peer beneath this surface of things,” Sullivan says of natural and artificial forms alike, we behold “the clear, fluent, unfathomable depth of nature,” where “unceasingly the essence of things is taking shape in the matter of things” in “this unspeakable process we call birth and growth.” For Sullivan, essence (interchangeable here with function) is an ongoing process, a narrative unfolding in “jointed and interdependent” relation to form and matter. Sullivan “looks” through a tree’s trunk or a flower’s stem into an “interior” that seethes with animation, a vitality that *takes* shape in the matter supporting it. Sullivan’s rhetoric constructs a gap between the structural “surfaces of things” and the lively “essence of things,” yet this gap does not imply that decorative forms are disconnected from function. Rather, forms and function adaptively relate, and ornaments—like Sullivan’s seed germs shooting out tendrils thickening into vines unfurling leaves and flowers all to enrapture passersby—tell the story of how interiors can exceed the material dimensions of their forms.⁴ For Sullivan, forms do not contain or transparently communicate, they set things in motion.

This dissertation traces literary and cultural accounts of how inanimate structures produce the lively effects that we recognize as character. I look specifically at the intersections between domestic houses and social roles surrounding domesticity. What I intend to show is the generative capacity of inanimate structure. Ultimately at stake is not only showing the inanimate origins of human liveliness but also showing that literary form does not depict subjects but the material structures that generate something lively that can resemble subjectivity—this is how not only houses

⁴ Greenough wrote that the law of natural structure is that of “adaptation of forms to functions,” and so in architectural construction, “the unflinching adaptation of a building to its position and use gives, as a sure product of that adaptation, character and expression.” Greenough, *Form and Function*, 62 – 63.

and social structures but bodies themselves function as housing in my account. Looking at the capacity of architectural forms to generate character makes the act of reading literature an act not of reading the content and depth of human subjectivities but of reading the inanimate structures that are the precondition for those subjectivities. The slippage between material and social structures is a strategic one indicating that it is not merely houses but *housing*, fictional containers that continually generate uncontainable effects that interest me.

I offer the liveliness of Sullivan's ornate crimes as an illustrative figure for the stakes of Mark Z. Danielewski's *The House of Leaves* (2001), a novel that according to the author initially gestated in "an image of a house that was a quarter of an inch bigger on the inside than on the outside."⁵ Danielewski goes on to illustrate the confusing ontology of how the essence of things ever takes shape in material form by narrating his wonder "if this image contained a story or was just a footnote to a story, or a poem, or maybe something else entirely; but the image persisted, keeping me company." Grappling with the question of whether the form of the house contains or is contained by the story he wishes to tell leads the author to an epiphany: "Oh, my god! All the characters I've been working on live in this house! And all the theoretical concepts that I have been wrestling with are represented by this house!" The ontological confusion of a house that is internal to a story, metaphorical of content, and an independent image existing alongside the author suggests that the form of this house follows unstable and developing functions. As the house transforms internally to the narrative at the novel's core (a fictional manuscript called the *Navidson Record* about a family of young professionals relocating from New York to a strange house in the suburbs of Virginia), the material of the novel itself progressively morphs in an explosion of typographical

⁵ McCaffery, Larry and Sinda Gregory, "Haunted House—An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 99 – 135.

oddities—footnotes crawl around the margins, lists appear and disappear in inset “windows,” and descriptions of an expanding hallway and a falling man are set like concrete poetry. Like Sullivan’s iron blossoms, Danielewski’s elaborate fonts and painstakingly constructed margins express liveliness churning behind the façade of supposedly inanimate structures.⁶ Danielewski’s haunted house exists only through textual mediation; yet the material, decorative qualities of that text still express the adaptive relation between the fictional house and its represented interior, its metaphorical content, and its literary functions.

Danielewski’s haunted house novel, while also a contemporary experiment in the novel’s form after the onset of the digital age, is a continuation of a fundamental question about the relation of literary form to its narrative functions after modernism. Danielewski’s elaborate fonts and ornately constructed margins express an ominous liveliness churning behind the impassive façade of a supposedly inanimate, single-family abode. These “meta” textual deformations may seem to be a “disorganization” of meaning and character, a postmodern hermeneutical void. Yet there is a narrative and linear progression to the deformations, suggesting that there is method to this textual madness. As the novel progresses, and the narrator Johnny Truant assembles a scholarly manuscript critiquing a documentary about a young family relocating from New York to a house in the suburbs, it becomes clear that a lively character haunting every level of the text is Truant’s mother, Pelafina Lievre. Lievre becomes an increasingly central character as the novel’s form becomes progressively more outrageous, and the novel ends with a series of appendices, one of which is entirely dedicated to letters written by Lievre to her son. As the house and the mother haunting it grow livelier, Truant

⁶ According to Danielewski, it took two years to construct and set the novel, and he was intimately involved with the entire process. See Sims, Michael, “Building a house of leaves: an interview with Mark Z. Danielewski,” *BookPage Interview*, March 2000 <<http://bookpage.com/interviews/8044-mark-z-danielewski#.VDgfmRbQ1oM>>.

gradually loses his mind and sense of self and he eventually disappears entirely from the novel, a dynamic that dramatizes the struggle at the heart of domestic scenes.

I propose we read *House of Leaves* within a modernist tradition that poses the problem of character as a problem of housing. Scholarship on the novel problematizes its relationship to meaning-making, its claims to represent human subjectivities, and its approaches to social problems, but tends not to trouble the very concept of human character itself. “To read the *House of Leaves*,” writes scholar Katherine Cox, “is to wander, lost, in a labyrinth,” and moving through the text does evade linear progress due to footnotes and footnotes within the footnotes that extend for dozens of pages, forcing readers to choose between threads and inviting them to return to previous ones once they have followed a thread to its relative conclusion.⁷ Cox writes that the novel is in essence a social problem text, its puzzling form constituting a spatial construction and reconstruction of family dynamics. Nele Bemong argues that Danielewski’s house combines the social problem with a problem of meaning making by using both the intellectual uncertainty of Jentsch’s uncanny (in the form of spatial disorientation) and the Freudian sense of the uncanny as a response to the return of things that ought to have remained repressed (such as Truant’s troubled relationship with his mother).⁸ N. Katherine Hayles reads the haunted house a figure for the always-already mediated nature of reality and identity, and she argues that the novel’s textual remediation of fictional media—including film, literary criticism, philosophy, and handwritten letters and notes—assembles

⁷ Cox, Katharine, “What Has Made Me? Locating Mother in the Textual Labyrinth of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*,” *Critical Survey*, 18 no. 2 (2006): 4.

⁸ Nele Bemong, “Exploration #6: The Uncanny in Mark Z. Danielewski’s ‘House of Leaves,’” *Image & Narrative: Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative* 3, no. 1 (January 2003), <<http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/uncanny/nelebemong.htm>>.

“subjectivities coherent enough to become the foci of the sustained narration.”⁹ Mark Hansen stakes a historical claim about the contemporary text, reading its haunted house as a symptom of digital aesthetics, which, he argues, have critically altered “the novel’s tie to the body” by severing creative production from material referentiality.¹⁰ According to Hansen, *House of Leaves* responds to the disembodiment of digital aesthetics by using its form to make the physical act of reading central to its experience, and the novel consequently represents a “definitive departure [. . .] from the tired postmodern agonies bound up with the figure of simulation.”¹¹ These critical commentaries all share an understanding of the novel as expressing something lively—for Cox a changing relation between a mother and son, for Bemong the spatial disorientation resulting from emotional insecurity, for Hayles character subjectivities, and for Hansen the embodied process of reading.

The present study builds on the scholarly understanding of the text’s liveliness by claiming that the fragments comprising the text’s characters participate in a modernist tradition in which character is continually produced in the present as action and gesture, or the lively unfolding of formal experimentation.¹² Reading Danielewski within this modernist tradition makes the text a testament to faith in the capacity of inanimate, superficial structures to generate animating effects. I thus read both this text and the tradition within which it participates as a narrative describing

⁹ Hayles’s study of *House of Leaves* argues that the novel is primarily concerned with remediation, but that its layers of remediation constitute the novel’s medium for depicting subjectivity. Hayles, Katherine, “Remediation in House of Leaves,” *American Literature* 74 no. 4 (December 2002): 781.

¹⁰ According to Hansen the “the novel’s challenge” is “to generate belief without objective basis,” which he argues Danielewski solves by foregrounding the “role of the reader” and “the figure of interpretation” in the formal construction of then novel. Hansen, “The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski’s ‘House of Leaves,’” *Contemporary Literature* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 602.

¹¹ Hansen, “The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski’s ‘House of Leaves,’” 601.

¹² Omri Moses makes such a claim about modernist character by reading a tradition of characters who are inconsistent; who unfold in adaptive response to changing circumstances. See Moses, Omri, *Out of Character: Modernism, Vitalism, Psychic Life* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014).

character itself as a relational phenomenon—relational between persons, things, and immediate environments. Ultimately at stake in this reading is demonstrating that formal structures and generic conventions—both thematic and those that exist on the level of the printed page—are not constraining or deadening but are enlivening, functioning like Sullivan’s decorative entrances to draw people in to form the lively relations expressed by the formal structures. This elaborately decorated novel does not sever literary form from referential functions but loosely links them in adaptive relation and to lively effect.

Character as Action and Relation: James’s Artificial Lives

Danielewski began his novel with the image of a house that was bigger on the inside than out, and it was from that image that the novel *grew*. Though this creative origin story might strike some as a postmodern gimmick, the process closely echoes that of Henry James, who described his novel *Portrait of a Lady* as “a structure reared with an ‘architectural’ competence,” and which James claims teaches “the high price of the novel as a literary form”—which is to not only range through a variety of outlooks on the ever changing conditions of life but also “to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould.”¹³ James’s assertion that the novel follows its function of being “true to its character” through verbs like *strain* and *burst*, paired with the descriptor “latent extravagance” utilizes an architectural vocabulary to describe how a building’s essential effects might be larger on the inside than on the outside.¹⁴

¹³ James, Henry, *Portrait of a Lady* in *Complete Works of Henry James* (Delphi Classics e-Books, 2012 [1897], PDF e-book) loc. 33435.

¹⁴ Quatremère de Quincy codified the use of “character” to describe how a building’s form relates to its function. See Vittoria Di Palma, “Architecture, Environment and Emotion: Quatremère de Quincy and the Concept of Character” *AA Files* 47 (Summer 2002): 45 – 56.

Both James and Danielewski route their creative processes through the expansive and enlivening effects of seemingly inanimate structures. The initial conception for his novel, James claims, started with

“this single small corner-stone, the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny, had begun with being all my outfit for the large building of “The Portrait of a Lady.” It came to be a square and spacious house—or has at least seemed so to me in this going over it again; but, such as it is, it had to be put up round my young woman while she stood there in perfect isolation.”

Isabel Archer stands alone in her great square building, and James sees his project as constructing an entire social context in which to place his isolated character in order to prompt her growth. It was around this “vivid individual,” says James, that the situations, settings, and the “*house* of the novel [my emphasis]” grew. My historical leap back to James not only contextualizes the conventional aspects of *House of Leaves*, but also highlights the avant garde impulses in James’s genre fiction. Omri Moses has written that James “tended to avoid ascribing to individuals any psychological quality that would encourage an act of interpretive penetration into a person’s underlying character” and he wrote that this approach constituted a “situational and relational [understanding] of character.”¹⁵ Though Isabel’s character stands in isolation, the building goes up round her *while* she stands in the ongoing act of affronting her destiny, and the form of her house *came to be* during her stand. James’s character does not represent a deep essence, but a developing set of actions and relations to other forms. James himself most clearly states this idea when trying to pin down how it is “the Isabel Archers, and even much smaller female fry, insist on mattering”; he concludes that “if they are

¹⁵ Moses, *Out of Character*, 2.

shown as ‘mattering’ as much as they could possibly pretend to, the proof of it is in a hundred other persons, made of much stouter stuff; and each involved moreover in a hundred relations which matter to *them* concomitantly with that one.”¹⁶ The depths of James’s characters lies not *in* interior psychologies but spread out *between* their assembled relations.

That James thought carefully about the depth of his character and novels was, as Mark McGurl has argued, both a social concern and an aesthetic one—inanimate and nonhuman surfaces, in other words, can produce effects that surge beyond their artificially constructed dimensions.¹⁷ James claimed that his attention to the architectural construction of his novel, his accumulation of detail, was a testament “to the anxiety of my provision for the reader’s amusement.” To compensate for the “possible limitations” of his “slim” character—an ordinary young woman—James felt that “detail, of the minutest” would help his printed pages come to be haunted, it is surface detail that brings about the “mystic conversion” of words on a page “into the stuff of drama or, even more delightful word still, of ‘story.’”¹⁸ The novel, which, James says, “is of its very nature an ‘ado,’ an ado about something, and the larger the form it takes the greater of course the ado.”¹⁹ His lengthy novel, his “portrait” of this lady, is a container appropriate to his aspirations to elevate the “slight ‘personality,’ the mere slim shade of an intelligent but presumptuous girl” to the “high attributes of a Subject.” The thick novel for this “slim” personality is a container that does not conform to its content, but is one that induces her to grow into an “ado.” James looks back on his creative process

¹⁶ James, *Portrait of a Lady*, 12.

¹⁷ McGurl argues that James’s commitment to a “flat” geometry was a response to the spread of mass culture, a change in the novel’s place in “low” culture. McGurl is thus able to claim that the superficiality of modernism was not a retreat from society as much as an aesthetic address to changes in it. McGurl, Mark, “Social Geometries: Taking Place in Henry James,” *Representations* 68, (Autumn: 1999): 59 – 83.

¹⁸ James, loc. 33550.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* loc. 33435.

and describes Isabel's "growth" as coming about through "these lurking forces of expansion, these necessities of upspringing in the seed," and that through these forces, the character and her novel began "to grow as tall as possible, to push into the light and the air and thickly flower there." I linger on this language to point out that James imagines his character as an adaptive, growing entity, but also to emphasize what is missing in his description of how Isabel came to be: James carefully avoids referring to Isabel as a referential human or even as an *a priori* subject. Instead, James emphasizes the uncanny mystery of Isabel's existence by referring to the "lurking forces" behind her animation, and he marks his character's strangeness by describing her growth in terms of plant life (an association of literary form with plant life that Danielewski duplicates in his house of *leaves*).

In describing his artificial character as uncanny plant life, as a seed with potential to grow, James's language closely parallels that of Louis Sullivan. Sullivan used the seed germ as an illustrative image for how "unceasingly the essence of things *is taking shape* in the matter of things [my emphasis]." James's attention to architectural structures as growing things is well known, and in *The American Scene*, he writes of built architecture as a "vivid show of a society trying to build itself, with every elaboration, into some coherent sense *of itself* [emphasis]"²⁰. The tragedy, to James, is the "squandered effort" of this attempt, for beneath the surfaces of a city like New York beats the pulse of wealth unfolding in singular expressions of "individual loneliness." Though an architect like Sullivan could consider a tall building in isolation from its neighboring buildings and the overall character of its social and built context, James saw built structures as pieces of a larger whole. New York ever builds *toward*, but cannot achieve, a coherent sense of itself, for its structures come into

²⁰ James, Henry, *The American Scene* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 58 – 59.

being as “a hundred embodied and consecrated forms,” temples of “massive private ease.”²¹ James seeks to remedy such failures of actual built space in an architectural construction of his novels.

Portrait of a Lady, the author claims, was built on “a plot of ground the neat and careful and proportioned pile of bricks that” was built through a “process of logical accretion.”²² The gerunds of James’s novelistic composition tell us that his characters come to life through its placement in context with other superficial forms.

The architecture of James’s characters is the subject of Sharon Cameron’s influential study of consciousness in (mostly late) James. Cameron argues that the author explores forms of consciousness that do not depend on human psychology or, more specifically, on focalization or formal binding at all. Cameron is thus able to read the diffusion of his characters’ thoughts as ways of freeing consciousness from binding, which constructs thought as a subjectivity that pre-exists both characters and their textual embodiment. Cameron’s questioning of “the identification of consciousness with psychology” and her assertion that “James dissociates consciousness from psychology” is an important foundation for my contention that James conceives of his characters not as representative humans, but as themselves forms of artificial animation.²³ The structure-bound form of animation in James is also explored by Jill Kress in her study of scientific metaphors in William and Henry James and Edith Wharton, where she argues that “though James constructs a series of metaphors out of which consciousness materializes, the structures come undone,” essentially claiming that consciousness is problematically bound to the structures of language in

²¹ James, 1946, 160.

²² James, 1897, loc. 33435.

²³ Cameron, Sharon, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1.

James.²⁴ Although Kress does not go so far as to consider the artificiality or the nonhuman uncanny of James's characters, she reads *The Portrait of a Lady* as using "metaphors of consciousness" to "invent the inner life of a character [my emphasis]"²⁵ (62). Such a non-referential understanding of James's metaphors is the basis for Kress's claim that "metaphors move beyond the simple function of defining concepts to generate vast perceptual networks of their own" and that "writers consequently *lose control* over their scrupulously composed texts" hence betraying "their anxiety over the creative and disruptive power of words [my emphasis]"²⁶. Not only does liveliness churn behind James's inanimate structures, it is a liveliness that provokes anxiety over its uncontainable excess.

Kress writes of the generating capacity of James's language, and she argues that his sense of its liveliness includes a sensitivity toward the tendency of his characters to supersede or expand his intentions and efforts—a tendency, in other words, to come alive. Such a view of literary character estranges the referentiality of realistic depictions; Henry James himself cites the work of Ivan Turgenieff, whose characters, James claims, prompted their creator "to imagine, to invent and select and piece together the situations most useful and favourable to the sense of the creatures themselves, the complications they would be most likely to produce and to feel." The "creatures" are dynamic entities responding to the conditions and stimuli of fictional worlds. They feel enough like humans for James to refer to them as "persons," yet they lurk in the margins of familiarity, animated by "forces" James marks as other than those animating familiar lives; characters, for James, are artificial forms that give birth to lively effects.²⁷

²⁴ Kress, Jill M., *The Figure of Consciousness: William James, Henry James, and Edith Wharton* (New York, 2002), xii.

²⁵ Kress, *The Figure of Consciousness*, 62.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 2.

²⁷ James repeatedly refers to his characters throughout his oeuvre as wind-up dolls and living statues as well as plants. In the preface evaluating the composition of his early novel *Roderick Hudson*, James

Isabel Archer and Madam Merle sum up James's complex response to the loneliness of American built environments in a contemplative conversation about surface expressions of the self. "every human being has his shell and . . . you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances [. . .] One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive."²⁸ Isabel's response reaffirms the misalignment between this "shell" and the content of one's character when she laments that "I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one." Isabel's character is not one with her formal envelope, but this disjunct is precisely the source of her expansive liveliness. Like the goldfish that is both limited and expanded by changes in the proportions of its housing, Isabel's growth is causally tied to her housing, which she strains and overflows.

That literary character is continually produced as action and relation to others means that the liveliness of those characters is subject to struggles over limited narrative resources, as Alex Wolloch

refers to the character Rowland in terms that highlight Rowland's tenuous connection to humanness, terms that foreground his status as artifice: "By making it acute, meanwhile, one made its own movement—or rather, strictly, its movement in the particular connection—interesting; this movement really being quite the stuff of one's thesis. It had naturally, Rowland's consciousness, not to be too acute—which would have disconnected it and made it superhuman: the beautiful little problem was to keep it connected, connected intimately, with the general human exposure, and thereby bedimmed and befooled and bewildered, anxious, restless, fallible, and yet to endow it with such intelligence that the appearances reflected in it, and constituting together there the situation and the 'story,' should become by that fact intelligible." James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, vol. 1, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), xvii.

²⁸ James, 1897, loc. 33435.

has argued.²⁹ James shapes the drama of that struggle to have larger social stakes in his representation of Isabel Archer's relation to her husband, who seeks to contain her growth and tame her animation by bringing her "into the mansion of his own habitation." This housing inspires in Isabel an "incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling [. . .] It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light no air. Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her."³⁰ Isabel here encounters housing haunted by its expression of the individual mind of another. This arbitrary barrier is a form intended to restrict and mold her character. Osmond's house is not housing, it is not the artificial limit that supports expansiveness—Osmond's home is just a house, a dead container. The difference is not in the material walls, however, for as Kress has noted, Isabel is "at home" in the locked chamber of her library in America, where "growth occurs despite the 'pressing' weight of solitude³¹; freedom is found within a locked chamber rather than outdoors," though this is not just *any* locked chamber, but a chamber full of books, themselves houses of leaves.³² The difference between mere house and housing for home is whether the inanimate container supports the expansion of dynamic relation to others.

²⁹ Alex Wolloch writes to "redefine literary characterization in terms of this distributional matrix: how the discrete representation of any specific individual is intertwined with the narrative's continual apportioning of attention to different characters who jostle for limited space," but where Wolloch claims to track "how living persons get rendered into literary form," I read James and Danielewski working specifically on the question of "how the literary form [. . .] is rendered into a *living organism* [my emphasis]" Wolloch, Alex, *The One vs. the Many* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 12.

³⁰ James, *Portrait of a Lady*, loc. 11921.

³¹ Kress, 2002, 76.

³² Another example of James's attention to his books as houses of leaves and houses of expansive life is his meditation on composition in *Roderick Hudson*, where he claims that "continuity" is his key method of construction, and he emphasizes "that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken [. . .] a young embroiderer of *the canvas of life* soon began to work in *terror*, fairly, of the vast expanse of that surface, of the boundless number of its distinct perforations for the needle,

The Preface, however, emphasizes the opacity of these windows: they “are not hinged doors opening straight upon life,” but are only “windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft,” and I have already argued that the “the spreading field, the human scene” is not a simple reference to actuality. James houses Isabel who houses the novel, which houses James. *Portrait*, as its title suggests, is a novel that frames a character, yet the frame does as much to relate the inside to the outside as it does to separate them. If this “dead wall” is a mere inanimate “pierced aperture” that is “literary form,” how is it that James succeeds in bringing it to life? James asks nearly this question of his own work: “If the apparition was still to be placed how came it to be vivid?” His answer is cryptic, claiming that the “animated figure or form” was nourished to life by “the imagination that detains it, preserves, protects, enjoys it, conscious of its presence.”³³ James does not cast himself as the origin or controller of Isabel’s liveliness, rather he writes of his own imagination as temporary housing, the shelter that holds her character until the housing of her novel could receive her. The author goes on to describe his imagination in architectural terms, describing it alternately as a stage or as “the dusky, crowded, heterogeneous back-shop of the mind very much as a wary dealer in precious odds and ends” with Isabel being “the rare little ‘piece’ left in deposit by the reduced, mysterious lady of title or the speculative amateur, and which is already there to disclose its merit afresh as soon as a key shall have clicked in a

and of the tendency inherent in his many-coloured flowers and figures to cover and consume as many as possible of the little holes. The development of the flower, of the figure, involved thus an immense counting of holes and a careful selection among them [my emphasis]” (vii). James here impresses his sense of responsibility to his “canvas of life” by bemoaning the arbitrary nature of the frame he must give to that life, and his insistence of filling “as many as possible of the little holes” is how he hopes to give expansiveness to his books, how he intends to make their interiors larger than the frames that enclose them.

³³ James, *Portrait of a Lady*, loc. 33435.

cupboard-door³⁴. And while this may seem a relatively conventional metaphor for the mind's interior, resembling as it does Gaston Bachelard's poetics of space, contextualizing this dusty shop-mind in relation to the "house of fiction" paints a curiously impossible picture of a house within a house.³⁵ The house of fiction, James tells us, has many "apertures" of "dissimilar shape and size, hang[ing] so, all together, over the human scene," and at each irregular window is a "watcher." If this watcher's mind is the structure that conceived the "sense" of Isabel, then the watcher is himself a house embedded within the house of literary form—a structure that pre-existed himself: James, in other words, is the activating medium through which his feminine small fry can pass into the grand, historical novel. In his twisted and labyrinthine explanation of the novel's origins, James realizes at some point that "I have lost myself once more, I confess, in the curiosity of analyzing the structure."

In trying to make sense of his labyrinthine process of building around Isabel the "house of the novel," even as that house resides in his own head as he looks out of the window of the house of fiction, James notes that he felt as though he had been "in complete possession of it [Isabel's character], that I had been so for a long time, that this had made it familiar and yet had not blurred its charm, and that, all urgently, all tormentingly, I saw it *in motion* and, so to speak, *in transit*. This amounts to saying that I saw it as bent on its fate [my emphasis]."³⁶ James here cites movement as the criteria for recognizing animation and intent; like Sullivan, James sees movement in artificial matter. James repeatedly expresses anxiety over the success or failure of embodying on the printed page this fictional animation—and over the moments when those creations seem to supersede his

³⁴ Ibid. loc. 33422.

³⁵ In his well-known book, Bachelard claims that spatial structures like closets and rooms are in fact the basis for our understanding of consciousness in spatial terms such as "interiority." See Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

³⁶ James, *Portrait of a Lady*, loc. 33410.

intentions and even consciousness—demonstrates a close binding of creators and the products of their artifice. Such anxiety also raises the stakes of character creation: James’s characters are artificial lives, not quite human, but close enough for their ontology to reflect a deeper uncertainty about how inanimate forms can generate life.³⁷ His character Rowland might be ventriloquizing just such responsibility to artificial lives when he complains, while anxiously awaiting the special spark that will transform his structures from dead form to animate life, that “I think of subjects, but they remain mere lifeless names. They are mere words—they are not images.”³⁸ Or in James’s early novel, *Watch and Ward*, the character George Fenton complains of novels that don’t animate their content: “Their stories are like the underside of a carpet,—nothing but the stringy grain of the tissue—a muddle of figures without shape and flowers without color. When I read a novel my imagination starts off at a gallop and leaves the narrator hidden in a cloud of dust.”³⁹

James’s masculine characters, no less than his feminine ones, are the artificial products of surface relations: in *Roderick*, Christina Light’s biological father, Cavaliere, gives “an odd sense of looking at a little waxen image, adjusted to perform certain gestures and emit certain sounds. It had once contained a soul, but the soul had leaked out.” This first impression leads the reader to believe that Cavaliere will be an insipid character with no “depth,” and, in fact, the man does become a figure in the novel for the hollowed-out form of an outmoded aristocracy; but this very hollowness is precisely the source of Cavaliere’s interest and flavor for Rowland, and the hollow, shallow little man becomes a figure of great pathos in the novel. Cavaliere is picturesque; in his figure are joined the pathos of a decayed past and the beauty of its preserved style. Yet such asymmetries between

³⁷ Kress also observes in her study of the representation of consciousness in fiction that “writers repeatedly betray their anxiety over the creative and disruptive power of words,” Kress, 2.

³⁸ James, loc. 5504.

³⁹ *Watch and Ward* was first published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1871, and collected into a novel in 1878.

form and essence don't always lead to such smooth productions of readable assemblages: a major source of drama across James's narratives is the tendencies of characters to *misread* each other by only reading their externals. In one example, Christina Light declares during a visit to Rowland's house that "I like looking at people's things," because "It helps you to find out their characters." But from her survey of Rowland's things, she determines, based on his artistic, yet prosaic taste that "I don't think I like you," and Rowland's good natured response that, "you make a great mistake" is supported by the progression of the narrative when Rowland becomes Christina's platonic source of advice and friendship.⁴⁰ James's characters are assemblages, they are compilations of their things, their appearances, and their associates, and to restrict a reading of them to any single element is to "make a great mistake" and to misread the life contained in that form. External housing obscures the content, yet the very obscuring nature of those external forms is what prompts movement between external expectations and internal content. The expectations of exterior draw characters into relation.

"Turn of the Screw" is a tale about just such a misalignment between exterior expectations and interior content drawing characters into animating relation. The famous "two turns" of the screw, are of course, attributed to the presence of two children, two delicate shells whose forms superlatively evoke socially constructed human notions of purity and innocence. When the governess receives the school's letter accusing little Miles of misdeeds, she and the housekeeper are incredulous: "'See him, Miss, first. Then believe it!'" exclaims the housekeeper Mrs. Grose, who continues, "'you might as well believe it of the little lady. Bless her,' she added the next moment—'look at her!'"⁴¹ Scholars have spent much time and energy debating whether this novella is a

⁴⁰ James, *Portrait of a Lady*, loc. 5758.

⁴¹ James, Henry, *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories* (Köln, 1996), 98.

straightforward haunting story or a representation of the governess's descent into madness, but while there is ample evidence to support either position, I am concerned here with the narrative's repeated stress on the misalignment of the children's innocent and pure forms with their frighteningly knowing characters. In a rare moment of sharp intuition on the part of the unimaginative Mrs. Gross, she pinpoints the source of the governess's unease over the children: "Are you afraid he'll corrupt you?"—an observation the governess supports when she admits "that, I think, is what I came for—to be carried away."⁴² The governess agrees to come to Bly Manor in search of reliable, beautiful, uncorrupted forms to which she can entrust and redistribute the weight of her own animation.

Bly itself is a house, that, like the children, has an exterior that conflicts with the content of its character. The manor's absent owner (who had already, due to his good looks, "carried away" something of the governess") sent the children to this place precisely because of its isolation from any neighboring structures or community, supposing its seclusion to be salutary for the children's health and morals—in other words, he thought that taking the children out of relation to broader human relations would strengthen their characters. Although many have noted the novella's ties to the Gothic genre, few have paid specific attention to the ways in which James plays with those conventions. The governess's first encounter with Bly illustrates where the house fails to comply with Gothic conventions of haunted houses. From the outside, one might suppose it to be a pleasant structure: "I suppose I had expected, or had dreaded, something so dreary that what greeted me was a good surprise. I remember as a thoroughly pleasant impression the broad clear front, its open windows and fresh curtains and the pair of maids looking out [. . .] The scene had a greatness

⁴² Ibid. 95.

that made it a different affair from my own scant home.⁴³ The governess's rare reference to any life she may have led before Bly. The governess, primarily brings to Bly romanticized conceptions of gothic conventions in addition to pessimism drawn from her former housing, and Bly formally subverts these expectations to lull her into the almost meditative state of receptivity that she reaches in her first few months of blissful repetition of idyllic suburban rituals.

The governess's first tour of Bly gives "the view of a castle of romance inhabited by a rosy sprite, such a place as would somehow, for diversion of the young idea, take all color out of story-books and fairy-tales" and she wonders whether it wasn't "just a *story-book over which I had fallen a-doze and a-dream?*"⁴⁴ Here the governess corrects herself, attempting to shake herself out of the romantic stupor with the contrasting formal properties of the house: "No; it was a big ugly antique but convenient house, embodying a few features of a building still older, half-displaced and half-utilised." But ultimately the house's disjunction between its form and its gothic content—the eerie children, the nearly silent and invisible servants, its unspoken history, and above all, its isolation— together drive Bly's animating powers: in the absence of "real" human relation, the house summons ghostly inhabitants with whom both children can relate.

Just as the governess continually trips over the misalignment of the children's beautiful and innocent forms with their very adult sensibilities and schemes, she also spends some time describing the house's formal misalignment with its actual history and content. Just before and during her first sighting of a ghost of a previous inhabitant, the governess spends time observing Bly's stylized exterior: "This tower was one of a pair--square *incongruous* crenellated structures," she observes, and they "were probably architectural absurdities, redeemed in a measure indeed by *not being wholly*

⁴³ James, *Turn of the Screw*, 93.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 96.

disengaged nor of a height to pretentious, dating, in their gingerbread antiquity, form a romantic revival that was already a respectable past”⁴⁵ Bly, in other words, is a stylistic imitation of architecture from an era of religious belief, a functional house decorated with abstracted ornaments that nonetheless aren’t “wholly disengaged” or out of place, for these gothic ornaments *express* the house’s overriding character, which is characterized by the misalignment of religiously inflected forms—be they cherubic children’s bodies or medieval battlements—with profoundly unholy and even ordinary content—daily processes of learning and eating and the vulgar status of being hired and paid “help” in a suburban house.

Of Bly’s ornamentation—declared by pre-war architects from Louis Sullivan to his forbear Horatio Greenough, author of *Form and Function* to be *immoral* and frivolous—the governess claims that “I admired them, had fancies about them, for *we could all profit* in a degree, especially when they loomed through the dusk, by the grandeur of their actual battlements.” Although this type of ornamentation hardly embodies common understandings of Sullivan’s “form ever follows function,” the governess admires it for its aspirationalism and its expression of a style that sought to embody its holy occupant in its soaring proportions and that sought to give form to the divine in this life. This aspirationalism is the same desire Sullivan expresses when he invests the skyscraper with just such nostalgia: “And thus the design of the tall office building takes its place with all other architectural types made when architecture . . . *was a living art*. Witness the Greek temple, the Gothic cathedral, the medieval fortress.” If modern structures of artifice now point to human origins and secular uses, they now communicate and shape their content through that very artifice, rather than importing divine and unchanging content into earthly form.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 104.

The animate and animating nature of containers is what justifies Sullivan in his decoration of skyscraper exteriors with organic plant life—a decoration that seems at odds with an object of human artifice, but through its very abstraction from content animates the building into something lively, something that can and will grow with changing use. Likewise, James’s containers maintain a simultaneous disjunction from and additive relation to their content. Nowhere is this more vividly illustrated than in his characters and the careful attention he pays to their external forms. In his first novel, *Watch and Ward*, James pays significant narrative attention to Nora’s “plain face,” which is gradually animated into something “stately” and “striking.”⁴⁶ Her guardian, who eagerly watched the development of her looks because he hoped to groom her for his own future spouse, muses that “She has a style of her own. It’s not quite beauty; it’s not quite cleverness. It belongs *neither altogether to her person, nor yet to her mind*. It’s a sort of ‘tone’ [my emphasis].”⁴⁷ As his first heroine, Nora sets a recognizable pattern for many of James’s female characters: her posterity includes Mary Garland, Fleda Vetch, Catherine Sloper, M. Nioche, and even Isabel Archer herself in being unconventional in her looks, yet producing a striking impression—an impression that is created by, yet is irreducible to her form. Sloper’s “style” is not an internal characteristic but an epiphenomenon of the assembled materials that solidify her.

In light of this favorable treatment of accumulated details, Henry James seems to stand guilty of the “crime” of ornament. Indeed, in their correspondence, his brother, the psychologist William James, suggests such a transgression when he writes: “You know how opposed your whole 'third manner' of execution is to the literary ideals which animate my crude and Orson-like breast, mine being to say a thing in one sentence as straight and explicit as it can be made, and then to drop it

⁴⁶ James, *Watch and Ward*, loc. 655, 852, 1076

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* loc. 1660

forever.”⁴⁸ William continues to explain why he thinks his brother’s style is oppositional to minimalism; Henry’s style is to

avoid naming it straight, but by dint of breathing and sighing all round and round it, to arouse in the reader who may have had a similar perception already (Heaven help him if he hasn't!) the illusion of a solid object, made (like the 'ghost' at the Polytechnic) wholly out of impalpable materials, air, and the prismatic interferences of light, ingeniously focused by *mirrors upon empty space*. But you do it, that’s the queerness! And the complication of innuendo and associative reference on the enormous scale to which you give way to it does so build out the matter for the reader that the result is to solidify, by the mere bulk of the process, the like perception from which he has to start. As air, by dint of its volume, will weigh *like a corporeal body*; so his own poor little initial perception, swathed in this gigantic *envelopment of suggestive atmosphere*, grows like a germ into something vastly bigger and more substantial. But it's the rummiest method for one to employ systematically as you do nowadays; and you employ it at your peril.”⁴⁹

William James not only uses the previously mentioned plant-life imagery to describe the growth of Henry James’s characters, but he also pays specific attention to Henry’s *surfaces*—rather than a “straight” depiction of characters, Henry breathes around their contours, accumulating details to build something “corporeal,” but crucially, the corporeality that Henry achieves is ghostly, uncanny, and William admonishes him that “the effect of solidity you reach is but perfume and simulacrum”—in other words, what Henry James creates, in William’s mind, is artificially lively, it is

⁴⁸ This correspondence is excerpted in Kress’s study. Kress, 78 – 79.

⁴⁹ James, William, *The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James, (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 2: 277 – 78, quoted in Kress, 65 – 67.

non-representational.⁵⁰ The uncanniness that William James is describing blends life-like effects with artificial “interferences,” and “ingeniously focused” mirrors reflecting themselves makes seamless the border between animate and inanimate, nature and artifice, surface and depth.

Faith in Inanimate Structure: Danielewski as Contemporary Modernist

Breathing and sighing around the “illusion of a solid object,” could describe the typography of Danielewski’s text, which utilizes unusual placement, font, and colors. Hansen writes that “the blue ink of the world ‘house’ in the work’s title transforms this keyword into something like a portal to information located elsewhere, both within and beyond the novel’s frame”⁵¹. Yet more than describing information located elsewhere, the color describes the ink and the fibers weaving the text together on the flat surface of the page. The pull beyond the novel’s frame, however, is something even the characters feel. The haunted house on Ash Tree Lane exerts a relational influence over Johnny Truant that makes him suspect that it “has created [him],” and it moves him to not only to compile the found manuscript but also go on a journey to physically locate it.⁵² The manuscript’s original author, Zampano, describes the house as exerting a “pull” on readers of “the antinomies of fact or fiction, representation or artifice, document or prank.”⁵³ As a consequence of this irresistible pull, Zampano concludes, “the house itself, like Melville’s behemoth, remains resistant to summation.” The house exists, as Hayles has argued, only in and through its remediation, so its animation of characters, its creation of Truant is phantasmagoric, suggestive. The characters come to life between their relations with the house, which puts them in relation to each other. Indeed, Truant’s suspicion that the house created him eventually morphs into an awareness that he is

⁵⁰ Ibid. 67.

⁵¹ Hansen, 598.

⁵² Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 370.

⁵³ Ibid. 3.

“nothing more than *the matter* of some other voice, intruding through the folds [my emphasis].”⁵⁴

And the narrative contains constant reminders that the novel’s characters exist *only* in relation to the haunted house on Ash Tree Lane. They are haunted by the house, literally and affectively moved by it even as they circulate in and around it, characters characterized as action and gesture in their present.⁵⁵

Johnny Truant begins *House of Leaves* with an official “introduction” of himself as an itinerant, substance-abusing tattoo artist with a crush on a stripper he calls “Thumper.” This introduction is printed in the almost cartoonish Courier font, which is carried through the body of the text in footnotes; the decorative font expresses the activity of Truant’s remediating efforts, both by referencing a typewriter and by making Truant’s narrative stand out starkly from the footnotes of Zampano and of the “editors” emending, sourcing, and printing Truant’s collated text. The first sentence, “I still get nightmares” throws readers into the psychological interior of the character’s mind, but only insofar as that character’s mind has already been infiltrated by the house—which itself only exists insofar as Truant encounters its mediation through Zampano’s manuscript. This phantasmagoric relation of fiction originating fiction does not indicate a copy without an original but rather an original that produces copies—in the foreword preceding Truant’s intro, the “editors” apologize for unsourced sources and call for corrections from readers that they promise to include in “subsequent printings.” The meaning of the *Navidson Record* is irreversibly impacted by Truant’s

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 326.

⁵⁵ The sense of animation as an affective state of *being moved* is a concept explored by Sianne Ngai in *Ugly Feelings*. While Ngai is interested in what this affect tells us about the power play between the humans doing the moving and the (racialized) humans they move, this project is concerned with narratives that credit the moving agency to nonhuman, artificial structures while the beings they move are self-consciously artificial characters. See Ngai, Sianne, “Animatedness,” *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Press), 2005.

active reading, marking, and appending, even as Truant's character is originated by the house internal to that fictional manuscript. Their relation is not *a* labyrinth, does not reference a physical maze, but it is rather labyrinthine in relation, adaptive and mutually formative with irreducible effects that warp the novel's physical form as it progresses.

The content of Truant's introduction narrates how late one "fateful evening," his friend Lude invites him to come go through his deceased neighbor's things, and it is there that he finds the manuscript Zampano has written about the haunted house on Ash Tree Lane.⁵⁶ The manuscript is scattered about the apartment in fragments, "reams and reams of it. Endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other pieces."⁵⁷ In this initial meeting, the manuscript and Johnny are mirror images of one another: Johnny is homeless, had "been in the throes of looking for an apartment," while the manuscript has no binding, no concrete, cohesive form to animate its contents.⁵⁸ The manuscript consists of snippets of writing on "old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp" and was typed, handwritten, and clipped. This diffuse manuscript, without binding, currently has only the potential to be animate—a potential that is palpable in the affect it radiates in embryo: "even without touching it, both of us slowly began to feel its heaviness, sensed something horrifying in its proportions, its silence, its *stillness* [my emphasis]."⁵⁹ Truant, it appears, is fated—"(*is that right? fate?*)"—to give form to Zampano's creation, and the ensuing novel read by the reader is the result of Truant's collating, typing, and

⁵⁶ Ibid. xi.

⁵⁷ Ibid. xvii.

⁵⁸ Ibid. xi.

⁵⁹ Ibid. xvii.

binding efforts: the homeless has housed the unhoused and in so doing constructs housing for himself.

The novel's form does not simply follow its function of communicating narrative and presenting characters but it adapts as the narrative and character casts warp and shift, and I argue that this shift is a recognition not of the story's fundamental, original, or hidden meaning, but of the story's shifting significance responding to the addition of characters and media. It is not that *House of Leaves* is always about Truant's relationship with his mother, but that as he reads and responds to the text of another and adds text of his own, Truant *makes* the story about his mother, uses it to reanimate her even as her gradual reanimation adapts and deforms it. "I cannot tell you why I didn't see her until now" he explains, "And it wasn't a scent that brought her back either or the wistful edges of some found object or any other one-the-road revelation. It was my own hand that did this." His mother was not originally contained in the story but Truant builds her into it as an action produced in relation to text and narrative—she is in the margins of Truant's personal narrative and *on* the margins of the manuscript he produces.

As the ghostly suggestion of his mother waxes, Truant's physical form wanes, a dramatic narrative enactment of the character network struggle over narrative resources. The surface relations of these fictional characters, then, produces its own microcosm of the social struggle at the heart of domestic relations. Yet this microcosm is a window that does not hinge onto human relations, but remains fictionally separate from them. Truant's address to readers both describes and enacts this separation of fiction from reality:

"Maybe you saw her first? Caught a glimpse, between the lines, between the letters, like a ghost in the mirror, a ghost in the wings? My mother is right before me now, right before you. There as the docent, as the interpreter, maybe even as this strange and tangled

countryside. Her shallow face, the dark lyric in her eyes and of course her words, in those far reaching letters she used to send me when I was young.”⁶⁰

Truant then tacks the letters on as appendices after the end of the presumably main narrative arc of this novel, where he swaps place with his mother. After the novel’s end, Lievre’s hand writes letters that loosely invoke Truant as a small character in her own story told in her own words. It is in these letters, these appended additions, that readers learn the true origin of Truant’s scars—physical traces of Lievre’s attempt to murder her son as a young boy. “Pelafina’s exclusion from the family home ensnares Truant in a labyrinth of repressed memories which, through contact with the book, forces Truant to retrace his history, to enter the labyrinth and to rediscover his heritage.”⁶¹ As though literalizing the battle over narrative resources that Wolloch says characterizes networks of characters, Pelafina returns to a story from which she had been repressed and her return warps the unfolding shape of that tale. The novel’s housing, in other words, adapts to its effects’s adaptations. Discussing literary animation and character in terms of housing evokes uncomfortably and historically charged constructions: woman as passive vessel, body as Cartesian container of mind, skin as enclosure for socially determined essences.⁶² But in *The House of Leaves*, the haunted house; the dead mother it resurrects “between the lines, between the letters”; and even Truant’s tattooed skin are disturbingly active forms of housing—the house kills and absorbs the character Holloway; Pelafina Lievre taught Truant to kill and assures him that he “could have laid this world to waste”; and Truant’s flesh responds to the haunted house’s influence by incrementally depleting him, eventually emptying him

⁶⁰ Danielewski, 502.

⁶¹ Cox, 7.

⁶² For a study of how surfaces like skin were deployed by modernists to encode bodies with essentialist meanings, see Cheng, Anne Anlin, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

of drugs, food, and desire until the novel ultimately ceases to even register him as an independent character.⁶³ These characters are all the ghostly and changing products of changing narrative relations.

Truant mirrors the manuscript in more than homelessness—his scarred and tattooed body is an assemblage of mismatched and interchangeable stories, illustrated by the character’s favorite gambit of picking up ladies by spinning fantastic tales about the origins of his scars. Truant’s homeless itinerancy parallels his proliferating narratives in flesh, but he longs for stable housing. Not only is Truant in the “throes” of apartment hunting, his job at the tattoo parlor is an exercise in housing construction. Truant does not create tattoo art; rather he builds the cases for the needles with loving, finicky, particular attention to the details of symmetry and soundness of construction as he carefully solders the needles together into appropriate sizes and forms. Furthermore, Truant types his own story as an appendage to the haunted house novel: what he has is housing, a material relation to the forms of others, but what he longs for is an independent, isolated house. The clumsy Courier font that records his peripatetic life stubbornly insists on its formal distinction from the traditional Times font that houses the haunted house novel. However, as the house on Ash Tree Lane and the book itself grow in physical dimension, Truant responds by including more, differentiated fonts and footnotes in the novel, and Truant’s narrative begins to be engulfed, begins to get lost in the frenzy of fonts and footnotes that represent and are warped by the morphing, powerfully animate house at the center of events. By more closely aligning form with its “lurking forces of expansion,” Truant enables the haunted house’s animation to further spill out of its own formal confines.⁶⁴

⁶³ Danielewski, 501.

⁶⁴ James, *Portrait of a Lady*, 20.

The manuscript's original creator seems to have had his own troubles with housing—sometime before dying, the blind man boarded his windows, sealed them with caulk, duct taped all the vents, and thoroughly storm-proofed all openings. Johnny offers his own explanation for Zampano's paranoid behavior: "my best guess now is that he sealed his apartment in an effort to retain the *various emanations of his things and himself*."⁶⁵ Zampano, then, did not fear the outside world intruding so much as he feared sublimation, feared losing cohesion. While proliferating the unbound scraps of the haunted house narrative, Zampano was himself coming unbound; his aged, frail housing was no fortress against the draining power of Ash Tree's fictional form. Zampano's desperate attempt to seal in his individuated animation is a sad irony if his name is, in fact, a reference to the Zampano of Federico Fellini's *La Strada*.⁶⁶ In that film, Zampano is a character whose street performance was to bind himself with chains and then break free of them. The filmed Zampano is all firm flesh, but when translated to novelistic form, he loses his sight, receives very little description of his physical form, and appears to have died struggling to bind himself: the fleshy film spectacle does not comfortably inhabit the flat and private page. The novel's Zampano is a mysterious and opaque character, and his erratic behavior directly contrasts the reliably flat and predictable escape performances of his filmed namesake: where the chains pressed firmly into filmed flesh, the novel's housing for Zampano has been awkwardly patched and clumsily fortified—still the character failed to find a snug seal for his emanations of self, and the reader must learn of Zampano mostly through the literal margins of his manuscript, where he has appended his own

⁶⁵ Ibid. xvi.

⁶⁶ Hansen has commented on Zampano as a likely reference to the character in Federico Fellini's *La Strada*. Hansen reads this intertextual reference as an insistence on Zampano's double artificiality and ultimate lack of referentiality. Yet the relation to the film Zampano firms up the novelistic character. Related to a man who is all surface form, a brutish, sweaty body, the unbound novelistic character gains pathos for his story of searching for binding.

interpretations of the haunted house's significance. The housing that Truant constructs for the manuscript hence includes Zampano's only housing, in addition to the only housing of Zampano's fictional characters, the Navidson family living in a haunted house. Such interlocking, intersecting levels of housing are not a radical break from James's sense of a character housed in the dusty shop of an author's mind while he peers out of one of the many windows of the house of fiction. The ghostly characters are not a postmodern loss of faith in representation but a testament to the productive power of assembling material surfaces.

Also of note in these encounters between homeless, nascent characters and unbounded manuscript is the fact that they are staged within a formal "Introduction," or preliminary structure that lays out a guiding armature for what will follow. To push the housing analogy further, an introduction might even try to reshape the reader, by shaping and directing the story's unfolding in a reader's mind. This particular introduction cedes the agency for armature construction to the manuscript itself. Truant writes of his initial encounter with the House of Leaves manuscript that "I felt certain [the manuscript's] resolute blackness was *capable of anything*, maybe even of slashing out, tearing up the floor, murdering Zampano, murdering us, *maybe even murdering you*. And then the moment passed. Wonder and the way the unimaginable is sometimes suggested by the inanimate suddenly faded. The thing became only a thing. So I took it home."⁶⁷ The thing, of course, does not remain *only* a thing, even though the emphasis in this introduction is that it is in fact inanimate. The inanimate here is anything but inactive. The flat surface of the page is "capable of anything" and its life will unfold and take shape with—or maybe against—"you," linking Zampano's fictional manuscript not with a represented manuscript but in relation with the reader bringing it to life.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid. xvii.

⁶⁸ Ibid. xvii.

As Truant moves into the narrative proper, the accumulated descriptions and interpretations of the haunted house put it into relation with more and more characters and commentators—including fictionalized versions of Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek—relations that give it increasingly substantial material form, making the novel an increasingly hefty “ado.” As the house on Ash Tree Lane accumulates relational form, its animation and animating powers consequently magnify; meanwhile, the human-like characters relating to it unravel, disappear literally or figuratively into it. When Truant gets trapped in a closet at work one day, he finds himself overwhelmed by his sense of the house, and he gives it his own form: “This time it’s human. *Maybe not*. Extremely long fingers. A sucking sound too . . . I’ve seen the eyes. The eyes. They have no whites. *I haven’t seen this*. The way they glisten they glisten red. Then it begins reaching for me, slowly unfolding itself out of its corner [my emphasis].”⁶⁹ I would like to suggest that Truant’s waffling negations do not designate the monster as unreal, but as the unique product of the specific relation with this particular character. Within Zampano’s manuscript, the “monster” haunting the haunted house is never revealed. Ominous growls mark its presence, growls are explained as the effect of walls moving deep in the interior of the haunted house. In keeping with haunted house convention, however, the explanations fail to explain the palpable effects that linger, and several “scholars” commenting on the novel within Zampano’s manuscript surmise that there is a minotaur-like monster haunting the house.⁷⁰ Online fora dedicated to *House of Leaves*—blogs, reddit discussion boards, commentary sections on articles about the novel—are also rife with speculation on the monster’s form and the meaning of its form. In other words, the form of the monster is dependent on its specific

⁶⁹ Ibid. 71.

⁷⁰ In fact, chapter eight of the novel is titled “~~The Minotaur~~,” and the strike-through font suggests that the monster is a presence with an affect like unto the mythological beast while it refuses the formal definiteness of a cow-headed man with its negation.

relations—the monster is the character of housing in *House of Leaves*, and that character is created through actions in its present.

In desperation to get someone to share his terror, in desperation to bring readers into a shared haunting, Truant turns to the reader: “try this,” he commands us, focus on these words, and whatever you do don’t let your eyes wander past the perimeter of this page. Now imagine just beyond your peripheral vision, maybe behind you, maybe to the side of you, maybe even in front of you, but right where you can’t see it, something is quietly closing in on you, so quiet in fact you can only hear it as silence. Find those pockets without sound. That’s where it is. Right at this moment. But don’t look. Keep your eyes here. Now take a deep breath. Go ahead take an even deeper one. Only this time as you start to exhale try to imagine how fast it will happen, how hard it’s gonna hit you, how many times it will stab your jugular with its teeth or are they nails?⁷¹

Truant here pleads with the reader to share his relation to the house and its character—he even dictates the proper breathing techniques for inducing the right state of openness to the particular character that results from his specific relation to the house. Yet the character of this relation is not meaningless or without social significance, for Truant’s encounter with the uncontainable effects of the haunted house aggravates the anxieties of his own transient-renter state. The permeable precarity of his own animation drives him to, like Zampano, fortress himself, enclose himself from the penetrating effects of the haunted house: “I nailed my windows shut, threw out the closet and bathroom doors, storm proofed everything, and locks, oh yes, I bought plenty of locks, chains too and a dozen measuring tapes, nailing all those straight to the floor and the walls. They looked

⁷¹ Ibid. 27.

suspiciously like lost metal rods or, from a different angle, the fragile ribs of some alien ship [. . .] this was about space. I wanted a closed inviolate and most of all immutable space.”⁷² Truant’s emphasis on stationary space is a desire for housing that fits an unchanging self, housing that is measurable to human proportions and housing that, in its stillness, would give stability to the being it encloses. In other words, Truant seeks the isolation and stillness that James’s Bly Manor seems to promise. Of course, Truant’s housing does not fulfill this desire—locks prove utterly ineffective against a relation unbounded by material walls. Locked in his room in isolation, Truant is further absorbed into his relation to the fictional house on Ash Tree Lane. The particular apartment he inhabits belongs to another, and the unemployed truant is evicted, left with only the treacherously dynamic haunted house manuscript as housing. Despite the expressed desire for housing to be deeply internal to an individual, *House of Leaves* is the story of the inexorably shifting nature of characters formed between related surfaces, flat leaves or sheaves of printed material.

Bringing only the manuscript, Truant embarks on a trip to find the fictional haunted house he has been forming. As he increasingly neglects his bodily needs, Truant grows more intertwined with the manuscript: “After all, I’m its source, the one who feeds it, nurses it back to health—but not life, I fear—bones of bond paper, transfusions of ink, genetic encryption in Xerox.”⁷³ The distinction between health and life is an uncanny one; it emphasizes the artifice of the manuscript’s influence while also injecting a breath of something *like* life into the bones of paper. This particular meditation of Truant’s marks something of a turning point in the novel, where the character begins contemplating his own origins and ontology. Echoing the “House of Stairs” lithograph referenced in the footnotes of the novel—also echoing the labyrinthine housing of characters within authors

⁷² Ibid. xix.

⁷³ Danielewski, 2010, 326.

within houses of fiction in Henry James—Johnny senses that “More and more often, I’ve been overcome by the strangest feeling that I’ve gotten it all turned around, by which I mean to say—to state the not-so-obvious—without it I would perish.” Johnny here suggests that his animation was birthed by the form of the novel even as he wrote it himself; he is relatively independent of this structure, and yet, like a natural body, without it he would perish. The life seething within this novel follows *ever* a step apart from the decorative typography and concrete poetry that shape its stories. Truant’s narrative is a meditation on the housing of the novel—the housing that gives him material form as a character—but it is the housing *in* the novel that moves and buffets his story with its own, independent “wind.”⁷⁴ In Danielewski’s novel the house of fiction has itself become a lurking force of growth, rather than merely originating the effect of growth through accumulated relations. What remains constant is that both fictional houses bring characters into relation with one another as they look out, but do not hinge onto, the scene of human affairs.

The story around which Truant takes shape gives matter to the fictional Navidson family. While Truant is buffeted by the haunted house he forms, while he tries to fortress himself against its influence, the fictional Navidsons at first actively seek to merge their family with that structure. The Navidsons are mobile professionals moving their young family into the suburbs, hoping to “see how people move into a place and start to inhabit it. Settle in, maybe put down roots, interact, hopefully understand each other a little better.”⁷⁵ The Navidsons felt themselves “being moved”⁷⁶ by their professional lives, and the house on Ash Tree Lane—like Bly Manor—beckons with the promise to

⁷⁴ When Johnny buys a gun, he explains that “the thread has snapped” and that he now waits for the mysterious creature that is the house’s affect, which will “come here at long last to summon the wind” (327). *In* the house, Navidson repeatedly feels the breath of wind, an impossible phenomenon due to Ash Tree’s complete lack of windows, doors, or even HVAC system.

⁷⁵ Danielewski, 9.

⁷⁶ Ngai., loc. 1013.

dampen that sense of too-much movement; it offers “a place to drink lemonade on the porch and watch the sunset” and promises ad hoc “roots” for their already-sprouted family tree.⁷⁷ Truant has already illustrated, of course, that Ash Tree is no passive vessel, waiting to receive or be manipulated. Once the Navidsons actually begin to inhabit Ash Tree, once they start hanging things on the walls, the house reveals its character as an animate, growing thing.

Ash Tree punishingly houses the Navidsons, and Truant unwillingly houses Ash Tree, but what appears to be a nesting of characters within housing within character turns into a chiasm: the Navidson’s destination and Truant’s origin are both encounters with Ash Tree. Ash Tree’s structure constitutes their narrative space and ties them all together, while its character competes with them once they have invaded its narrative space. Ash Tree gives Truant a “terrible sense of relatedness to Zampanò’s work,” and that relatedness “implies something that just can’t be, namely that this thing has created me, not me unto it, but now it unto me [. . .] possessing me with histories I should never recognize as my own; inventing me, defining me.” While a close-perspective may read Truant’s ontological uncertainty as a window onto the neo-liberal subject’s possession by the capital and markets that he or she is supposed to have produced and help comprise, a wider-scale perspective exposes Truant as “matter,” as artificial form animated by relation to the text he brought to life and which he now houses by virtue of his creating role.⁷⁸ Housing in this novel is the mechanism for producing and distributing animation among artificial creations, and Ash Tree is the center of a chiasm of character animation; Ash Tree is both artificially created setting and moving things with its own power to produce and, more ominously, absorb the animation of other

⁷⁷ Danielewski, 9.

⁷⁸ Mark McGurl argues for the need of both microcosmic and macrocosmic perspectives when interpreting fiction. See McGurl, “The Posthuman Comedy,” *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 533 – 53.

characters—it not only silently drives Navidson’s friend Holloway to kill himself but it neatly absorbs the body he left behind. This structure’s abstract relation to the animation it produces creates a mood of unease, a suspicion that structures like someone else’s manuscript or a previously owned home move those who encounter them with something irreducible to the human aspirations invested in them.

Where on a formal level, *Ash Tree* demonstrates the paradoxicality of a novel’s content preexisting and hence shaping the form that brought it into being, on a thematic level, *Ash Tree*, centered in a chiasm of character animation, produces content irreducible to the sum of its formal relations. About halfway through the novel, we are told that “The Navidson Record has focused principally on the effects the house has had on others: how Holloway became murderous and suicidal . . . No consideration, however, has been given to the house as it relates purely to itself.”⁷⁹ One section of the novel describes in detail a fictional documentary made by Karen Green called *What Some Have Thought*; this documentary is a collection of interviews in which Karen asks various fictional and actual-world people what the house means—people ranging from her personal trainer to Slavoj Žižek. A footnote introducing the documentary tells us that it was “originally” not included (in the non-existent “first edition” of *House of Leaves*) because it was “too self-referential and too far from ‘the spine of the story’ to justify its inclusion. ‘Audiences just want to get back to the house.’ Such self-conscious self-referentiality—a reminder to get back to the house already—does not point to *Ash Tree*’s lack of meaning. Rather, it unites the house’s spatial proliferation with its hermeneutical proliferation by performing within the text the act of reading: the house prompts Karen to search out commentary and interpretations, yet the interpretations only open further

⁷⁹ Danielewski, 370.

hermeneutical possibilities and throw into relief the absence of Karen's own act of interpretation, openings that ultimately push Karen to return to Ash Tree itself and rescue her husband from its belly. This event prompts yet further interpretive commentary later in the novel, and is the primary event that prompts readers in the actual world to read this haunted house novel as a romance. Like Ash Tree, the text that houses it is capable of animating content and proliferating interpretations. Leaves performs its own reading, and Danielewski's ornate method for housing the text gives expressive form to the act that so many readers have performed with so many novels before it. Michel De Certeaux has described reading in terms of renting an apartment, where readers return to certain spaces and hang the trappings of their interpretations, open some new hallways, forget others.⁸⁰ Danielewski forces the reader to make spatial choices in his novel, formally embodying that which has always been implicit in the act of reading a novel.

"The house itself" is a formulation that poses significant difficulties for a literary critic, difficulties not unprecedented for scholars working in the intersections between architecture and literature. Some, like Diana Fuss, might point to the house as it is inhabited—as it fulfills its function as the site of sensuous dwelling and creative production.⁸¹ Ash Tree, however, dramatically resists human habitation, even erases and consumes any marks of dwelling—including corpses—left within its hallways: "the place will purge itself of all things, including any item left behind," and is described

⁸⁰ "The thin film of writing becomes a movement of strata, a play of spaces. A different world (the reader's) slips into the author's place. This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient." De Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), xxi.

⁸¹ Fuss, 2004. Writing about the physical sites of writing for Emily Dickinson, Sigmund Freud, Helen Keller, and Marcel Proust, Diana Fuss argues that it is important to attend to "the sensory experience of dwelling," because it impacts writing "in ways both intensely physical and deeply philosophical." She argues that bodily experience of houses is formative of subjectivity. Fuss, Diana, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18.

as “a very mean House Keeper who vigilantly makes sure the house remains void of absolutely everything. Not a speck of dust. It’s a maid gone absolutely nutso.”⁸² As though actually fulfilling the isolation and lack of human relationality promised by Bly Manor in the secluded suburbs of James’s story, Danielewski’s haunted house purges itself of human relations—yet its effect is to draw character more inexorably into itself. The house on Ash Tree Lane is housing, a structure that produces characters in active relation to its changing conditions.

When related to the Navidson children, the house produces a terror expressed in a manner unique to their relations. When assigned to draw their houses at school, Daisy and Chad eschew the triangle roof and stick-figure humans in other children’s drawings, and they instead fill in a square with an impenetrably dark interior, layering it with black ink and crayon. In the margins around the square they draw terrifying beasts, giving nonrepresentational image and affective form to the terror and nonhuman animation the house produces. Like the children of Henry James’s fiction, Daisy and Chad know too much, though they don’t quite have forms for expressing what they know.⁸³ What the children’s drawings communicate is an asymmetry between form and content, an asymmetry that mirrors on a thematic level the formal paradox driving the novel’s construction. Daisy’s teacher is deeply disturbed by the lack of conventionality in the child’s illustration of the house, and when she sees the stylistic similarities of Chad’s drawing, she “just had to take a gander at the place that had inspired those drawings.⁸⁴” When the teacher visits the house, however, she notes that “the house was nice and quaint on the outside. I was expecting something else I guess.”⁸⁵ The sharp disjunct

⁸² Danielewski, 357.

⁸³ Kathryn Stockton reads the child figure in the fiction of Henry James as a queer figure—a child of wayward or inappropriate desires. See Stockton, Kathryn Bond, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Series Q. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁸⁴ Danielewski, 314

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 314

between what the form promises and what it actually produces contributes greatly to the unease attached to this familiar type of building. A conventional understanding of exteriority fails to capture the “interior” effects produced by the house. In contrast to James’s children, the teacher does not misread the children but she misreads their readings—she expects their readings to be representational, but they are gestural and affective readings. As Lauren Berlant might put it, the children have found their genre for expressing the affective content of their encounter with a precarious structure, and this particular genre collapses signs of exteriority (the familiar square-for-house) into signs of interiority (the impenetrable layers of ink and crayon), communicating their sense that their housing has produced an animation irreducible to conventional understandings of interior and exterior, an animation independent of their comprehension of that very collapse of conventionality.⁸⁶

In its asymmetry between external formal structures and “interior” affect, *Ash Tree* troubles conventional understandings of *transparency* as an inherent quality belonging to a single object or concept. Hansen and Hayles use this term to describe the curious boxes that appear on dozens of pages of the novel; these boxes feature on one side of the page a list of everything that is *not* in the house. On the reverse sides of the page, the same text appears in reverse, creating the illusion of the page being transparent within the box, windows into the book’s interior. At the end of these pages of item after item that is *not* in the house, page 144 features a blank white box, as though the whiteness of the page has suddenly reasserted its opacity. The facing page features a box in the same position, but this one is filled in with a dense, inky black. These two squares juxtaposed recall the children’s renderings of the house itself. The blankness of the white space on the page directly

⁸⁶ See in particular “Introduction: Affect in the Present” and “Five: Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal” in Berlant, Lauren, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, 2011), 1 – 24.

contrasts the opacity of the children’s drawing, a sudden blankness that brings an absolute halt to the presence of text that had heretofore constructed the illusion of transparency. In other words, this white square calls attention to transparency as an irreducible effect achieved by assembled opacities.

Transparency as a relational quality rather than an inherent quality of a single form or material is a well-known concept architectural history and theory, termed *phenomenal transparency*. In an influential collection of theoretical studies of architecture, Colin Rowe characterizes the difference between “literal” and “phenomenal” transparency as the difference in which “the transparent ceases to be that which is perfectly clear and becomes, instead, that which is clearly ambiguous.”⁸⁷ When layered in relation to other shapes or materials, opaque forms can give the *illusion* of depth, and it is the very illusion that is the focus—it is a depth communicated on and through the surface. Rowe uses Le Corbusier’s League of Nations building as characteristic of such clear ambiguity, and its phenomenal transparency turns the building’s walls into “knives for the apportionate slicing of space,” and it effects a spatial experience Rowe describes as “like a dam by means of which space is contained, embanked, tunneled, sluiced, and finally spilled.”⁸⁸ Thinking back to the Navidson children’s drawings of the house, then, we see that the opacity of their drawings is precisely that which allows them to communicate a sense of “seeing” through to the house’s animated character.

This distinction between literal and phenomenal transparency is an important one for examining how *Leaves* deploys the concept of interiority, because phenomenal transparency emphasizes the importance of opaque surface structures in producing character. Ash Tree’s interior

⁸⁷ Rowe, Colin, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 161.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 175 – 176.

not only repels any object or décor in its space, but it is also conspicuously mostly without windows—the one window Navidson stumbles across deep in its belly looks out onto only another dark hallway in mocking reminder of the literal transparency so lacking in Ash Tree. It is Ash Tree in *The House of Leaves* that organizes and allots limited space and animation to the other characters. If Ash Tree’s interiority is an effect produced by the assemblage of its formal structure, its interiority is also irreducible to such structures. In an effort to discover, to unearth the “meaning” of Ash Tree, Navidson rents a lab to “consider new evidence: namely the collected wall samples,” and he performs what amounts to an autopsy of these chunks from Ash Tree, an autopsy that reveals the age (from “a few thousand years old” to “billions”), composition (“a nice banquet of igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic samples”), and origin (“I doubt lunar but maybe interplanetary”) of the pieces pried from Ash Tree’s interior.⁸⁹ The strange and impossible facts that the lab dislodges from the samples are of course grounds for wild speculation within the “sources” included by Zampanò in his manuscript. The conclusion that Zampanò himself posits, however, is that “it would seem the language of objectivity can never adequately address the reality of that place.”⁹⁰ The reference to “reality” here, is a reference not to a physical existence of an American house made of interplanetary material, but rather a reference to the affective reality of the house’s impact—the reality captured in the children’s’ renderings—and no anatomization of the inanimate surfaces that make up the structure of the housing will disclose exactly how those parts add up to an animation that brings to life and extinguishes numerous other characters.⁹¹ Ash Tree, as a body whose walls

⁸⁹ Danielewski, 376 – 78.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 379.

⁹¹Such a concept certainly calls to mind the assemblage theory developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in particular the “body without organs,” an image meant to evoke a whole that comprises but is irreducible to moving, flowing parts. Deleuze, Gilles, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London, 1988).

reject any permanent ornamentation or accumulation, any stillness or aspirations to stillness, and its housing integrates thing and object, container and contained, interior and surface as partial and interweaving concepts that add up to a literary form that is trying to express something about creative production and its capacity to animate—its capacity to move.⁹²

The particular lesson that this literary form teaches about the character of fictional housing seems to emphasize not the immortality of inanimate matter but rather its precious mortality, its transient liveliness. Not only do multiple characters die in the novel, the character Navidson reads *the House of Leaves* in the darkness of the haunted house by igniting one page of the manuscript to light the next, “a final act of reading, a final act of consumption.”⁹³ If housing produces characters as active relation to changing material circumstances, *House of Leaves* suggests that the unfolding of those characters is irreversible and evanescent.

To close this account of *House of Leaves*, I would like to linger for a moment a story Johnny Truant shares directly with the reader, a story “told” to him by his imaginary doctor friend. “It begins with the birth of a baby,” the fictional doctor tells us through Truant, but this baby is sick. He tells the mother “that her son has holes in his brain [. . .] He can only survive on machines.” The baby is hooked up to “A Siemens Servo 300” and obscured by “IV pumps and miles of IV lines.” But the mother stays, “sits with him all day [. . .] words pouring out of her, melodies caressing him, tending her little boy.” She patiently sits with the baby for a tense four days, drawing the attention of all the nurses and infecting even the doctor with hope. On the fourth day, the mother stands up, tells the doctor that it is time to “unplug” the child, and “for a moment everyone there swears she has stopped breathing, her eyes no longer blinking, focusing deeply within him.

⁹² Ngai., loc. 1013

⁹³ Danielewski, 467.

Then she leans forward and kisses him on the forehead. ‘You can go now,’ she says tenderly. And . . . The child is gone”—as is story itself, abruptly ended with no explanation. Truant never resolves whether the mother or the machines kept the child in animation, and that mystery is the mechanism for channeling and redistributing animation across the scene. The mother’s suspended breath pulls animating power away from the machines and sucks in all other characters, flattening doctor and nurses alike into a rapt “everyone,” a raptness that holds this reader, regulating and suspending my breath to the rhythms of the story. At the end of this story Truant confesses that he made it all up, that he never even had dinner with the supposed doctor friend who narrated it. Though fictional, baby and mother are as material—and fleeting—as Truant himself.

The content of this story wraps this story about formalism back to a question of realism. What sort of “scene of human affairs” does *House of Leaves* look onto through this perplexing and adamantly unresolved short story, this scene of redistributed animation presented as an aside, as a small window in the narrative wall? James’s house of fiction, unevenly and numerous fenestrated, looks, but *does not open onto* the scene of human affairs. Ash Tree’s one interior window looks only deeper into the house. Though this literary genealogy might be tracing something of a retreat from realist representation, it might better describe what Bill Brown has termed a literary desire that “ideas and things should somehow merge.”⁹⁴ Brown argues that a modernist interest in imagining an “interiority” of things “illuminates the material specificity of reading”— ideas, in other words, rest on the surfaces of things rather than inhere deeply within them.⁹⁵ The haunted house’s use of flat surfaces and artificial characters (both fonts and actors) induces character interiority as the lively effect of formal assemblages, and relational struggles characterize these flat artificial lives as much as

⁹⁴ Brown, Bill, *A Sense of Things the Object Matter of American Literature*, (Chicago; London, 2003), 3.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 9.

do realistic representations of human strife. These haunted forms help to trace a rough genealogy of Danielewski's arguably American investment in housing as having an over-determined role to play in producing *and* representing the so-called self-made—or rather, artificially made—life.

CHAPTER TWO “Reanimated Women and Gothic Magnetism in the Houses of Bundren, Pyncheon, and Usher”

In my previous chapter, both Henry James and Mark Z. Danielewski depict feminine characters who come to inhabit the role of protagonist or central actor through lively interactions with their surrounding environments. Danielewski’s matriarch Pelafina Lievre plastically deforms the shape of the novel as she gradually becomes an increasingly vital part of her son’s story—so vital that she eventually entirely displaces her son’s presence. Lievre’s rise to protagonist is all the more significant for her rise from the dead in the narrative of *House of Leaves*—the rise shows that character animation is not just about how characters come to life but also how they relate to inanimate matter. To demonstrate how decorative detail can add up to expressions of character liveliness, I applied a version of architectural transparency to these literary texts—specifically phenomenal transparency, or the technique of overlapping opaque surfaces to suggest the illusion of transparency. I read Danielewski’s decorative prose and remediation as producing the illusion of “seeing” through literary forms to an animation seething within, a claim that places the novel squarely within a modernist tradition in which characters are produced as actions unfolding on and through the assembled surfaces of things.¹

This next chapter develops the animating capacities of housing by looking to crypts in literary domestic settings—or, opaque containers that counterintuitively mediate the lively actions of their entombed characters. Edgar Allen Poe’s Madeline Usher, waifish and ghostly while alive in her short

¹ This modernist tradition is represented by both Omri Moses’s study of modernism and vitalism and by assemblage theories like Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory. Moses analyzes modernist characters who adapt to ever-changing circumstances and Latour argues that relationships gain duration through the mediation of inanimate and material “actors.” See Omri Moses, *Out of Character: Modernism, Vitalism, Psychic Life* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014) and Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

story, once confined in her copper-lined and iron-doored vault, spectacularly rises and brings her patrilineal house crashing down. Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hepzibah Pyncheon, buried barely alive in her ancestral crypt of a seven-gabled house, catalyzes her novel's narrative by resurrecting the house's penny store, crumbling what was left of the Pyncheon's aristocratic heritage and ushering herself into a new way of life and lively engagement with her community. William Faulkner's Addie Bundren, a scowling skeleton while still breathing in her novel, focalizes an entire character cast and narrative—including the story of her extramarital desires—once she has been enclosed in her custom-made coffin. What can the concept of literary housing tell us about these characters whose containment in crypts reanimates them? I argue that although crypts are intended to contain death and conceal decay, their fictional role as housing instead gives expressively material form to the normally unseen conditions of their oppression; it is within this expressive containment that Gothic fictional females can become undetermined, dynamic characters who all too actively pursue desires unsanctioned by the patriarchal systems that entombed them. In short, opaque housing mediates the illusion of interiority for characters not typically recognized as protagonist material.

Attention to the crypt's animating dynamic discloses the stultifying and deadening dynamic of systems traditionally associated with life, specifically domestic scenes of familial love. Addie and Madeline wreak vengeance on their families after escaping through death, and Hepzibah shames the honorable Judge Pyncheon by shunning the supportive structure of their patrilineal birthright. Each character mobilizes the activity that accumulates into character—the subject of the previous chapter—but does so specifically through opacity, ugliness, and non-normative appetites. Madeline lives and dies with undisclosed secrets; Hepzibah inhabits an ugliness that prevents those around her from seeing her; and Addie utilizes words that contain no depth to actively shape character relations. Where the previous chapter looked at feminine characters who insist on mattering as protagonists, the present

chapter looks at feminine characters who matter by refusing their inheritances and threatening their families. What they achieve through these refusals is not realistic psychic interiority but rather active roles in their narratives—they become material agents in literary assemblages. Not only are these Gothic characters uncontained by opaque crypts—a lead-lined tomb, a decaying ancestral house, and a wooden coffin—they also inhabit deceptive bodies—a gossamer duplicate of a male sibling; a squinting, scowling crone; and a straight-laced, frail old matriarch. It is through the mediation of these crypts and bodily housing that each character becomes a load-bearing actor in her narrative. The power plays that unfold in these narratives suggest that the balance of power in love and domesticity is undecided and undetermined, and crypts disclose the ongoing struggles seething within domestic settings.

Gothic Opacity

The housing in this chapter is Gothic in style. A literary form inherited from European writers Horace Walpole and Anne Radcliffe, American writers from Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allen Poe, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Henry James, William Faulkner and on into the present day have embraced the Gothic to expose and express the dark inheritances hidden behind pleasant surfaces.² The application of ornate veneers over the apparently ordinary events unfolding within domestic walls is part of a significant stylistic tradition that persists through and against the stripped and streamlined transparency of twentieth-century international style modernism. In its imaginative renderings of built space, Gothic styling gives affective reality to open secrets and immaterial structures of repression—

² For a literary history of the Gothic in American literature see Crow, Charles L. *American Gothic*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009). In her account of contemporary Gothic fiction, Victoria Nelson writes that in the worlds of Gothic fiction, “character is more a function of plot than vice versa”—a claim which means Gothic characters are ideal cases for exploring how character is formed as action unfolding through assemblages of surface. Nelson, Victoria *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012), 9.

or as Charles Crow has identified of the genre, it “records our disgust or rejection of a fallen, haunted, cursed or diseased world that we know should be something else.”³ The Gothic transforms the surfaces of things to appear how they feel.

The Gothic as a fictional genre is a preoccupation in Charlotte Perkins Gillman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), in which the protagonist is evidently acquainted with the genre and its conventions, and she is initially disappointed with the lovely exterior of her new summer home because its conventional loveliness “spoils my ghostliness.”⁴ The new mother longs for the grand adventure and epic stakes of the European Gothic, but what she gets is the American twist on the genre: nonviolent confinement in plain sight in a charming suburban summer home at the benevolent behest of an apparently irreproachable patriarch.⁵ Gillman then expresses her protagonist’s refusal of masculine confinement in a domestic setting through her Gothic rendering of the nursery’s famous lurid yellow wallpaper. Rife with phallic imagery, the paper expresses the masculine will binding the protagonist to a room in an isolated summer home meant to fulfill a “rest cure,” cutting her off the activity and stimulation of her urban life. The pattern itself “lolls” flaccidly with masculine imagery, it is “bulbous,” “it sticketh closer than a brother.”⁶ Though the protagonist at first resists confinement in this yellow-papered crypt, she eventually chooses it, literally locking herself into the room and tossing the key out the window. Containment within this crypt, however, does not fulfill her husband’s hopes for stillness:

³ Crow, 9.

⁴ Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” 1.

⁵ Confinement in plain sight is a Gothic trope that stretches back to America’s earliest literature. In “Letters of an American Farmer” (1782), J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur writes of an idyllic land filled with nature’s wonders, but the idyll is interrupted by a gruesomely Gothic scene in which the body of a tortured African American slave is suspended in the open in a cage. Institutionalized slavery is America’s Gothic heritage—the open secret, the originary type for the American gothic theme that things are not what they seem.

⁶ Gilman, 1.

instead it sends Gilman's character out of her mind, splitting into an imaginary other projects onto the wall's pattern with whom she can relate and actively engage. The character who began the story with orders for bedrest ends the story endlessly circling the room, actively performing her refusal of patriarchal prescriptions for domestic tranquility. Gilbert and Gubar famously read this refusal as an escape from gendered confinement to house and body.⁷ Janice Haney-Peritz has read this refusal as "a displacement of a colonial inheritance that fate seems to have decreed as her lot."⁸ Susan G. Lanser reads it as a xenophobic anxiety about immigration in a nation obsessed with race as the foundation for character.⁹ The flat surface of these Gothic walls can of course support all of these interpretations—it is the very opacity of the decorated surface that continues to move scholars to speculate on the true character of Gilman's ornament.

Whatever she is really refusing, Gilman's protagonist is ultimately buried alive in her yellow room. Eve Sedgwick interpreted the trope of live burial as a figure for the repression of the libido, and indeed surface generating depth through repression is a familiar model for reading.¹⁰ While it seems accepted that Freud neglects women and mothers when formulating his explanations for death and religion, Elissa Marder has asserted that the figure of the mother has a formative and crucial role

⁷ Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. "From the Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination," in *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on "The Yellow Wallpaper."* Catherine Golden, ed. (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1993), 145 – 48.

⁸ Haney-Peritz, Janice "Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House: Another Look at The Yellow Wallpaper," in *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on The Yellow Wallpaper* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1993), 261 – 276.

⁹ Susan S. Lanser, "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America," *Feminist Studies* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 415 – 41.

¹⁰ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. New York: Methuen, 1986, 6 – 7. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus read into the act of reading into hidden depths and propose an alternative model that is attentive to describing surfaces as the material qualities of language that exist in and across texts in their essay "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 1 – 21.

to play in the lead up to masculine death. Marder argues that there is a sexual difference in death and that reading this gendering may make it “possible to open up some new ways of thinking about the repercussions that psychic representations can produce on social and political life.”¹¹ At the source of psychoanalytic theory, Sigmund Freud dedicated time to analyzing fictional womb-tombs. If what we were concerned with were a dream,” he speculates about stories featuring a choice of casket, “it would occur to us at once that caskets are also women, symbols of what is essential in woman, and therefore of a woman herself—like coffers, boxes, cases, baskets, and so on.”¹² If the coffin is a womb, Freud reasons, and a womb is woman’s essence, then the casket narrative is one that allows a man to pleasurably reconcile himself with death. To Freud, the casket makes death palatable by housing it in the deceptively pleasurable form of feminine “essence.” Inside the casket is a letter telling the wooer that he has made the right choice by choosing the “dull lead” with its “blunt” warning. This casket, more than just death, symbolizes a certain type of woman—she who will not disguise herself with adornment, makeup, or decoration, but who will present a dull and blunt warning about the myth of the confrontation between man and woman. Abram and Torok take Freud’s casket to be an opaque symbol for a secret that contains no content yet whose empty suggestion of hidden depths constitutes the very grounds for language and meaning making. This introjected shell of a secret “erects a secret tomb inside the subject.” Within the subject, then, the lost object or other remains in the ego as an inassimilable foreign body.¹³ Imaginative tombs, then, are forms of figuration that put characters into

¹¹ Marder, Elissa, “The Sex of Death and the Maternal Crypt,” In *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 23.

¹² Freud, Sigmund. “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* James Strachey ed., (XII, 1911), 289 – 302.

¹³ Abraham, Nicolas and Maria Torok. *The Shell and the Kernel* Trans. Nicholas T. Rand. vol. 1. (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1994), 130.

relations with others even within themselves—in this chapter such relations are struggles over dominance.

This chapter looks at hideous surfaces to see both the rendering of unseen oppression and the animation induced when characters encounter that rendering. Gothic conventions are a stylistic tool for expressing the inherited social forms which built space materializes and which all-too easily makes habitual and invisible to the distracted masses occupying them. If Walter Benjamin believes that tactile habits determine the public's perception of built space, then the literary Gothic works at the level of virtual tactility and sensuous surface—the level of affect, of atmosphere, of imaginative touch and sight and smell—to retrain and refocus the meanings in and of architectural forms. The popularity of the literary Gothic, in fact, helped mobilize the Gothic revivalism of the early nineteenth century, an ironic concretization of the expressive spatial deformations made possible in the literary style.¹⁴ This chapter narrates the often-overlooked stories of a few unique and uniquely unwilling feminine characters created contemporary with that dominant cultural movement.¹⁵

The Empty Tomb: Madeline Usher's Uncanny Return

I now turn to two of these unwilling characters, first Madeline Usher and then Hepzibah Pyncheon, as illustrative examples of, on the one hand the female corpse as medium for character magnetism, and on the other, opaque containment of a feminine body as expressing and resisting patriarchal oppression. Together these characters suggest that housing moving characters into relations is a gendered struggle within domestic settings, and that opaque surfaces are a narrative

¹⁴ Hawthorne's connection to Gothic revivalism is documented in Maurice, Charney. "Hawthorne and the Gothic Style." *The New England Quarterly* 34, no. 1: (March 1961), 36 – 49.

¹⁵ For an account of the nineteenth-century formation of the cult of femininity, see Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture*. (New York: Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

medium for resisting patriarchal structures. My final character, Addie Bundren, will demonstrate that gender does not determine the directions or outcome of that struggle.

Edgar Allen Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) is well-known as a story about the domestic house, but less known as the site of struggles for domination. Roderick, it is generally accepted, is the story's protagonist, and interpretations vary on whether he is mentally ill, an illustration of a Romantic intellectual or a Renaissance man, or a cautionary tale about the dangers of masculine fragility.¹⁶ Madeline Usher's story is barely hinted at by the masculine characters around her. Her role in the text is marginal, with only a few short lines dedicated to her in the entire story. Even during her one fleeting appearance, the narrator and Roderick alike talk about Madeline as though she were absent, and after her departure they scrupulously avoid any further mention of her. The lady's appearance fills the writer with "utter astonishment not unmingled with dread." In direct contrast to his previous actions—rather than obsessively reflecting on (and imaginatively inverting and rearranging) the scene before him—here the narrator simply gives up, deems it "impossible to account for such feelings," and then turns "instinctively and eagerly to the countenance of the brother."¹⁷ Roderick is a surface that shows his comfortingly familiar interior depths. Where the narrator demonstrated an uncanny self-consciousness in his initial reflections on his aesthetic responses to the house of Usher, his encounter with Madeline is an encounter with the unexplainable, the indigestible, a surface that opaquely refuses to communicate interior states.

¹⁶ One such study by Brett Zimmerman asserts that "Usher" replaces the feminine heroine of other Gothic tales with two masculine protagonists in order to expose the dangers of excessive sensibility. See Zimmerman, Brett, "Sensibility, Phrenology, and 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 47.

¹⁷ Poe, Edgar Allen, "Fall of the House of Usher," in *Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe*, (n.d. Kindle edition).

Madeline Usher is a peculiarly wordless and undescribed presence in a story otherwise saturated with minutely detailed descriptions and lengthy ekphrastic passages describing pointed arches and cold embattlements—it is as though the story’s descriptive language fails around this feminine character. Literary historians have attempted to account for Madeline’s presence by explaining her as the object of Roderick’s incestuous desire, the mirror for Roderick’s heightened artistic sensibility, a metonym for a diseased family line.¹⁸ And while the damsel is still living within the short story, it is indeed difficult to think of her as ought but a passive object. Yet once buried, Madeline rises spectacularly from her crypt, the blood on her clothes bespeaking a superhuman struggle to wrench open impossibly heavy iron doors. Madeline’s indecent burial figures the struggle for domination that characterizes the Usher’s unhomely home and that is thematized in Poe’s turn to mesmerism to both bring Madeline under the sway of her brother’s will and to then release her into an active role once death frees her from oppression. Madeline Usher is housing, an animate structure that in this case deanimates character relations: the only possibility for refusal in this story is bring the entire patrilineal house crashing down.

Though housed within her domestic dwelling and narrative, Madeline stands outside the story’s language and outside the understanding or even literal company of the story’s so-called primary characters. Presently absent, Madeline’s character flickers between subject and object, animate and inanimate. The one reference to her interiority is parenthetical: after passing through the apartment, the lady “without having noticed my presence, disappeared.” Part of the narrator’s “utter astonishment” at seeing Madeline comes from her blatant neglect to pay the caller the attention

¹⁸ For an example of this type of canonical reading that collapses the events, settings, and characters of “House of Usher” into a representation of various aspects of Roderick, see Butler, David, “Usher’s Hypochondriasis: Mental Alienation and Romantic Idealism in Poe’s Gothic Tales,” in *On Poe: The Best from “American Literature,”* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 189 – 90.

conventionally due to him from the lady of the house. The lady's perplexing unconventionality provokes the narrator to turn from her in horror, to seek the comforting familiarity of her brother's transparently communicative face. Poe is well-known for constructing female characters whose hints of interiority provoke horror in her masculine observers. The narrator of "Morella" can't stand the uncanny intelligence he observes in the child Morella, who appeared to house within her child's body the "adult powers and faculties of the woman."¹⁹ Concomitant with his divining an unexpected depth and maturity in the child, however, is the narrator's repetitive references to young Morella as "it," an objectifying pronoun that justifies treating the child as a disposable object to be dealt with. The uncanny misfit between Morella's body and her interiority is the Gothic horror of cherubic face as knowing reprisal of the narrator's role in the adult Morella's untimely death. The narrator of "Usher," too, switches from gendered pronouns to "it" when trying to convince himself of the appropriateness of sealing Madeline in the tomb.

Madeline, described only once she has been safely "encoffined," is deceptively housed. Her presumed corpse misleads the narrator with its well-known "mockery of a faint blush" and "lingering smile." Whether it is the secret means of her death or the hidden truth of her continued life that is being obscured, her appearance effectively perplexes narrator and reader alike. Awed out of his usual meticulous visual cataloguing, the narrator briefly notes a "striking similitude" between brother and sister: but in a text so full of physiognomy-based claims that read Roderick's artistic soul in the arabesque curve of his nose, Madeline's semblance to her brother communicates only "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature" with her brother and betrays nothing of the contents of her character.²⁰ Literary historians have filled in the hermeneutic void that is Madeline's content with readings of incest

¹⁹ Poe, Edgar Allen. "Morella," in *Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe*, (n.d. Kindle edition).

²⁰ Poe, "Fall of the House of Usher," in *Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe*, (n.d. Kindle edition).

or of Madeline as Roderick's metaphorical extension, but I seek to allow the uncomfortable absence to remain present. Madeline's ontologically uncertain character is not an empty vessel in need of interpretive filling but represents a special limit in figuration. The curve of Madeline's smile mocks because of its refusal to straightforwardly express the apparent grimness of her life.

Madeline's structural role in the story, her seemingly incidental and minimal presence in the house and its narrative, belies the active role she plays in bringing down the walls that would contain her. Madeline shares similarities with the house in "House of Usher" that are irreducible to Roderick's well-documented physical parallels to the house. Unlike Roderick's illness-torn visage, Madeline's illness "entombed the lady in the maturity of youth," and there appears to be no external indication of the ruined condition of her interior state.²¹ In this misleading aspect, the lady's surface echoes the house's superficial appearance, which "gave little token of instability"—with the notable exception of a single, zig-zagging crack barely perceptible even to our perceptive narrator.²² As with his sudden inattentiveness to detail when it comes to Madeline, the narrator leaves a gap in his descriptive catalogue of the house when it comes to the crack: he merely notes its existence and moves on. Our mysterious lady also resembles the house in the progress of her illness. The narrator finds the house remarkable for its *lack* of noticeable decay. "No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones." The house as a whole is inconsistent with its parts, and the narrator seems to be telling us that its form is artificially whole, as though an act of will were holding the edifice up against its natural ruin.²³ Similarly, it is a striking coincidence that before the narrator's visit, Madeline

²¹ Roderick's countenance expresses his inner malady, with the very wisps of his hair proclaiming a certain "tenuity" about his character. Poe, "Fall of the House of Usher."

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

“had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady,” and she succumbs “to the prostrating power of the destroyer” only on the exact day of the narrator’s arrival. The specific assemblage of characters brought together within the Usher house creates the conditions of Madeline to rise as a character moved by opaque motives.

Madeline has, as by an act of will, been held together, held as part of the House of Usher against her natural decline. An unnatural whole captivating its parts is a theme present across Poe’s work, and one he explicitly connects to the contemporary pseudo-science of mesmerism.²⁴ The “cataleptic” nature of Madeline’s illness, in fact, describes the state of a person under a mesmeric trance.²⁵ The conventional reading of this story is that Madeline’s ghoulish rise from the tomb is the return of Roderick’s guilt and the catalyzer for the building’s literal fall, but reading Madeline and the house as both being held up against decay by mesmeric willpower suggests that the House of Usher has *already* fallen long before the story begins. Doris Falk claims that Poe’s unique conception of animal magnetism, given its manipulation by mesmerism, “is an amoral force operating within the mind and body, linking consciousness and ‘physique,’ animating both. Within the body, magnetism is the unifying force which prevents dissolution.”²⁶ Poe’s most explicit use of mesmerism is in “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” in which a mesmerist puts Valdemar into a cataleptic trance at the moment of his expiration. He then experiments over the course of several days with posing and

²⁴ *PMLA* provided a forum for a friendly debate over mesmerism and animal magnetism in Poe’s writing. Doris Falk argues that Sidney Lind’s earlier study mistakes mesmerism for hypnotism, and then details the unique history of the pseudo-science and its metaphorical adoption in contemporary writing. See Lind, Sidney E., “Poe and Mesmerism,” *PMLA* 62, no. 4 (December 1947): 1077 – 1094 and Falk, Doris, “Poe and the Power of Animal Magnetism,” *PMLA* 84, no. 23 (May 1969): 536 – 546.

²⁵ For a contemporary use of *catalepsy* as the state of a body in mesmeric trance, see George Sandy’s scathing book-length criticism of the pseudo-science. Sandby, George, *Mesmerism and Its Opponents* 2nd ed., (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans), 1848.

²⁶ Falk, 537.

moving the mesmerically suspended body. In this state, all trace of Valdemar has left, and the body is completely under the willpower of the mesmerist. The story comes to an abrupt and grotesque end when the mesmerist decides to pose a question to Valdemar himself, and he asks if Valdemar can communicate his wishes. The man's dead and rotting tongue lolls and jerks in the rigid mouth to form his plea: "For God's sake!—quick!—quick!—put me to sleep—or, quick!—waken me!—quick!—I say to you that I am dead!"²⁷ Shocked, the mesmerist quickly releases Valdemar from the trance, and "his whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence." The sudden and total collapse of Valdemar's body once released from its trance parallels the House of Usher's melodramatic plunge into the tarn. The literal fall of the house, then, is a return to the house's natural state, a return to the death that it had succumbed to long before Madeline's rise.

Madeline's rise, then, doesn't just catalyze the house's fall, her actions forcefully remove the impediment—the mesmerist Roderick—holding back its collapse. Roderick has been willfully clinging to this domestic structure, holding his sister there, melancholically grasping at a storied family name with no future, preserving a family at the end of its reproductive line. The narrator experiences something of Roderick's mesmeric will while looking at his paintings, "at which I shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered knowing not why [. . .] By the utter simplicity, by the nakedness of his designs, he *arrested* and *overawed* attention [my emphasis]."²⁷ After his genealogical line has already failed, Roderick tries to mesmerically suspend the family's death. In the 1970s television adaptation of the story, Roderick hires the narrator to come out and repair the house's foundation, to save the house

²⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (reprint), *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe* (PDF e-Book), 130.

and consequently himself from decline. Madeline rebels against this attempt at immortality by reasserting the mortality of characters brought to life by inanimate structures assembled in specific configurations for a moment in time.

Unlike the mesmerist in “Valdemar,” Roderick never asks for Madeline’s wishes and the story never reveals them. Instead, after placing her in a casket deep in the house’s tomb, “we replaced and screwed down the lid, and, having secured the door of iron, made our way, with oil, into the scarcely less gloomy apartments of the upper portion of the house.”²⁸ When Madeline makes her uncanny return, she fantastically breaks through the screwed-down lid of the casket and the secured door of iron. Silent in life, Madeline makes an absurdly loud racket after death: her return brings back with a vengeance the noise and activity repressed in the lady’s gossamer life. Madeline’s tomb is the medium for her return and the site of her conversion from Usher property into independent actant. It is not exposing the secret of her character that gives her struggles meaning but attending to the motions on the surfaces of her story that add material heft to her character.²⁹ Through “the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault,” Madeline at last makes her individual presence and will felt in the House of Usher. The “blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame” house Madeline in a body that Roderick cannot ignore and which he can no longer control.

²⁸ Poe, “Fall of the House of Usher.”

²⁹ The psychoanalytic crypt provides a useful figure for this non-interpretive move—Elissa Marder argues that it is the *translation* of the crypt’s secret that makes it a figure for the very seat of subjectivity. This interpretive act does not uncover the hidden secret but translates, or moves, form into meaning. The content remains hidden and “therefore something of the crypt always remains beyond comprehension and beyond explanation or even description.” Elissa Marder, “Mourning, Magic, and Telepathy,” in *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Fordham University Press, 2012), 45.

Madeline bears down on Roderick with the weight of outrage, and she consequently releases his hold over the house's structure.

The fall of the House of Usher, then, is not the corruption, but the fulfillment of what in Poe's story is the natural, anti-aristocratic order. The House of Usher is itself a coffin for the rotted corpse of aristocracy, for the impotent and housebound will of the Usher patriarchs and the close watch they must have kept over female bodies to ensure property transmission and consequently suspend the animation of a family name. The House of Usher, while productive of atmosphere, is outdated in style and décor, it is a melancholy preservation of the past to express the inheritance weighting the present. Poe's interest in interior decorating is well-known, and his "Philosophy of Furniture" suggests that the House of Usher flouts Poe's personal, pronounced tastes in decorating. Usher's pointed arches and high-set, narrow Gothic windows starkly contrast the nearly modernist wall of windows Poe describes as flooding light into his ideal bachelor's pad. The building's architectural and decorative obsolescence is the result of the house's "undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher."³⁰ This strict non-deviation from direct patrimony is the Usher family's way of resisting the collapse of the aristocracy that Alexis de Toqueville credits with liberating American women.³¹ The soon-to-be branchless tree that is the Usher family depicts is specific America's lack of primogeniture laws; to keep a house in a family, the family has to keep members close and undeviating. As a female who does not reproduce and who literally threatens

³⁰ Poe, "Fall of the House of Usher."

³¹ De Toqueville writes that due to the collapse of the aristocracy, in America "paternal discipline is very relaxed and the conjugal tie very strict"—by entwining the fraternal and the conjugal, however, the House of Usher has found a way around liberating (or even directly acknowledging) its women. De Tocqueville, Alexis, "The Young Woman in the Character of a Wife," *Democracy in America* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1840), 79 – 81.

the continuation of her patrilineal line, Madeline acts out the role of woman as an anti aristo-normative cultural force aligned with nature. She is the womb-casket whose opaque form figures acceptance of death, she is the unassimilable kernel in the father's house, she is the character around whose secret the parts of the narrative rise and fall.

Madeline Usher's metaphorical and literal entombment within her domestic housing is a Gothic trope in the broadest sense. What makes Edgar Allen Poe's use of live burial in "House of Usher" remarkable is the violence with which Madeline bursts out of her containment. Or rather, Madeline's violence is what distinguishes her character from her European counterparts. Much more like Clara Wieland impulsively wielding her penknife than like Emily St. Aubert brandishing her chastity, Madeline's body defies the Christian woman's spiritual duty to submit and lay down her life. Furthermore, with her countenance veiling a secret, Madeline's character is more closely related to Radcliffe's villainous Sr. Montoni than she is to Emily, whose every interior emotion and thought is plainly legible in her face. Madeline is a "secret tomb" buried within a literal tomb, requiring all the more violence to erupt past those reified borders.³² Her secrecy is the only expression of her character and her posthumous vengeance expresses the hidden secret of the Usher family: the ontological asymmetries behind the walls of domestic structures like the Usher mansion.³³ For Poe, fiction is animated by the same magnetism that holds the Usher mansion together against the heterogeneity of its parts and that maintains family structure past the end of its reproductive potential. H. P. Lovecraft picks up on this animated quality of Poe's stories in his essay on the history of weird tales: "Poe's

³² Marder, Elissa, "Mourning, Magic, and Telepathy," in *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Fordham University Press, 2012), 37 – 52.

³³ Marder, Elissa, "The Sex of Death and the Maternal Crypt," in *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 19 – 36.

weird tales are *alive* in a manner.”³⁴ Every act of reading or re-reading this story uncannily resurrects the briefly-resurrected deceased. The animal magnetism circulating through “House of Usher” is a force that temporarily animates: a reader temporarily animates Roderick Usher, who briefly suspends Madeline, who vengefully returns to de-animate Roderick and once again bring down the entire house.

An Occupied Cenotaph: Hepzibah Pyncheon's Transfiguration

Edgar Allen Poe uses animal magnetism as a figure for one subject's control over another's animatedness, a struggle with explicitly gendered stakes. By willfully and then literally binding the dying Madeline to the Usher house, the mesmerist Roderick takes mechanical control of a natural and feminized process. Madeline's tomb-housing gives life to her stubborn refusal to remain under her brother's control, and it is as an object—more specifically, a corpse—that it wreaks her revenge. Nathaniel Hawthorne uses animal magnetism in a similar vein, for he reportedly found the practice “morally and philosophically repugnant, since in his view the mesmerist could violate an individual consciousness and soul and gain power over his victim.” Such a power struggle at the heart of the practice also made it a deeply ambivalent force for Hawthorne, since it might “describe the way the artist works upon a reader's consciousness.”³⁵ As a force not purely negative in effect, he also used it as a metaphor for the “force of attraction between minds and wills, an important moral analogue to human interdependence (the ‘magnetic chain’ or ‘adhesiveness’).”³⁶ Where Poe's magnetism suspends the natural decay of built architecture and social relations, Hawthorne's magnetism depicts the tendency of social relations to accumulate into weighty housing. Hawthorne's mesmerists—like

³⁴ Lawrence, D. H., “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” in the *H. P. Lovecraft Archive*, <<http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/sbil.aspx>>.

³⁵ Coale, Samuel Chase, “Mysteries of Mesmerism: Hawthorne's Haunted House,” in *A Historical Guide to Nathaniel Hawthorne*. ed. Larry J. Reynolds (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001), 49.

³⁶ Falk, 537

Holgrave and his ancestor Matthew Maule—channel animal magnetism to attempt to make relations stick, to form housing out of the forms of other people—like Phoebe Pyncheon and her ancestor Alice Pyncheon. Madeline Usher gave opaque and violently expressive form to the gendered struggle at the heart of the domestic scene, but Hawthorne’s Pyncheons will also give expressive form to the generational struggle in the same setting.

Although Holgrave begins the novel full of idealistic rejection of inherited housing and disdain for the architectural practice of hiding interior essence under borrowed forms, he, echoing Henry Greenough, condemns Gothic complication in favor of the classically inspired box, as though he could undo the patriarchal inheritance weighting domestic housing by stripping material ornament and simplifying structural angles.³⁷ Hepzibah Pyncheon is Hawthorne’s counterweight to Holgrave’s utopian, youthful idealism. Hepzibah struggles both with the weight of past inheritance and with the flighty changes of upcoming generations. Unlike Madeline Usher, who literally brings her patrilineal house crashing down, Hepzibah only figuratively brings it down. She brings the House of Pyncheon’s social standing down from lofty isolation into close contact with the masses by opening up a cent shop. A fictional echo of Hawthorne’s actual cousin Susanna Ingersoll, who ran a successful business out of the actual inspiration for the seven-gabled house, Hepzibah shares some important similarities with single women in nineteenth-century America.

³⁷ The ending of the *House of the Seven Gables* has been the object of debate. Two sides of the debate over Hawthorne’s intentions can be found in Frank Battaglia, “The (Unmeretricious) *House of the Seven Gables*,” *Studies in the Novel* 2: (1970), 468 – 78; and Michael T. Gilmore, “The Artist and the Marketplace in *The House of the Seven Gables*.” One of the strongest arguments for the ending as ironic is in Rudolph von Able, *The Death of the Artist: A Study of Hawthorne's Disintegration*. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955), 58 – 69. More recently, Brook Thomas has suggested that the melodramatic conclusion causes tension and so initiates a moment of participation in which we are provoked to criticize and perhaps act to reform American society. See his “*The House of the Seven Gables*: Reading the Romance of America,” *PMLA* 97: (1982), 195 – 211.

Bringing Holgrave in as a lodger was a move not unfamiliar to Hawthorne's America, as architectural historian Bernard Herman has documented. He writes that "crowded houses filled with unrelated lodgers and multiple families were a common feature in the early American city, but they also represented a condition associated with the households of the lower sort or with households organized around extended dependent relationships."³⁸ Part of what led to such circumstances were legal arrangements called widow's dower, known as a "widow's third," which would divide a house up after a man's death and a lot part of it to his widow and the rest to a family from the community. Herman looks at the resulting divided floor plans of nineteenth century American townhomes and read in them "a culture of dependency surrounding the perception of women and property."³⁹ Though Hepzibah is simply unmarried rather than a widow, the attitudes of her uncle, the honorable Judge Pyncheon, and of the gossiping old men commenting on her fate at the beginning and ends of the novel certainly support such a view of women as dependents. At the novel's end, a passing man gossips to the "sagacious Dixey" that "My wife kept a cent-shop three months, and lost five dollars on her outlay. Old Maid Pyncheon has been in trade just about as long, and rides off in her carriage with a couple of hundred thousand [. . .] and some say twice as much! If you choose to call it luck, it is all very well; but if we are to take it as the will of Providence, why, I can't exactly fathom it!"⁴⁰ The man's chatter frames the old maid as utterly dependent on luck or divine favor: her choices in assembling community or rejecting ancestral wealth are not possibilities. To listen to this man's account of her would be to only know the most superficial and material facts of her wealth.

³⁸ Herman, Bernard L., *Town House: Architecture and Material Life in the Early American City, 1780-1830* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 190.

³⁹ Herman, *Town House*, 158.

⁴⁰ Hawthorne, 331.

Actual history is similarly absent the choices and actions of women in their domestic abodes. Without such information about the characters of women, Herman can only “infer social status on the basis of the quality of architectural spaces” allotted to widows in court documents. He goes so far as to ask “who were these widows who occupied divided houses, and did the rooms allotted to them thoroughly communicate a sense of rank in Portsmouth's urban society?”⁴¹ Herman admits of one particular subject of his study that “her house and its key furnishings reinforced her husband's assumptions concerning the style and manner in which his widow would act.”⁴² Although court documents could spell out “numerous provisos detailing the widow's right to move in and out of the other household's allotted spaces” [. . .] none of them instructed widows on how they should behave in their new lodgings.” The historian concludes, however, that the variations in legal arrangements suggested that women spoke out for their interests and bargained for spatial and material arrangements that could accommodate lives they desired. Yet whether nineteenth-century American women were allotted work-centric or entertaining portions of their houses, the actual desires of women remain inaccessible, lost to history. Like the actual women she echoes, Hepzibah's character remains stubbornly mysterious. By refusing to decently hide ugliness and by choosing not to seclude herself away from social relations, Hepzibah is a character brought to life simultaneously through refusal and embrace of the struggles associated with being close to others.⁴³

Hepzibah Pyncheon is, as Hawthorne describes her, “of the old time entombed” in both body and domestic housing; she is, in other words, something of an anachronism. Like the applied Gothic

⁴¹ Herman, 172.

⁴² Herman, 180.

⁴³ Nina Baym has also argued for Hepzibah's centrality to *House of the Seven Gables*, and she, too, identifies Hepzibah's ugliness as crucial to her interior character and structural role in the novel. See Baym, Nina. “The Heroine of ‘The House of the Seven Gables’; Or, Who Killed Jaffrey Pyncheon?” *The New England Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (Dec., 2004): 607 – 18.

in domestic housing, Hepzibah is an awkward, functionless, ugly old woman: “There was an uncouthness pervading all her deeds; a clumsy something, that could but ill adapt itself for use, and not at all for ornament.”⁴⁴ This character has little use value and even less display value—she is a decoration without beauty, a character whose very body is encumbered by her Pyncheon inheritance. Hawthorne’s narrator feels “compelled to introduce” as one of the novel’s “most prominent figures [. . .] not a young and lovely woman, nor even the stately remains of beauty, storm-shattered by affliction—but a gaunt, sallow, rusty-jointed maiden, in a long-waisted silk gown, and with the strange horror of a turban on her head!” In my first chapter Henry James struggled with the difficulty of building up for “feminine small fry” the high “attributes of a subject.” Hawthorne’s narrative voice at first seems to contradict the accumulative vital build toward character by noting that “truly there was something high, generous and noble, in the native composition of our poor old Hepzibah!” But the voice quickly destabilizes the insinuation of essential mimetic traits by interrupting that train of thought: “Or else—and it was quite as probably the case—she had been *enriched* by poverty, *developed* by sorrow, *elevated* by the strong and solitary affection of her life, and *thus endowed* with heroism.”⁴⁵ The verbs driving Hepzibah’s character establish her as the accumulation of active traits unfolding in the present—Hawthorne then adds to the actively vital character the problem of opacity, for the unlikely heroine’s “scowl had done Miss Hepzibah a very ill office, in establishing her character as an ill-tempered old maid”⁴⁶

Though Hepzibah’s *actions* may be courageous, the narrative voice informs us that her “heart” is not: in her second confrontation with Jaffrey Pyncheon, Hepzibah “spread out her gaunt figure [. .

⁴⁴ Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *House of the Seven Gables*, (n.d. Kindle edition).

⁴⁵ Hawthorne, 141.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 38.

.] and seemed really to *increase in bulk*” even as there was “terror and agitation in her heart.”⁴⁷ What *matters* is the surface of this encounter, and the old woman’s actions are perhaps even more effective and moving for her absence of conviction or inner courage. Baym in fact argues that Hepzibah’s actions effectively kill Jaffrey Pyncheon, and that the novel insinuates that the political future of their town is brighter for that death. The old woman’s actions, then, are not ultimately private—there is no definite distinction between “interior” acts and political ones. This dynamic comes about not through revealing hidden privacy but through the layering on of surfaces: Hepzibah enters social and consequently political relations by refusing the inheritance that would allow her to remain decently hidden, by adding a penny shop to her domestic housing, and by appending Holgrave, Phoebe, and Uncle Vennor to her intimate connection with Clifford—even when those additions cause private tears. As Hepzibah accumulates actors and details, “the harshness of her features disappeared, as it were, *behind* the warm and misty glow [my emphasis]” that her relation to Clifford produces.⁴⁸ It is not that her ugliness is stripped away but that her relation quickens her character, adds something superficial that produces lively effects. Hepzibah’s decorative and ugly excess, her superficial wretchedness indexes her disordered and undetermined desire to accumulate—more possessions, more intimacy, more warmth, more independence, simply *more*. What this old woman’s housing tells us about character is that interiority is an illusion produced through surface accumulation.

The surface wrinkles of Hepzibah’s myopic squint, the dusty mannerisms of her class and age, and the applied horror of ornament all hide Hepzibah from those around her, and consequently add

⁴⁷ Hawthorne, 137.

⁴⁸ “There seemed no necessity for his having drawn breath at all; the world never wanted him; but, as he had breathed it ought always to have been the balmiest of summer air. The same perplexity will invariably haunt us with regard to natures that tend to feed exclusively upon the Beautiful, let their earthly fate be as lenient as it may” Hawthorne, *House of the Seven Gables* (Kindle edition) 147.

to the development of her character. Her pathos comes from her ugliness but also from her undisclosed secrets: “she rejoiced—rejoiced, though with a present sigh, and a secret purpose to shed tears in her own chamber that he had brighter objects now before his eyes than her aged and uncomely features. They never possessed a charm; and if they had, the canker of her grief for him would long since have destroyed it.”⁴⁹ Though it is tempting to *interpret* this “secret purpose” as incestuous desire for her brother, the “canker of her grief for him” indicates a festering, accumulative growth that makes the purpose of her retreat to her own chamber irreducible to any one desire, unfulfilled or not. The narrative does not here unveil what sexual appetites may have been expressed or denied, but it does claim that Hepzibah’s housing, her physical, superficial features, *would* have been “destroyed” by their close relations *had* they been comely to begin with. This use of the subjunctive tense indicates that Hepzibah’s horrifying housing did mobilize a horrifying relation, making her surface all the more charming for the horror that must have been commensurate with her uncommunicated secret life. The antidote for the horror of charming surfaces, it seems, is adding charm to horrifying surfaces, which have gained character for having moved through ugliness.

Nina Baym argues that the old woman’s superficial ugliness “allows [Hawthorne] to *strip* morality of its wrappings to reveal the true essence of woman: the tender and courageous heart [my emphasis].”⁵⁰ Yet according to a contemporary review, Hawthorne has a “golden touch,” which “imposes no superficial glitter, but *brings out upon the surface*, and concentrates in luminous points, the interior gilding, which is attached to the meanest objects and the lowliest scenes by their contact with the realm of sentiment, emotion, and spiritual life. He literally transforms, draws the hidden soul of whatever he describes to the light of day, and often *veils exterior phenomena* from clear view by *the very*

⁴⁹ Ibid. 115 – 116.

⁵⁰ Baym, 615.

tissue of motives, loves, antipathies, mental and moral idiosyncrasies, which they are wont to conceal [my emphasis].” This language is not that of making transparent or of stripping but of adding. His characters, this reviewer writes, have “shading derived from no model, and so characteristic as to defy imitation.” This reviewer takes up Hawthorne’s vitalism and discusses his characters as so singular as to not be mimetic but as having their own liveliness, a liveliness that is opaquely layered over deceptive surfaces. Hawthorne thus depicts “inward experience so graphic that to read them is to live them over.”⁵¹ Although the claim here is that we “see” Hepzibah’s “inward experience,” the assertion that to read about her experience is to live them over emphasizes that it is the activity of her life lived in relation to others that we as readers experience—and in experiencing those activities, we “live them over,” animating and reanimating the inanimate character.

Hepzibah’s passage between inanimate and animate states is thematized by her boarder, Holgrave, who is skeptical of Hepzibah’s ability to survive her transformation from dusty aristocrat into bustling capitalist: “Miss Hepzibah, by secluding herself from society, has lost all true relation with it, and is, in fact, dead; although she galvanizes herself into a semblance of life, and stands behind her counter, afflicting the world with a greatly-to-be-deprecated scowl.” Holgrave reads Hepzibah’s character as a static essence contained inside her exterior rather than as an ongoing activity of interfacing with others. Hawthorne’s complicated portrayal of this unusual character constitutes a literary attempt to retrain reactions to unfortunate and ugly surface like Hepzibah’s. Yet even this pessimist checks himself when he observes to Phoebe that “both [Hepzibah and Clifford] exist by you”; the photographer here expresses a belief in interpersonal animation, a belief which Hawthorne amplifies by describing Phoebe’s effect on the house: Phoebe’s presence coats “the grime and

⁵¹ “*The House of the Seven Gables; a Romance by Nathaniel Hawthorne; The Blithedale Romance by Nathaniel Hawthorne,*” *The North American Review* 76, no. 158 (January 1853): 228.

sordidness of the House of the Seven Gables” with her influence; her mesmeric influence suspends “the gnawing tooth of the dry-rot [. . .] among the old timbers of its skeleton frame”. Phoebe is not quite a subject in this story; Hawthorne writes that “her spirit resembled, in its potency, a minute quantity of otter of rose in one of Hepzibah's huge, iron-bound trunks,” and “as every article in the great trunk was the sweeter for the rose-scent, so did all the thoughts and emotions of Hepzibah and Clifford, somber as they might seem, acquire a subtle attribute of happiness from Phoebe's intermixture with them.”⁵² Phoebe is part of the more of Hepzibah's accumulation: it is at Hepzibah's initially begrudging tolerance that Phoebe becomes a permanent resident of the house of the seven gables.

Phoebe's decorative presence moves Clifford back to life, and her capable functionality is a crucial part of Hepzibah's successful return into living relation with human society. For Clifford, Phoebe's “subtle essence [. . .] acted on him like a charmed draught, and caused the opaque substance of his animal being to grow transparent, or, at least, translucent; so that a spiritual gleam was transmitted through it, with a clearer luster than hitherto.” Character animation, in this novel, is the effect of the accumulative layering of surfaces and essences of people and objects. Hepzibah describes this accumulative process as feeling “at home,” a feeling that she materializes in “nothing but love!”—in other words, Hepzibah assembles a home out of her relations with Clifford and Phoebe. Her saccharine exclamation is a direct response to Clifford's initial distaste at finding himself again in the Gothic house of his unhappy youth. Hawthorne wrote of the inspiration for the house of the seven gables that “the terror and ugliness of Maule's crime, and the wretchedness of his punishment, would darken the freshly-plastered walls”, yet the novel is the impossible transformation of those dark walls

⁵² Ibid. 144.

by adding to them, by making those walls an armature to shape Hepzibah's accumulating relations.⁵³ Being so close to ugliness does not pacify but activates Hepzibah's transformations. Though certainly conservative in message, the ultimate result of Hepzibah's formal transformations is that she is able to leave the house with her electively assembled family. Though her move is into yet another man's house, the pattern of her character's movements suggests that such containment will not domesticate but catalyze the old woman's adaptive pursuit of more.

The pursuit of more certainly does not spell eternal liveliness or youth for Hepzibah, indeed, "her very brain was impregnated with the dry-rot of [the house's] timbers": both housed by and housing for the house of the seven gables, Hepzibah is a character in a transformative motion that includes decay and age as part of her character rather than a diminution of it.⁵⁴ Thomas Pauly's work on Hawthorne's houses claims that Hawthorne "would have agreed with [A.J.] Downing's assertion that "much of the character of every man may be read in his house," yet Hepzibah is the character continuously shaped by her housing and in relation to the accumulation and characters relations quickened thereby.⁵⁵ Pauly contradicts his own assertion of stable character by arguing that the occluding light of the moon in Hawthorne's short story "Sights from a Steeple" lead the narrator to "speculate upon the *shadowy* circumstances that brought each wayfarer past his door. Given this stimulus, each traveler *suddenly becomes a story on the brink of creation* [my emphasis]."⁵⁶ Conceiving of characters as stories in embryo means that he is not seeing human people but rather has covered them with a layer of fiction. This sight "alienates him from the body of humanity with which he wishes to

⁵³ Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Literary Trials: The House of the Seven Gables" *Litigation* 32, no. 2: (Winter 2006) 73 – 76.

⁵⁴ Hawthorne, 64.

⁵⁵ Pauly, Thomas. "Hawthorne's Houses of Fiction," *America* 48, no. 3 (November 1976), 271.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 276.

associate, and consequently his houses of fiction never lead to the stories they anticipate.”⁵⁷ Lack of control does not spell lack of success in character creation. Hawthorne himself claims that “oddly enough, my success was generally in proportion to differences between the conception and accomplishment”—production, like reproduction, produces offspring that may be unfaithful to their origins, but for Hawthorne this unfaithfulness is the accomplishment of fiction.

The liveliness of Hawthorne’s characters is thematized in two tellingly parallel scenes, one involving Phoebe and her habits and the other involving a crank organ’s windup dolls. After Phoebe has established herself in the house of the seven gables, the narrator notes that the house’s dark façade “must have shown a kind of cheerfulness glimmering through its dusky windows as Phoebe passed to and fro in the interior. Otherwise, it is impossible to explain how the people of the neighborhood so soon became aware of the girl’s presence. There was a great run of *custom*, setting *steadily* in, from about ten o’clock until towards noon,—relaxing, *somewhat*, at dinner-time, but *recommencing* in the afternoon, and, finally, *dying away* a half an hour or so before the long day’s sunset.”⁵⁸ Phoebe’s activities are mechanical, performed like clockwork wound tight and gradually winding back down toward the end of the day. Phoebe is the unconscious magnet for the flow and redirection of mesmeric energies, and she herself is as all surface as a windup doll. The other scene of mechanical liveliness is the crank organ played just for Phoebe outside the house by a monkey. After describing the monkey’s energetic winding, the narrative voice proclaims,

Behold! Every one of these small individuals started into the most curious vivacity. The cobbler wrought upon a shoe; the blacksmith hammered his iron, the soldier waved his glittering blade; the lady raised a tiny breeze with her fan; the jolly toper swigged lustily at his

⁵⁷ Ibid. 277.

⁵⁸ Hawthorne, 287.

bottle; a scholar opened his book with eager thirst for knowledge, and turned his head to and fro along the page.⁵⁹

After listing yet more players in this windup masque, the narrative voice speculates that “Possibly some cynic, at once merry and bitter, had desired to signify, in this pantomimic scene, that we mortals, whatever our business or amusement,—however serious, however trifling,—all dance to one identical tune, and, in spite of our ridiculous activity, bring nothing finally to pass.” The artificial liveliness then winds to a halt, and “at the cessation of the music, everybody was petrified at once from the most extravagant life into a dead torpor. Neither was the cobbler’s shoe finished, nor the blacksith’s iron shaped out; nor was there a drop less of brandy in the toper’s bottle”. For all their hurried activity, the wooden dolls remain “precisely in the same condition as before they made themselves so ridiculous by their haste to toil, to enjoy, to accumulate gold, and to become wise.” The narrator then hastily concludes: “But, rather than swallow this last too acrid ingredient we reject the whole moral of the show.”⁶⁰ The hasty rejection, of course, prompts pause. I have already suggested that Hepzibah’s character is driven through her hidden desire for accumulation, yet these dolls make “themselves so ridiculous by their haste to toil.” If the closure of fictional liveliness means that nothing has accumulated and everything merely returns to the same state of inanimacy, what might this strange scene be saying about the liveliness of fictional character? The leveling of such various activities, pursuits, and motives into the same little mechanical and inarguably artificial bodies is precisely the mechanism by which *House of the Seven Gables* operates—creating singular and artificial bodies for his characters allows Hepzibah to matter as epically as the honorable Judge Jaffrey.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 168.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 168.

The dwelling model that both Holgrave and Clifford advocate a return to is the form famously invoked by architectural theorist Marc Antoine Laugier as the originary figure for human dwelling: “In the early epochs of our race, men dwelt in temporary huts, of bowers of branches, as easily constructed as a bird's-nest, and which they built [. . .] such sweet homes of a summer solstice rather grew than were made with hands.”⁶¹ Clifford conceives of the figurative hut as a literal escape from the housing to which man has made “himself a prisoner for life in brick, and stone, and old worm-eaten timber”; the hut offers a model for dwelling “in one sense, nowhere,—in a better sense, wherever the fit and beautiful shall offer him a home?” A man ought, Clifford argues, to live in no more “cumbrous habitation than can readily be carried off with him,” because “the soul needs air; a wide sweep and frequent change of it,” and the figurative hut is Clifford’s solution, with its classical roof and no walls separating a man from the elements. Clifford takes in imagination the self-destructive path of action taken by Madeline Usher, only Clifford never enters the realm of action: he wishes that “these heaps of bricks and stones, consolidated with mortar, or hewn timber, fastened together with spike-nails [. . .] could be torn down, or burnt up, and so the earth be rid of it, and grass be sown abundantly over its foundation.” Clifford speaks in the passive voice, for he has no intentions of taking or even aiding in the revolutionary deconstruction he advocates.

In philosophical sentiment, Clifford’s sentiment follows the nineteenth-century transcendentalism popularized by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who famously rejected the conveniences

⁶¹ One of the earliest architectural theorists, Marc-Antoine Laugier claimed that all architecture was based on a temporary “hut,” which he described as being of post and lintel construction—in other words, a classical structure that would have emphasized strong verticals and horizontals and a certain transparency, since walls would have been secondary to a post-and-lintel structure. Laugier also topped the hut off with a classical entablature, making the roof, and not walls, the defining element of a dwelling structure. Laugier, Marc-Antoine, *An Essay on Architecture* (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1977).

of modern domestic architecture, arguing that “to go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society.”⁶² Indeed, as Clifford expounds on his Emersonesque rant on the train, he begins to embody the transparent eyeball; his “countenance glowed, as he divulged this theory; a youthful character *shone out from within*, converting the wrinkles and pallid duskiness of age into an almost *transparent mask*. [my emphasis].” As Clifford puts on transparency, his philosophizing veers toward mesmerism, and he claims that “by means of electricity, the world of matter has become a great nerve, vibrating thousands of miles in a breathless point of time” and he sublimates the material world represented by “the round globe” into “a vast head, a brain, instinct with intelligence!” This “intelligence” is “itself a thought, nothing but thought, and no longer the substance which we deemed it!” Animal magnetism is the universal current of animation into which Phoebe taps, but mesmerism is the control of that animation by means of technology, and Clifford believes that controlling mesmerism will purge “away the grossness out of human life.” Unlike Phoebe, who channels animal magnetism to reanimate silly elderly people, musty housing, haughty chickens, and wilted flowers, Clifford narrows magnetism into “electricity,—the demon, the angel, the mighty physical power” and reserves it for “high, deep, joyful, and holy missions.” Through control over the material world, by conceiving of the material world as something to be sublimated into the great thoughts of great men, Clifford covers himself and the physical world with a mask of transparency and ephemerality. The gentleman at whom Clifford has been spilling his thoughts voices a pragmatic skepticism, and he directs “his gimlet-eye” at Clifford, “as if determined to bore right into him,” and he humorously concludes “I can't see through you!” The transparency Clifford puts on does not reveal the one true universal solution for coping with the weight of inheritance in

⁶² Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1836), digital facsimile on *OpenLibrary.org*, 1.

domestic structures; instead, this mask of transparency reveals Clifford and Clifford's attachment to a specific style of domestic dwelling. A style classical in form—wooden post and lintels with no walls to separate the man from elements—and transcendentalist in philosophy.

“Behold, therefore, a palace! Its splendid halls and suites of spacious apartments are floored with a mosaic-work of costly marbles; its windows, the whole height of each room, admit the sunshine *thorough the most transparent of plate-glass*; its high cornices are gilded, and its ceilings gorgeously painted; and a lofty dome—through which, from the central pavement, *you may gaze up to the sky, as with no obstructing medium* between—surmounts the whole. With what fairer and nobler emblem could any man desire to *shadow forth* his character? [. . .] Ah! but in some low and obscure nook,—some narrow closet on the ground-floor, shut, locked and bolted, and the key flung away [. . .] may lie a corpse, half decayed, and still decaying, and diffusing its death-scent all through the palace! The *inhabitant will not be conscious of it*, for it has long been his daily breath! [my emphasis]”⁶³

In this passage, I read the stylistic conventions of the Gothic haunting modernist literal transparency. Behind the sheets of industrially produced glass, Hawthorne's narrator reminds us, are the opaque secrets, secrets so openly hidden that they have become invisible to the habitual inhabitant. More than a metaphor comparing fashion to architecture, Hawthorne's palace-man embodies a rigid conception of form and its relation to function at the expense of simply choosing not to see the inconveniently opaque, skeleton-filled closet marring the transparency of the palace-man's glass soul.

⁶³ Ibid.

A reviewer of the novel's first publication summed up the puzzlingly animated quality of this barely alive old woman by claiming that "there are characters in novels who walk about on their feet, who stand upright and move, so that readers can look behind them . . . There are others, again, so wooden that no reader expects to find in them any appearance of movement [. . .] Miss Hepzibah is one of the former. The reader sees all *round* her, and is sure that she is alive, though she is so incapable [my emphasis]."⁶⁴ This contemporary reader reads Hepzibah's liveliness *around* her character—her movements through the house are what stick characters together, and it is in the accumulation of characters and events in and around her house that Hepzibah's character unfolds. Interiority is not inside individual bodies but formed in the relations and interactions between them. Hepzibah's character specifically stands out all the more in American literary history because of the old woman's reluctant yet stubborn refusal to cede her present to ancestry *or* posterity. Clifford compares Hepzibah's rotten old house to "the corpse of the old giant, his grandfather, who died a long while ago, and only needs to be decently buried," and Hepzibah is Hawthorne's figure for refusing to exchange the Gothic traces of the ugly past for the literal transparency of a modernism that would see through such ugliness to lofty transcendence from inherited structure.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ "Review: *The House of the Seven Gables*; a Romance by Nathaniel Hawthorne; *The Blithedale Romance* by Nathaniel Hawthorne," *The North American Review* 76, no. 158: (January 1853): 215.

⁶⁵ This project of preserving ugliness is a sharp departure from his compatriot, Emerson's transcendentalism. Emerson writes in *Nature* that "what we are, that only can we see" and he urges his great and little readers alike to "Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions." By building according to the beauty of your beautiful mind, Emerson claims, "a correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit. So fast will disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, mad-houses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and shall be no more seen [. . .] it shall draw beautiful faces, and warm hearts, and wise discourse, and heroic acts, around its way, until evil is no more seen." Hawthorne, 94.

The topic of domestic housing is deceptively transparent, so apparently uniform in function; it takes the stylized genre of the Gothic to express the diversity of functions and the invisible weight of inheritance behind the misleadingly uniform facades of American housing. This style is a reminder of a time when walls had their own function, when they were load-bearing. Hawthorne pays humorous tribute to the load-bearing nature of Gothic walls when he accords that function to the portrait of the house's original patriarch: "This picture, it must be understood, was supposed to be so intimately connected with the fate of the house, and so magically built into its walls, that, if once it should be removed, that very instant the whole edifice would come thundering down in a heap of dusty ruin"⁶⁶ The load that the patriarch's portrait is bearing in Hawthorne's fictional building is not the literal weight of a Gothic wall, but the metaphorical encumbrance of patriarchal structures for human dwelling. The difference in the fictional preservation of Gothic walls' load-bearing functions is that the opaque decoration of allegory change the loads that the walls bear: poesis can build walls around ordinary events with materials used to construct "castles in the air", literature can show characters to be formed in relation to one another and to changing circumstances; and where history is left with only floorplans and court documents, narrative can tell the unfolding and ever-changing nature of the interior functions of a domestic dwelling. It can, to borrow Benjamin's terms, reshape the habitual perceptions of surfaces.

An Animate Coffin: Addie Bundren's Transubstantiation

Addie's story continues and adapts the familiar tradition of indecently buried women. This matriarch's indecent burial makes her corpse more active in death than in life. Her animated burial materializes the stultifying nature of her superficial conformity to her surrounding social norms,

⁶⁶ Hawthorne, 204.

particularly that of fidelity within reproductive marriage. It is her containment that designates Addie the central and focalizing character in her narrative, and the opacity of her surfaces are the precondition for communicating her story. Faulkner, antithetical to the increasingly popular International Style, made conscious use of Gothic opacity as a medium for channeling the magnetism of his fictional beings through the unlikely vessel of their frail matriarch's corpse. The tenant-farm family in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) resides in a mythical county set in a modern and depressed South that is dotted with neoclassical, decaying relics of institutional slavery. In his correspondence and throughout his fiction, Faulkner explicitly praised the old and rotting antebellum houses of Oxford, Mississippi, and he openly criticized the international style taking hold in American architecture. Thomas S. Hines writes that "Faulkner, the literary modernist, was generally unsympathetic to the modern movement in architecture," for the author believed the Gothic remnants were windows onto the past preserved within the present.⁶⁷ The rotting structures of *As I Lay Dying* provide a non-literal transparency by expressing the Gothic textures of a system in which racial, classed, and gendered oppression suffuse a modern, antebellum society. In this form of transparency, it is the opaque surfaces of things that tell the stories of unspoken (though not hidden) social relations, particularly that of love and its struggles for domination. John Tucker writes that "things exist in the novel to the extent that they participate in the shaping tension between the exterior and the interior, between the container and the contained. There is nothing in this world to

⁶⁷ For a beautifully and thoroughly illustrated account of the actual built architectures from which Faulkner drew and a quite comprehensive index of the appearances of specific antebellum domestic and civil structures throughout Faulkner's oeuvre, see Thomas Hines. Hines, Thomas S., *William Faulkner and the Tangible Past: The Architecture of Yoknapatawpha* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 103.

which the definition of the word love cannot be applied: ‘just a shape to fill a lack.’”⁶⁸ The tension between interior and surface mirrors the tensions in modernist transparency: “behind” clear glass and open structure is the illusion of depth suggested by intersecting shapes on the surfaces of things. Such illusory depths drive Addie Bundren’s active refusals.

In my previous chapter, Mark Danielewski began his novel around the incipient image of a house bigger on the inside than out, and Henry James began his novel with the sense of a girl around whom he had to build a house. William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, as Tucker has argued, begins with “the image of the coffin,” which “is so central to the novel, that we might well expect it to be the “literary germ” from which the novel developed.”⁶⁹ Tucker takes this organizing image to mean that the novel is spatial and visual in its structural logic. This emphasis suggests that the novel deprioritizes narrative and theme, and is, as Patricia Broughton argues, “an exercise in pure design, a true tour de force, a cubist novel.”⁷⁰ Joseph Reed sees coffin as “an almost visual image of a character *imprisoned* in a fleeting moment [my emphasis].”⁷¹ Eric J. Sundquist sees the novel’s central image as indicative of the novel’s disembodiment, its impulse away from bodies and containment and toward pure expression and free-floating consciousness: the blurring of “the distinction between body and container [...] is completely analogous to the novel’s formal blurring of distinctions between its own structure of expression and the ongoing event that is expressed.”⁷² Such interpretations of the flatness of Faulkner’s aesthetic composition need not be at odds with reading

⁶⁸ Tucker, John. “William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*: Working Out the Cubistic Bugs.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 388 – 404.

⁶⁹ Tucker, 395.

⁷⁰ Panthea Reid Broughton, “Faulkner’s Cubist Novels, in ‘A Cosmos of My Own’”: *Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 1980, ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson: (University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 93.

⁷¹ Joseph W. Reed, Jr., *Faulkner’s Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 260.

⁷² Sundquist, 38.

its social character. Reading the housing of *As I Lay Dying* shows the “imprisonment” of characters within containers to be a means of bringing to life a relation of struggle, specifically romantic struggle within domestic settings. The characters relate to their containers in ways that indicate they fight over what Alex Wolloch has called narrative resources. The coffin at the heart of the novel is neither merely metaphor nor passive setting, but a medium for structuring the relations that animate these characters in relation to one another and to their surroundings.

Before going into Addie’s containment in her opaque coffin, I first look at the transparent domestic setting which she moves so inexorably away from through the narrative of *As I Lay Dying*. The Bundren family lives in a home that is hardly more substantial than a bird’s nest, “the cottonhouse is of rough logs, from between which the chinking has long fallen. Square, with a broken roof set at a single pitch, it leans in empty and *shimmering dilapidation* in the sunlight, a single broad window in two opposite walls giving onto the approaches of the path [my emphasis].” The house, shimmering with dilapidation, has become almost literally transparent; it is so airy and light that Jewel can walk straight through it without breaking his rigid stride. The broad window doubled on parallel walls of this modernist square glass box gives the house so little material substance that Jewel, rather than taking the path directly around the house,

still staring straight ahead, his pale eyes like wood set into his wooden face, he crosses the floor in four strides with the rigid gravity of a cigar store Indian dressed in patched overalls and endued with life from the hips down, and steps in a single stride through the opposite window and into the path again just as I come around the corner.

Hardly substantial or impactful enough to slow Jewel’s stride as he walks right through it, the Bundren home is not housing, it is merely a container for a head of household. Jewel’s wooden movements are observed and recorded by Darl, whose perspective is spatially impossible, since he is “fifteen feet

ahead of” Jewel, but he claims that “*anyone* watching us from the cottonhouse can see Jewel’s frayed and broken straw hat a full head above my own [my emphasis].”⁷³ Darl transposes his perspective onto “anyone” in the transparent house behind him, claiming for himself the disembodied perspective of Emerson’s universal eyeball.⁷⁴ Darl is a transcendental vessel for meaning, passive and transparent container for his own consciousness.⁷⁵ The boy easily leaves his material body every time he goes to sleep in a strange place: “In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not.”

Though the cottonhouse itself seems an almost transitory hut, the house itself is neither mobile nor transportable; the only object in motion in this first scene of the novel is the path of human labor. The path “runs straight as a plumb-line, worn smooth by feet and baked brick-hard by July, between the green rows of laidby cotton” and it “turns and circles the cottonhouse at four soft right angles and goes on across the field again, worn so by feet in fading precision.” This material trace of human labor makes no distinction between the feet of slaves and the feet of the tenant farmers who took their place, though it retains something of the economic revolution due to the faded precision, the loss of enforced unity in the footstep patterns. By circling the transparent box-house with the patterns of human labor, Faulkner emphasizes this bird’s nest house as an object in stasis and as a site of work in

⁷³ John Tucker attributes the impossibility of Darl’s perspective in this scene to what he describes as Faulkner’s Cubistic fracturing of space. I am not arguing against this interpretation so much as arguing that Darl is himself Faulkner’s figure for modernist transparency, and I seek to contextualize Darl’s transparency against the Gothic opacity of characters like Addie and Jewel. See Tucker, John. “William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*: Working Out the Cubistic Bugs.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 26.4: (Winter 1984): 388 – 404.

⁷⁴ Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*. The Oxford Authors, Richard Poirier, ed., (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 6.

⁷⁵ Dorrit Cohn argues that Faulkner’s characters are transparent media for human psychology. Cohn, Dorrit, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983). Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

an era when domesticity is defined as a refuge and retreat from work.⁷⁶ By tromping straight through the house on his way to work, Jewel hoofs over Darl's idealized dreams of home as refuge⁷⁷. This object in stasis at the center of labor's movements, this glass house transparently embodies its patriarch's conceptual goals, for Anse is bothered by even the path's trace suggestion of movement and possible change.

As a tenant farmer, Anse is a relic of older economic systems—Anse stands still while the economic world around him dramatically transforms. The path around his house bothers him, for Anse claims that God “never aimed for folks to live on a road, because which gets there first, I says, the road or the house? Did you ever know Him to set a road down by a house? I says. No you never.” The road represents to Anse the mysterious acts of God and society while houses represent the material acts of men, and his desire is to build his house far away from the dynamic realm of God and society. Anse complains that “it's always men cant rest till they gets the house set where everybody that passes in a wagon can spit in the doorway, keeping the folks restless and wanting to get up and go somewheres else when He aimed for them to stay put like a tree or a stand of corn.”⁷⁸ Anse aspires to stay put, fearing that being near the path of human labor will bring “every bad luck prowling [. . .] straight to my door, charging me taxes on top of it. Making me pay for Cash having to get them carpenter notions when if it hadn't been no road come there, he wouldn't a got them.” Anse echoes the violently insane patriarchs of Charles Brockden Brown and Stephen King who seclude their

⁷⁶ Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture*. (New York: Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998).

⁷⁷ For Darl, the cottonhouse is home: “How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home,” Faulkner, 74.

⁷⁸ Form, Anse bitterly grumbles, should follow function, “because if He'd a aimed for man to be always a-moving and going somewheres else, wouldn't He a put him longways on his belly, like a snake?” (Ibid. 31).

families off the beaten path, away from the “prowling” and movement of human society. These characters seek houses, passive vessels for taking them out of relation to human affairs. Where such seclusion splits Gilman’s feminine protagonist within her self, that same seclusion pits patriarchs against their families, house becomes housing in provoking a gendered struggle over domination. Faulkner poses the struggle over domestic domination in terms of housing through Tull’s character, who muses that “the more the sweat, the tighter the house because it would take a tight house for Cora, to hold Cora like a jar of milk in the spring: you’ve got to have a tight jar or you’ll need a powerful spring, so if you have a big spring, why then you have the incentive to have tight, wellmade jars, because it is your milk, sour or not, because you would rather have milk that will sour than to have milk that wont, because you are a man.” Tull would risk souring Cora through confinement rather than risk losing any part of her as his property; he houses Cora as an act of dominance.

That house may become housing based on the relations its contains means that characters too can become housing for their own characters, or can become housing by entering into relations with other characters. The airily transparent cottonhouse is weighted down in comparison to the dynamic path of labor circling it, and Darl himself is weighted down by his too-material brother. According to Darl, Jewel—Addie’s favorite—“cannot empty himself for sleep because he is not what he is and he is what he is not.” Rooted firmly in his wooden body, Jewel is opaque, a grotesque caricature. An airily transparent house does not translate into airy essence for Jewel, who has become petrified into a “cigar store Indian” version of himself. Faulkner houses Jewel in a grotesque consumer icon imported from Europe in the eighteenth century, encumbering Jewel’s character with the dead weight of inherited stereotype.⁷⁹ Jewel is repeatedly described throughout the novel and by different characters as wooden:

⁷⁹ The cigar store Indian was a famous retail icon that originated in Europe, where sculptures originally gave the figures cartoonishly black characteristics. Once imported to America, sculptors

“He sits erect on the sea leaning a little forward, wooden-backed. The brim of his hat has soaked free of the crown in two places, drooping across his wooden face so that, head lowered, he looks through it like through the visor of a helmet, looking long across the valley to where the barn leans against the bluff, shaping the invisible horse.” Addie’s favorite child, the jewel of her brood, inhabits his body as housing, an opaque container that puts him in active relation to the world—though wooden, he strides purposefully and though his face gives shape to desires. The object of Jewel’s desire, the horse, exchanges lithe animation into the boy’s wooden body when they come into contact:

“his whole body earth-free, horizontal, whipping snake-limber [. . .] Then they are rigid, motionless, terrific, the horse back-thrust on stiffened, quivering legs, with lowered head; Jewel with dug heels, shutting off the horse's wind with one hand, with the other patting the horse's neck in short strokes myriad and caressing, cursing the horse with obscene ferocity. They stand in rigid terrific hiatus, the horse trembling and groaning. Then Jewel is on the horse's back. He flows upward in a stopping swirl like the lash of a whip, his body in midair shaped to the horse. For another moment the horse stands spraddled, with lowered head, before it bursts into motion.”⁸⁰

The close contact between Jewel and the horse makes their liveliness a force to be exchanged in an overtly sexualized relation. The Jewel transforms from wooden cigar-store Indian to “snake-limber” to “rigid” to cursing with “obscene ferocity” and flowing like a whip. The horse is at once “stiffened” and “quivering” and it stands in both “terrific hiatus” and groans and trembles. Thus merged into one shape of kinetic energy, it is then the horse—not Jewel—who pauses before bursting into motion,

gave the figures more exaggeratedly Indian characteristics. The figures were a popular way to advertise to an illiterate constituency, with their peak popularity in the mid-nineteenth century. See “The Cigar Store Indian,” *Bulletin Journal*. 14, no. 93: (June 25, 1985).

⁸⁰ Faulkner, 9.

boy and horse assembled through the motions of the boy's initially wooden and barely animate "whole body." The force of liveliness and stillness being exchanged in this assemblage is animal magnetism, a technique which Christopher White claims is part of "modernity reconceive[ing] the bodily domain of living animality in terms of electro-magnetic forces in flux, of uncanny communication and transference."⁸¹ White concludes that Faulkner uses animal magnetism to reveal the animal within human structures, while Rosemary Franklin argues that "The technique and metaphor of animal magnetism [. . .] reveal[s] the minds of Darl and the other characters and to emphasize the strong magnetic bonds which unite the Bundrens."⁸² While both describe Faulkner's use of the pseudoscientific concept, this chapter focuses on it as the force enabling forms to enter into assembled relations that move characters.

Faulkner's characters *are moved* in the sense of being driven by forces not altogether within their agency or power. While contained in the house of Bundren, the children are fleshy objects to be exchanged, bartered, and put to work. Addie, in her own words "gave Anse the children. I did not ask for them." Addie has no desire for children—the desire is entirely on Anse's part. "I gave Anse Dewey Dell to negative Jewel. Then I gave him Vardaman to replace the child I had robbed him of. And now he has three children that are his and not mine." What Addie desired, she "did not even ask him for what he could have given me: not-Anse. That was my duty to him, to not ask that." Addie desires to be, like her Jewel, an opaque "I," in contrast to Anse's Darl, who would be a transparent eye. "My children were of me alone, of the wild blood boiling along the earth, of me and of all that lived; of none and of all. Then I found that I had Jewel." The magnetism binding Addie

⁸¹ White, Christopher T. "The Modern Magnetic Animal: 'As I Lay Dying' and the Uncanny Zoology of Modernism," *Journal of Modern Literature* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 82.

⁸² Rosemary Franklin, "Animal Magnetism in 'As I Lay Dying,'" *American Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1966): 34.

and her children is the same force flowing through Jewel and his horse transposing animate into inanimate characteristics. The transposition of inanimate for the animate here means that the children are housed within the relational struggle over dominance between Addie and her husband: housed within this domestic tussle, they are interchangeable, inanimate objects even as Addie selects one to be precious and irreplaceable.

Addie Bundren's perspective exposes decent and respectable surfaces as deceptive housing. Perhaps Addie's most dramatic exposure of the mismatch between surface conventionality and interior actuality is in her infidelity to Anse. Addie expresses awareness of mismatch between her superficial appearance of conventionality and fidelity in terms of wearing clothes before the world: she would "think of sin as I would think of the clothes we both wore in the world's face, of the circumspection necessary because he was he and I was I."⁸³ But Addie is not hiding *behind* Gothic surfaces, "I hid nothing. I tried to deceive no one [. . .] for his sake, not for my safety, but just as I wore clothes in the world's face." The act of putting on clothing—an act recalling Adam and Eve's sudden shame when they become aware of one another's nakedness—is a relational act, a recognition of human society and conventional interaction within it. Addie put on the clothes of conventionality, and takes comfort in the mismatch between surfaces and interiority. While she waited for him, she "would think of him as dressed in sin. I would think of him as thinking of me as dressed also in sin, he the more beautiful since the garment which he had exchanged for sin was sanctified." Her lover's "sanctified" garments do not conceal sin but are a social exchange that makes sin, sanctity, and clothes interchangeable currency: "I would think of the sin as garments which we would remove in order to shape and coerce the terrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air." Bundren

⁸³ Faulkner, 163.

refuses to accept essential definitions of relational concepts, she rejects socially inherited characterizations.

Addie metaphorically transforms Anse into inanimate house, expressing through metaphor—and hence vehemently rejecting—her feeling of confinement: during intercourse, Addie “would think about his name until after a while I could see the word as a shape, a vessel, and I would watch him liquefy and flow into it like cold molasses flowing out of the darkness into the vessel, until the jar stood full and motionless: a significant shape profoundly without life like that I had forgotten the name of the jar.”⁸⁴ Thusly transforming through language Anse’s erection into mere inanimate house, Addie stands outside the supposed penetration while Anse becomes contained in his own form. The supposed oneness of flesh is transformed into a meeting of surfaces, allowing Addie to remain a discrete and individual occupant of her own body. The temporary assemblage plastically deforms Addie’s housing by leaving both a wound and the materials for a baby: “The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a and I couldn’t think *Anse*, couldn’t remember *Anse*. It was not that I could think of myself as no longer unvirgin, because I was three now [space in original].” Addie takes revenge for the deformations to her individual housing by taking ownership of the babies created out of Anse’s temporary occupancy. Though Addie has produced posterity, she is, like Hepzibah, disoriented in her relation to ancestry. And Addie expresses the weight of her disoriented relation to inheritance with Gothic flourish: “I believed that the reason was the duty to the alive, to the terrible blood, the red bitter flood boiling through the land.”⁸⁵

Addie expresses her metaphorical disorientation in the face of inheritance with her literal, upside-down placement in her coffin. Addie rests in her coffin in what Sara Ahmed describes as a

⁸⁴ Ibid. 161.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 163.

wonky orientation, which is to say that Addie fits into her housing as well as she fit into her social roles as nurturing mother and dutiful wife.⁸⁶ To accommodate the feminine flare of her old-fashioned dress, Addie lays upside down in the conventionally anthropoid-shaped coffin, belying the universality of the coffin's *anthro* shape and scandalizing the neighbors (see figure 4). Addie's neighbor Cora attests to Addie's wonky relationship with those around her: "She lived, a lonely woman, lonely with her pride, trying to make folks believe different, hiding the fact that they just suffered her, because she was not cold in the coffin before they were carting her forty miles away to bury her, Right-side up, for Cora, is "a woman's place [. . .] with her husband and children, alive or dead" and Addie is upside down by willing herself away from her domestic structures.⁸⁷ By willing herself into lumbering motion, Addie also inappropriately lingers with the living, thwarting "decent burial."

Addie's angular coffin is the shimmering cottonhouse's foil: it is an object in motion, an icon with diagonals that uneasily suggest simultaneously motion and death, an assertion supported by the Faulkner's repeated use of animal magnetism.⁸⁸ Inside the coffin, Addie "[becomes] a polyhedron, a

⁸⁶ Ahmed, Sara, "Sexual Orientations," in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁸⁷ By willing herself inside a wooden block *and* willing that block to be flung far from her conjugal home to never return, Addie almost literally inhabits the object position in Sigmund Freud's "Fort-da game"; she also inhabits the subject position conventionally occupied by the boy. Addie wills herself to be sent *fort* (away) in a block, but she interrupts the *da* (here) phase of the game; she stays dead (*fort*) by slipping away from her children's repeated attempts to fully internalize, to "properly" and completely mourn her. Hans represents to Freud a compulsion to repeat, but also a compulsion to try and contain the essence of the mother within an object that can be controlled. Bringing the block back (*da*) is a way for Hans to master his mother, and interrupting that phase of the game is Addie's way of mastering her own objectivity.

⁸⁸ The human corpse is in fact very alive. Mary Roach writes about the steps involved in the decay of a corpse, including the stage when intestinal gas ruptures the belly and splits the body in half, a process that is accompanied with loud noises and violent movements of the stiffened body. Addie is certainly a vivid illustration of this process, and we read throughout the novel of her weight shifting suddenly and eventually sloshing. Roach, Mary. *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2003).

form utterly protean, an angular seed or egg seething with perverse life and eager for metempsychosis,” and indeed the novel is one of repeated transformations, echoing the bodily and character transformations in both Poe and Hawthorne. The coffin is a weighty encumbrance on the family Addie feels trapped her: when Anse insists on forging the river, the coffin, “for an instant it resists, as though volitional, as though within it her pole-thin body clings furiously, even though dead, to a sort of modesty, as she would have tried to conceal a soiled garment that she could not prevent her body soiling.” “We lower it carefully down the steps. We move, balancing it as though it were something infinitely precious, our faces averted, breathing through our teeth to keep our nostrils closed.” But as anyone who has been in the presence of putrefaction can attest, the smell of decay is a thick one, one that you can taste as much smell⁸⁹. Addie’s corpse, upside-down in its housing, drilled full of holes, and decomposing into an unevenly weighted mess, embodies in its silhouette and powerfully animated presence the cumbrous containment Addie felt while living in Anse Bundren’s shimmering hut.⁹⁰

Addie’s coffin provides the materials for expressing Addie’s wonkiness, and it also is the housing for a nontraditional form of dwelling. The cottonhouse was a house to Jewel and a home to Darl, but Addie’s coffin is her housing—Just as Hepzibah uses the house of the seven gables as the raw material for building a nontraditional family, Addie uses her coffin to shape a nontraditional domestic economy. Using the coffin, Addie commands Cash’s labor in a way that makes Anse bitterly

⁸⁹ For vivid descriptions of the varying steps of putrefaction for a human cadaver, see Roach *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, 2003.

⁹⁰ “They had laid her in it head to foot so it wouldn't crush her dress. It was her wedding dress and it had a flare-out bottom, and they had laid her head to foot in it so the dress could spread out, and they had made her a veil out of a mosquito bar so the auger holes in her face wouldn't show.” Faulkner, 80.

jealous.⁹¹ Cash devotes himself to his unalienated labor on the meticulously hand-crafted object with a zealotry that far exceeds the requirements of Addie's tersely laconic demands. His saw snores steadily behind every character's dialogue, his work on the coffin permeates the novel's atmosphere. As Darl notes, Cash works till "every joint and seam beveled and scrubbed with the plane, tight as a drum and neat as a sewing basket." When Faulkner depicts Cash's labor directly, the man does appear to transform into a machine, but this machine "functioned in a tranquil conviction that rain was an illusion of the mind" and mechanically shucks away with "unhurried imperviousness." By commanding his loving labor, Addie makes Cash truly at home. In fact, the Gothic only rears its ugly style when Cash "puts down the saw," and then his wet shirt makes it look "as though he had been abruptly turned wrong-side out, shirt and all." At home in unalienated labor, Cash believes he is constructing the form of Addie's coffin to follow "the animal magnetism of a dead body [. . .], so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel," and he believes that the anthropoid form "makes a neater job." To paraphrase Cash's reasons for constructing a beveled form: form *should* reflect its content. In practice, however—as with the infamous modernist house, the Farnsworth box—the actual inhabitant's material reality is an inconvenience. Addie occupies her housing inappropriately, and her burial goes anything but "neatly."

The coffin is also housing for Addie's final vengeance on the structures of domesticity that encumbered her in life. After her family mourn her in a symbolic meal by eating the transubstantiated form of Vardamon's fish, Addie's coffin reclaims her as *a* fish that slips away when it takes to the water and wreaks tragic loss of animal life, human, and—much to Cash's detriment—material

⁹¹ The family friend Tull also remarks on the extraordinary dedication with which Cash applied himself to his woodworking, "Wouldn't mind, anyway. I have seen him spend a hour trimming out a wedge like it was glass he was working, when he could have reached around and picked up a dozen sticks and drove them into the joint and made it do." Faulkner, 79.

damage⁹². Addie's resistance to being introjected and digested belies the so-called healthiness of proper mourning, and her corpse's refusal to "stay dead" is a posthumous indictment of the objectifying nature of the subject's mourning work.⁹³ "*As I Lay Dying* is after all the story of a body, Addie's, both in its existence as an unembalmed corpse and, as it was—at least partly—conceived for passion. Although the novel has none of the traditional Gothic trappings of body-snatching [. . .] it can be considered nevertheless a variation on the ancient folk fable of the unburiable cadaver."⁹⁴ Addie—like Madeline Usher and Hepzibah Pyncheon before her—is as psychologically indigestible as she is, for most of the novel, indecently buried.

Faulkner in the twentieth-century is way of gesturing toward the International Style and its apparent dominance in twentieth-century design. The International Style expressed with literal transparency the new "skin" quality of walls in buildings with steel skeletons. As this chapter illustrated, glass was an important conceptual revolution in the literary imagination. But the literary Gothic preserved florid description, epic tones, and grotesque situations in the face of the architectural shift toward modernist transparency. Transparency in my archive was often associated with a sort of casual phrenology, in which skin, "mammalian ludicrosities," and clothing were accorded the weight of character and the function of displaying interiority. This literary style preserves the densely opaque walls of the architectural Gothic, making the skins of characters impediments to seeing their interiors,

⁹² As soon as he can stand after the accident, Jewel returns at Cash's insistence to retrieve his expensive woodworking tools.

⁹³ Vardamon's famous transubstantiation of his mother into the fish cooked by Dewey Dell and ingested by the entire family has been read as a figuration of the introjection work of healthy mourning. One such reading can be found in White, Christopher T., "The Modern Magnetic Animal: 'As I Lay Dying' and the Uncanny Zoology of Modernism," *Journal of Modern Literature* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 81 – 101.

⁹⁴ Clarke, Deborah, "Worth Any Number of Old Ladies," in *Robbing the Mother: Women in Faulkner* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 150.

making the exteriors of buildings a misrepresentation of their loving and revolutionary inhabitants, making superficial traits like a squint or old lace an inverted physiognomy, in which the kind heart of the squinter can deform an inveterate scowl into a glow.⁹⁵

This chapter has focused on the literary expression of invisible forms of patriarchal oppression in American domesticity.⁹⁶ In a period during which men are increasingly leaving the home for work in the public sector, the masculine wills in these texts seek to bind the feminine body to the domestic interior⁹⁷. Gendered figuration of social relations has long been recognized as a particular problem for scholars of the American novel and of the Gothic genre specifically. Yet the American Gothic in particular is a genre populated by atypical protagonists, mad patriarchs, and by family structures that *begin* with the presumably predictable result of the “confrontation of a man and woman,” but *end* in the bloody failure of continued posterity.⁹⁸ When the women are figures for the threat that needs to be managed, these writers house them in forms that express that dynamic.

I conclude with a contemporary illustration of my argument about the conventions of the Gothic genre and their use to express invisible inheritances; the penultimate episode of season 7 of the AMC Series *Mad Men* concludes on a moment of Gothic opacity revealed behind the literal

⁹⁵ A nineteenth-century satire on phrenology with which Hawthorne would have been familiar cheekily suggests that if you change your character then you can change the shape of your nose. Warwick, Eden, *Nasology: Or, Hints Towards a Classification of Noses* (London: Schulze and co.), loc. 1848.

⁹⁶ This, of course, is not at all to suggest that this is the only route of inquiry in this line of research. As referenced previously, William Gleason looked into the inheritance of slavery in both fictional and literal architectures in the south. Elizabeth Grosz goes into other forms of gendered inheritance in built space.

⁹⁷ Luciano, summary of the time period of displacement. Luciano, Dana, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America. Sexual Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

⁹⁸ Fiedler, Leslie A., *Love and Death in the American Novel*. 1st Dalkey Archive ed. (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997), 26.

transparency of the show's slickly designed steel and glass office settings. Behind the show is modernism's open secret, its many-gabled inheritance—the Victorian whorehouse in which the show's gray-suited hero grew up (see figure 2). When Don Draper's serial use and abandonment of women threatens to completely estrange his daughter Sally, he finally tells her something real about himself by showing her the place where he grew up; Don shows Sally his past by showing her a Victorian style house for buying and selling women by the hour.⁹⁹ When human perception has settled by habit into connecting literal with conceptual transparency, it is the ugly opacity of the literary Gothic that finally induces conceptual transparency. Using a Gothic house to reveal the character hidden behind glass is an image best explained using Hawthorne's prose: Don Draper is one of those "men of strong minds, great force of character, and a hard texture of the sensibilities," who represents himself as a great edifice with "windows, the whole height of each room," that "admit the sunshine through the most transparent of plate-glass."¹⁰⁰ It takes "a seer, before whose sadly gifted eye the whole structure melts into thin air," to expose the "the hidden nook, the bolted closet, with the cobwebs festooned over its forgotten door [. . .] and the decaying corpse within." It is in these opaque, Gothic details, Hawthorne and *Mad Men* both claim that "we are to seek the true emblem of the man's character, and of the deed that gives whatever reality it possesses to his life," for it is in the closeted relation between the decaying, encumbered Gothic and the international style transparency that, "without remembering it,—is this man's miserable soul!"

⁹⁹ At the time Draper shows the house to Sally, the house is now part of a racial ghetto, and a young African American child sits on the front porch, throwing into relief the overwhelming homogeneity of the show's main cast.

¹⁰⁰ Hawthorne, 238.



Figure two. “This is where I grew up.” *Mad Men*, 6.12: “In Care Of.”

CHAPTER THREE: Locked Wombs and Porous Rooms in *Rosemary's Baby* and "The Yellow Wallpaper"

The previous chapter looked at Gothic housing that reanimated the female characters entombed within. Such housing was thick with ugliness, excessive decoration, and oppressive inheritance, yet containment produced something that looked like character interiority on those thick surfaces and between interactions with other characters. The feminine small fry of my second chapter actively pursued desires unsanctioned by the patriarchal systems that entombed them. In short, opaque housing hides and hence mediates the illusion of interiority for characters not typically recognized as protagonist material. The first two chapters of this dissertation looked at housing as a medium for the relational construction of character, and the second half shifts emphasis to housing as mediating the proximity necessary for such relational constructions. This chapter exchanges single-family housing for a Gothic apartment building and shifts emphasis from formations of character interiority to (de)formations of intimate interiors. My reading of *Rosemary's Baby* demonstrates the horrific results of what Fuss claims is modernism's colonization of the exterior by interior, private worlds. When these worlds become so thick that any outside seems to have entirely disappeared, the characters produced within those thick interiors become demonic in impact and influence. This chapter vividly stages the scalable and interlocking nature of housing—Rosemary's womb is housed within her marriage, a bond which is housed within her domestic apartment, which is contained within a larger building that is housed within a social sphere, which is itself housed within an urban setting. That each scale of containment is penetrated by invaded and supposedly external forces belies the fiction of the ideological promise of locks and seals. The room is locked in the same way that a womb is locked—which is to say it is not at all impenetrable, but only thick with ideological promises that produce the illusion of a disappeared outside. This chapter tracks across media a consistent gnawing awareness

that locks and seals do not contain but rather bring people, animals, and things into animus-inducing—and consequently animating—proximity.

When the newlywed Woodhouses in Ira Levin's 1967 novel *Rosemary's Baby* first view the recently vacated apartment in a fashionably coveted, nineteenth-century-era Manhattan high-rise, Rosemary encounters her first mystery: "the secretary; it used to be there.' She pointed to a peaked silhouette left ghost-like on the wall near the bedroom door, and the deep prints of four ball feet in the burgundy carpet. Faint scuff-trails curved and crossed from the four prints to the secretary's feet where they stood now against the narrow adjacent wall."¹ It takes Rosemary, Guy, and the real estate agent Micklas together to work "the secretary bit by bit back toward its original place." "I see why she went into a coma," Guy jokes over their exertion, but Micklas corrects him: "She couldn't have moved this by herself [. . .] she was eighty-nine."² The impossibility of the effort arouses Rosemary's suspicions, and she pragmatically wonders aloud "Why would she cover up her vacuum cleaner and her towels?" Guy's response is another jest: "Whoever she locked in got out."³ The real joke, of course, is that the elderly former resident of the Woodhouse's new apartment wasn't trying to keep someone *in* the closet—she was trying to keep someone *out* of the apartment by blocking the closet that concealed a secret passageway connecting the unit to that of the Castavets next-door. Though after moving in, Rosemary fills the closet with her own carefully folded towels and linens, the Castavets impossibly manage to continue invading, mysteriously bypassing the towels and objects that at the end of the story Rosemary herself must laboriously clear away before she can herself penetrate the passageway

¹ Levin, Ira, *Rosemary's Baby* (New York, NY: Pegasus Books, 2010 [1967], PDF e-Book) loc. 200.

² Levin, loc. 200.

³ *Ibid.* 206.

The mystery of how this upscale apartment is impossibly penetrated frames the novel's central mystery—that of how Rosemary's very womb was implanted with a monstrously foreign fetus in spite of her pious confinement of intercourse within the bounds of her marriage. The supernatural source of both invasions is the cabal of witches led by the next-door neighbors Minnie and Roman Castavet (Roman's name turns out to be an anagram for his grandfather Steven Marcato, an infamous Satanist and witch)⁴. Although demonic in name and affiliation, these neighbors ultimately amount to little more than a nosy, overbearing old couple with wide and important social connections, the type of people who might in reality belong to a tightly knit, exclusive social collective, or to what Peter Sloterdijk might call a group with a "shared inside."⁵ *Rosemary's Baby* is a mystery that begins after the love story's end—and love stories, as Sloterdijk postulates, "are stories of form" in which "every act of solidarity is an act of sphere formation, that is to say the creation of an interior."⁶ The mystery of Rosemary's story is how she comes to be sealed within her interior and where the limits of her impossible confinement are.

I argue in this chapter that Rosemary's aspiration to locked housing animates an interior with boundaries that are far thicker than material walls—these boundaries borrow their ideological weight from fantasies about material barriers, an illusion that is no less palpable for its phantasmagoric origins. This story is driven by an aspiration to containment that ultimately queers rather than

⁴ Levin's demonic narrative was published on the eve of a Satanism scare in 1970s America. The scare was launched by Mike Warnke's fraudulent account of ritual sacrifice and demonic worship among a shadowy underground network of Satanists. Warnke's book helped drive a series of high-profile trials and popular speculations on the presumed role of Satan worship in crimes. Although Levin took personal responsibility for initiating the popularity of demon baby narratives in popular fiction, *Rosemary's Baby* seems more of an anticipation of a larger cultural movement. See Warnke, Mike, David W Balsiger, and Les Jones. *The Satan-Seller* (Plainfield, N.J.: Logos International, 1972).

⁵ Sloterdijk, Peter, *Spheres: Microspherology*. (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2011), 12.

⁶ Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, 12.

subdues the main character—Rosemary’s character arc is that from happy housewife to determined detective. Though Rosemary and Guy begin their story as an intimately bound unit, the narrative trajectory follows the infiltration and dissolution of their shared sphere—part of a conspiracy to isolate Rosemary in a purified sphere of her own. *Rosemary’s Baby* narrates relocating the once-excluded exterior in the wake of burst intimacy, and it also dramatizes the consequences of inhabiting too-thick, too-successfully exclusive social spheres. In theorizing the formation and phenomenology of intimate interiors, Sloterdijk uses the image of the bubble, because “there is a solidarity between the soap bubble and its blower that excludes the rest of the world.”⁷ Sloterdijk argues that this image of “biune intimacy” between boy and bubble is a figure for the act of creative production, for romantic coupling, and even for the seamless union between mother and infant. Expanding on Sloterdijk’s analysis, I move away from how intimacies are formed, and focus instead on burst attempts to contain these intimacies, to seal them in impenetrable structures meant to ensure the duration, purity, and stability of the social interior. Intimate bubbles can seem inexplicably delicate, liable to shatter at an unfortunate word choice or an inappropriate glance. But they can also become frighteningly thick, their walls so dense that the insider forgets the possibility of an outside. The supernatural and impossible elements of *Rosemary’s Baby* and other locked room mysteries are neither simple betrayals of detective fiction conventions nor purely symbolic metaphors; rather the supernatural in this chapter registers the animating effects of the usually unseen seals of social interiors

This chapter analyzes the construction of intimacy by re-placing both novel and film adaptation of *Rosemary’s Baby* in the fictional tradition of the locked room trope as well as in

⁷ Sloterdijk, 18.

ideological trends in domestic housing. Though not exclusively American, the promise of housing to lock, contain, and shelter individuals away from human society is an aspiration specific to middle-class white American domesticity. By reading this aspiration to domestic purity as it manifests in locked rooms from *Rosemary's Baby* to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," I demonstrate how fictional housing has historically represented, indicted, and speculated on what today may seem a natural or immutable function of domestic housing—the function of locking in intimacy and sealing out the world. The aspiration to purity is racialized in ideology and specific to waves of immigration fear in America.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote in the wake of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and Susan Lanser argues that Gilman's story should be read in the context of "a culture obsessively preoccupied with race as the foundation of character" and "a culture desperate to maintain Aryan superiority in the face of massive immigrations."⁸ *Rosemary's Baby* was written in the wake of The Immigration Act of 1965, which reversed the U.S. policy of restricting immigration based on ethnic origin (regardless of national origins)—the result of the Act was to increase Asian immigration from 6.7% in 1965 to 12.3% in 1966, resulting in increased anxiety among Americans about invasions from "external" influences, spectacular threats to the supposedly sealed purity of what had been ideologically fictionalized as a white nation.⁹ This chapter then contributes to the opacity of the previous chapter a racialized connotation—when character is formed by interactions between surfaces, power struggles necessarily become a struggle for control over racial purity. Attention to

⁸ Lanser, Susan S., "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America," *Feminist Studies* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 425.

⁹ Charles B. Keely, "Effects of the Immigration Act of 1965 on Selected Population Characteristics of Immigrants to the United States," *Demography* 8, no. 2 (May 1971): 157 – 69. For contemporary American perceptions of the changes brought about by the Act, see Irwin, Richard, "Changing Patterns of American Immigration," *The International Migration Review* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 18 – 31.

the aesthetics of housing shows how power struggles over the racial purity of character make ideological assumptions about material borders based on the classed expectations that have congealed around the womb as a rhetorically constructed space.¹⁰ Not only is *Rosemary's Baby* the horror of the subjugation of women, but the horror of class- and race-specific housing aspirations.

Thick Social Spheres

Peter Sloterdijk opens the first volume of his expansive theory of social bubbles with a whimsical reading of a painting of a little boy blowing a soap bubble. Sloterdijk meditates on the boy's rapturous attention, and he claims that by enclosing the breath of the interior in the external form of the bubble, the little boy has imaginatively sent off a part of himself into the space temporarily animated by this simple act of artifice. The soap bubble in the painting, it seems, is not the "sphere" of Sloterdijk's title for volume one, rather, the soap bubble sets the scene for the temporary animation of a sphere in which the boy briefly becomes two, his breath suspended for a shimmering moment that holds his attention, setting the boy beside himself with joy in his creation. The model of the bubble blower is Sloterdijk's figure for the concept of *biune intimacy*, or the idea that the most elemental form of social intimacy includes at least two parts; the subject and the constructed other (here, the bubble), which is the *With* produced by a subject to animate an immediate world. In constructing this figure, Sloterdijk himself seems to have produced an interior, his prose rapturously bringing to life the painting that he has had mechanically reproduced in *Spheres: Bubbles*. The painted boy's attention is held aloft by the confidence of Sloterdijk's syntax, while

¹⁰ The most famous account of the womb as an ideologically constructed space of capture is Ann Oakley, *The Captured Womb: A History of the Medical Care of Pregnant Women*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986. Nancy Ehrenreich has argued that there is a racial blindness in such studies that fail to account for the intersections of race and class on such a gendered concept, "Colonization of the Womb," *Duke Law Journal* 43, no. 3 (December 1993): 492 – 587.

readers in turn bring to life the space comprising the site of reading and the text. Thus materially framed, mental concepts are formed, bubbles of attention enveloped in philosophy.

In what could almost be a real-life enactment or parody of Sloterdijk's scenes of mechanical magic, on October 15th, 2009, a little boy was reported to Colorado police to have actually lifted off the ground inside a weather balloon sent off by his father. Instead of the boy's attention being held enraptured by his bubble's journey, this scene held a nation breathless with anticipation, fear, delight, fascination, and horror as news coverage exhaustively plotted out and speculated on the balloon boy's trajectory. When the balloon finally drifted back down to Earth, authorities, media, and community members rushed to release the boy from the hydrogen-filled neoprene, only to find that there was no child inside the sealed form. The spectacular event, it turned out, had been a hoax perpetrated by the boy's father, and the solution to the mystery of the sealed bubble was that the child had been hidden in his home attic the entire time. This childish angel entrapped in the attic by his father tells us something about the images that contemporary Americans will take as acceptable in the real. Unlike Sloterdijk's evanescently enchanted sphere, the creator of this contemporary event sought to create the illusion of reality, to make it appear as though the boy's enchanted drifting off with the bubble were actual, as if he had not remained grounded to the Earth but had literally lifted off. And unlike Sloterdijk, Americans expected the bubble to be thick enough to bear the literal weight of a child, the fragile bubble of promise in contemporary America. Balloon boy highlighted an insecure attachment to the lofty dreams for white childhood, a wish that the dreams and fantasies were real and substantive, capable of bearing weight.

The contemporary boy (aptly named Falcon) and his bubble inspired debates and speculations across traditional television and radio news outlets as well as social media forums like Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and YouTube. When reality deflated the bubble, Americans were outraged to find themselves exposed as the fanciful creators of an evanescent dream (see figure 3). The untethered rage of American consumers eventually congealed around Falcon's father, Richard Heene, the adult man responsible for the stream of hydrogen that brought the balloon to life. Heene's true betrayal, one might say, was *wasting our time*—more specifically wasting our attention. Just as a boy blowing a bubble is a fascinating subject for a painting and a charming object for philosophy, a boy getting in a balloon and floating away from his home is an enrapturing topic for news and social media attention. But a middle-aged man fabricating a weather balloon is not only a waste of attention, it constitutes an intrusion into contemporary media spheres. Heene's crime was



Figure three: “We all share blame for Balloon Boy,” taken from Mary Papenfuss, “Emotion-ravenous audience devoured fake,” *Newser*, Oct 19, 2009 <<http://www.newser.com/tag/44778/1/balloon-boy-hoax.html>>

seeking attention; apparently barred from the distributors to his target social spheres, Heene smuggled himself in through the form of his child, the father impregnating the son with himself.

In a state of exposure to the vast ocean of information in the World Wide Web, attention has become the resource with which we build our interiors, and this evanescent material—attention—itself needs shelter and protection.¹¹ The consuming public of the internet needs gates, automated rules for what makes an appropriate extension of attention, needs gatekeepers like media-commentators to keep the gates sheltering our intimate attention. Even after the true artificer was revealed, the story lived on in social media spheres as “balloon boy,” and the costume marketed directly after the event insists on linking the balloon’s flight to the boy (see figure 4). What I take



Figure four. “Be Balloon Boy for Halloween,” taken from Nick McMaster, “Canadian company hawks costume,” *Newser.com*, Oct 22, 2009 <<http://www.newser.com/story/72348/be-balloon-boy-for-halloween.html>>

away from these scenes is their containment in scales of housing. These housing frames are important because the artifice does not come to life without the coordinated conspiring of all the levels together.

The locked room is a

¹¹ William Gibson’s *Mona Lisa Overdrive* has a protagonist who is seeking the “shape” of the internet, he is searching constantly to simply perceive its form. In the end he succeeds in perceiving and hence is able to inhabit the internet. Rosemary is engaging in essentially the inverse activity, since she is detecting the shape of her social sphere in attempt to get outside it. Gibson, William, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989).

figure for the frames that enclose each plane or level of animating scene. The trope of the locked room is the literary housing of this chapter—by which I mean the forms that contain, but do not domesticate, actors in fictional worlds. In the balloon boy scandal, the container for expressing this function of gatekeeping is “trust” which commentators mourn in structural terms—the balloon boy hoax has “damaged,” “hit,” and “weakened” trust. Or in more provocative terms, the scandal was a “blow to trust.” Simultaneously suggesting structural damage and a whisper of air on a delicate film of soap, the outrage in the wake of this seemingly fanciful and inconsequential story expresses a deeply insecure collective belief in gatekeeping and purity.

Locks promise purity while laying the conditions for penetration. The fantastic implications of demonic conspiracy in *Rosemary's Baby* express Rosemary's reality within her fictional world as the victim of a very real plot to invade her body: the weighty influence of her social sphere finds its expression in sorcery. At the end of the novel, the baby stands as the physical product attesting to the invasion of external influences into Rosemary's interior. In Gilman's locked nursery, the passivity imposed on the protagonist by social convention animates the paper on which she writes, with which she is surrounded, and on which the character herself was composed. The locked room takes promises of shelter, isolation, and purity to their logical and material extremes, forcing interiors to reckon with the exteriors temporarily yet effectively excluded by the fantastically exclusive spheres formed by human intimacy. “The sphere,” Sloterdijk explains in *Bubbles*, “is the interior, disclosed, shared realm inhabited by humans—in so far as they succeed in becoming humans. Because living always means building spheres, both on a large scale, humans are the beings that establish globes and look out into horizons. Living in spheres means creating the dimension in which humans can be contained. Spheres are immune-systemically effective space creations for ecstatic beings that are

operated upon by the outside.¹² The ecstatic beings inhabiting *Rosemary's Baby* seek to create an interior unsullied by that outside. The specific form of their interior animates the demonic influence of these characters.

Gothic Styling of Social Spheres

In *Rosemary's Baby* the promises of the locked room and sealed social sphere constitute responses to a specific prescription for domestic housing's function—particularly to the suburban-era promise of housing to be an “escape” or “retreat” from society. Where the feminine characters of my previous chapter were unwillingly entombed away from others, Rosemary actively seeks exclusive seclusion. *Rosemary's Baby* was written during the height of “white flight” from urban areas. While it might be easy to read the story as a fearful account of urban life, Sharon Marcus has convincingly argue that it instead reveals the pitfalls of *retreating* from human society within an urban setting.¹³ Marcus has also written about apartment life in Victorian England, where she historicizes the ideology of domestic retreats by arguing that domestic apartments were vibrant stages for public lives.¹⁴ Though Rosemary's demonic domestic story is set in the city, it is seclusion in an isolated building that promises to elevate exclusively wealthy inhabitants literally above and away from the masses that drives her story's horror. This function entails both a thickness of walls keeping the outside at bay and a thickness of interiority, kept pure from external influence.

As previous chapters argue, superficial styling gives animating shape—in this chapter to intimate spheres. At the beginning of *Rosemary's Baby*, the couple had originally “signed a lease on a

¹² Sloterdijk, 28.

¹³ Marcus, Sharon, “Placing ‘Rosemary's Baby,’” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (1993): 121.

¹⁴ Marcus, Sharon, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

five-room apartment in a geometric white house on First Avenue,” but when a unit in the Bramford opens up, Rosemary declares that “I’d rather have four rooms in the Bramford,’ Rosemary said, than a whole floor in that—that white cellblock.¹⁵” When Guy reminds her that yesterday she had “loved” the modernist apartment, Rosemary insists “I liked it. I never loved it. I’ll bet not even the architect loves it.” Like William Faulkner, Rosemary despises modernist minimalism, but unlike William Faulkner, she values the Gothic not for its visible reminder of hidden historical inheritances, but for its charming character—which she believes will mobilize a sense of being at home. To Rosemary, a white middle-class housewife in 1960s America, the modernist “cellblock” is too minimal a structure to induce home. Rosemary distinguishes the difference between a house, or mere structure, and a *home*, or an architectural setting that induces the conditions for ideologically driven conceptions of family and domesticity. Home according to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, is ‘the shelter of the family, of the group organized for the purposes of reproduction,’ a definition Rosemary supports when she says that “good houses” are places where people fall in love and make babies¹⁶. Gilman ties this conception of home as the site of life production by claiming that “we may study the evolution of the home precisely as we study that of any other *form of life*.” Home is no mere structure but a living system. The Branford suggests lives lived with its “old, black, and elephantine [. . .] warren of high-ceilinged apartments prized for their fireplaces and Victorian detail.” Rosemary’s love for the “elephantine” home is a nostalgic turn to the thick and heavy walls of yesterday’s houses as more capable than modernism of bearing the weight of her domestic aspirations for home.

¹⁵ Levin, loc. 124.

¹⁶ Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, *Home, Its Work and Influence* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2013 [1903]), 145.

Rosemary's nostalgia for thick walls constitutes a reactionary turn away from the literal architectural thinning of housing's walls beginning early in the nineteenth century, when the advent of balloon-frame construction freed domestic walls from their former load-bearing functions, paving the way for the light and airy flow between interior and exterior lauded in modernist architecture¹⁷. Rosemary rejects minimalism in the name of thick stone and private locks, for she lives in a world in which "taking part in modernity means putting evolved immune systems at risk." Sloterdijk argues that the global and secular condition of modernity has left humans "shellless," and the philosopher asserts that "the body of humanity seeks to create a new immune constitution in an electronic medial skin."¹⁸ In *Rosemary's Baby*, this "medial skin" is less electronic or automatic (as will be the topic of the next chapter), and here takes the form of a thickening of social and material walls in the interest of securing intimate units within impenetrable shells. The irony of Rosemary's chosen apartment building, of course, is that the interior walls dividing units aren't thick enough to keep out sound let alone the nosy neighbors themselves. The ideological promise of immunity from some only opens Rosemary to the influence of others.

The reactionary positioning of these characters, Levin ruefully notes in the preface to the second edition of the novel, inspired a late-twentieth-century popular surge in demon-baby narratives and Satanic fiction. But Rosemary, a lapsed Catholic married to an atheistic actor living next door to a prosaic Satanic cult, also channels the ambivalence of a more questioning type, when Americans alternately mourn or revel in the loss of a nonhuman, supernatural animator. In both the

¹⁷ Architectural historian Siegfried Gideon ties the balloon frame to the advent of industrialization, and he argues that the balloon frame's thin walls return walls to its roots in classical architecture, which put the weight of buildings on posts and lintels, with walls being either only temporary animal skins or nonexistent. See Siegfried, Gideon, "The Balloon Frame and Industrialization," in *Roots of Contemporary American Architecture*, Lewis Mumford, ed., (New York: Reinhold, 1952), 201 – 5.

¹⁸ Sloterdijk, 23.

novel and Roman Polanski's film adaptation, Rosemary picks up the April 8, 1966 copy of *Time* in the Ob-Gyn Dr. Sapterstein's office. The glossy cover poses a provocative question in bold red lettering, "Is God Dead?" (see figure 5)¹⁹ The article copy claims that the question is relevant for both believers who fear he is *and* atheists, who fear he isn't. The *Time* article hypothesizes on the question in terms of form: in a time of "no religion" the writer claims, "grey Gothic cathedrals stand empty, mute witnesses to a rejected faith."¹⁹ Religious structures remain, but the God presumably responsible for breathing life into them has left the buildings. Fitting, then, that Rosemary would move into a freshly-vacated Gothic building, her own recent departure from the house of religion leaving her shellless and exposed to what *Time* calls a "wilderness" in which "nearly one of every two men on earth lives in thrall to a brand of totalitarianism that condemns religion as the opiate of the masses." Without the breath of God to move these stone forms to life, humans are exposed as themselves the artificers of "empty" shells. Whether believers or not, the article's author sadly



Figure 5. Without God? Roman Polanski, *Rosemary's Baby*, 1968, digital stream

¹⁹ "Theology: Toward a Hidden God," *Time.com*, posted April 8, 1966, accessed March 27, 2018, <<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,835309,00.html>>.

pronounces that humans are destined to be born into a world without God, surrounded by dead forms emptied of living meaning. The use of the Gothic here is a conservative reversal of the previous chapter's argument about the rebellious ugliness of the style—Rosemary embraces the ugliness of that style in the name of its containing a historical character. As housing, of course, that containment will only animate and warp its contents, as Rosemary soon experiences.

Yet Rosemary is initially determined to delight in her borrowed shell's dilapidated character—it is not that she finds charm in its ugliness as much as she determines to reanimate it as charming despite its ugliness. When they first visit the building, an ancient elevator operated by an African-American man in an old-fashioned bell-hop's uniform brings them “into a dimly lighted hallway walled and carpeted in dark green,” where they must navigate “to the right and then to the left, through short branches of dark green hallway” past “rubbed-away places in the wallpaper and a seam where it had lifted and was curling inward; saw a dead light bulb in a cut-glass sconce and a patched placed of light green tape on the dark green carpet.” The reality of the building unsettles the couple: “Guy looked at Rosemary: *Patched carpet?* She looked away and smiled brightly: I love it; everything's lovely!”²⁰ Rosemary's determined cheerfulness in a building of superior social status echoes a similarly inclined protagonist determined to love the worn-down building in Shirley Jackson's mid-century twist on the locked room trope in “The Lovely House.”²¹ The character visits a fortress-like manor, and while touring the house with its wealthy mistress, the visitor repeatedly refers to the patched carpets, faded tapestries, and chipped mosaics as “lovely!” The end of Jackson's story reveals the protagonist to be the ghost of “Margaret, who died for love,” and she

²⁰ Levin, loc. 152.

²¹ Jackson, Shirley, “The Lovely House,” in *American Gothic Tales*, Joyce Carol Oates, ed. (New York NY: The Ontario Review, 1996 [1950]).

encounters herself as an aged lady living alone in the house's ruined tower. In their ruinous yet thick shells, one empty of love and the other of God, Margaret and Rosemary have not lost meaning; in fact, they more meaning than will fit even in the vast forms they have selected as borrowed containers. Jackson's protagonist exceeds her vast housing by reenacting her love story into eternity, and Levin's by the exuberance of her hopes for her future.

The text of *Rosemary's Baby* emphasizes the vastness of the Bramford, the narrative pointing out that at seeing the kitchen, "Rosemary couldn't keep from giggling, for it was as large if not larger than the whole apartment in which they were then living. It had a six-burner gas stove with two ovens, a mammoth refrigerator, a monumental sink."²² Despite its enormous proportions, the unit is crowded with the materials of its previous owner, and it takes Rosemary's dedicated artifice to "[imagine] away Mrs. Gardenia's chrome table and chairs and roped bales of *Fortune* and *Musical America*" so that she can reconstruct "the perfect place for something like the blue-and-ivory breakfast nook she had clipped from last month's *House Beautiful*."²³ In the nursery, the free-indirect narration reveals that "the room would accommodate *almost perfectly* the nursery she had imagined. It was a bit dark—the windows faced on a narrow courtyard—but the white-and-yellow wallpaper would brighten it tremendously [my emphasis]." The gap between magazine ideal and material reality only stimulates Rosemary's animating imagination, and its vacated, abandoned state is the foundation for her loving home building. "It's a marvelous apartment!" Rosemary said, back in the living room. She spun about with opened arms, as if to take and embrace it. "I love it!"²⁴ "Heartened, Rosemary leaped from practicality. 'Oh Guy, let's take it! Please! Please! It's such a

²² Levin loc. 168.

²³ Levin loc. 170.

²⁴ Ibid. 189.

wonderful apartment! She didn't do anything with it, old Mrs. Gardenia! That living room could be—It could be beautiful, and warm, and—oh please, Guy, let's take it all right?"²⁵ The real estate agent showing them the place remarks that “apartments with this kind of charm and individuality are as rare as hen’s teeth today,” and it is the rarity, the singularity of the shell that constitutes its social thickness, its promise to individuate and separate Rosemary’s fantasies into material existence. “The Bram?” the girl said. ‘I’m mad about it! If you ever want to sub-let, I’m first, and don’t you forget it! All those weird gargoyles and creatures climbing up and down between the windows!’ The charm of the Gothic style lies in its newfound fashionability, the exclusive tastes it has animated. As housing, the Bramford brings into proximity certain types, hence mobilizing a character for an exclusive social group.

Rosemary, unlike what the *Time* article calls the “anti-heroes of modern art [who] endlessly suggest that waiting for God is futile, since life is without meaning,” is radiant with hope and expectation. What she seeks is housing stable enough to bear the weight of her desires. When her older friend Hutch attempts to talk her out of wanting to move into the Bramford, pointing out the century-long trail of unfortunate events that occurred in the “bad house,” Rosemary counters that “maybe there are good houses too,’ she said, ‘houses where people keep falling in love and getting married and having babies.” The generality of this fantasy—*people keep*—summons what Benedict Anderson calls an *imagined community*, one that Rosemary can virtually join from safely enclosed behind thick walls²⁶. In contrast, Guy’s community is and must be specific and actual, proximal to the workplace where he will earn the money to keep the home he will only intermittently inhabit. In

²⁵ Ibid. 124.

²⁶ Anderson, Benedict R. O’G, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised and extended. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 6 – 7.

effort to tempt Guy into joining her fantasy about the Bramford, Rosemary declares that “‘it's better located.’ ‘God, yes,’ Guy said. ‘I could walk to all the theaters.’” The real estate mantra of “location, location, location” combines Rosemary’s unlocalizable fantasies with Guy’s workplace placement, for, as housing law historian Lee Fennell has argued, *location* refers to intangible and transient qualities such as proximity to commerce and industry and perceived demographic homogeneity even more than it refers to static, specific geography—the value of domestic housing extends far beyond the enclosure of its walls.²⁷ Though *Rosemary’s Baby* is set in the urban metropolis of New York, the home in this text is as detached from specific place as are the suburban and semi-rural houses of my previous chapters. The thick skin of Rosemary’s Gothic apartment building serves the same function that large lawns and physical distance serve for single-family houses in middle class white suburbs.

Rosemary meets the material reminders of past inhabitants with her own efforts to remodel and reorganize those materials. Before moving in, she imagines “away Mrs. Gardenia's chrome table and chairs and roped bales of *Fortune* and *Musical America*” and replaces it with an image she clipped from “last month's *House Beautiful*”²⁸ Though the building’s dingy appearance seems at first to dampen Rosemary’s enthusiasm, she determinedly declares that the dinginess is because “she didn't do anything with it, old Mrs. Gardenia! That living room could be—it could be beautiful, and warm.” The previous tenant is not simply a past to be erased but a negative illustration of what the space *could* be, a material basis for remodeling and revision. Rosemary reclaims the closet that Gardenia had blocked off and carefully covers the shelves in magazine-shoot picturesqueness (see figure). The Bramford itself also architecturally embodies the concept of intimate spheres being

²⁷ Fennell, Lee Anne, *The Unbounded Home: Property Values beyond Property Lines* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

²⁸ Levin loc. 170.

founded on and nourished by other spheres, for “originally the house consisted of very large apartments—the smallest was a nine—but now they've almost all been broken up into fours, fives, and sixes.²⁹” The Woodhouse’s intended unit “is a four that was originally the back part of a ten. It has the original kitchen and master bath, which are enormous, as you'll soon see. It has the original master bedroom for its living room, another bedroom for its bedroom, and two servant's rooms thrown together for its dining room or second bedroom.” Micklas highlights the apartment’s cannibalization of former social arrangements, and the historically concealed servant-entrance is in fact the blocked secret entryway into the locked room that opened this chapter. The shell of this apartment is not entirely empty but composed of material sedimentary layers of its past.

The thick skin of Rosemary’s housing, of course, does not protect or individuate Rosemary and her fantasies so much as make her vulnerable to the scheming invasion of the nosy neighbors who constitute the intangible social demographics of the Bramford’s location. If the value of domestic housing extends beyond its walls, those external conditions also have a tendency to breach the borders of privacy. What makes the dingy Bramford (based on the actual apartment building the Dakota) fashionable in this mid-century moment is its particular social connections, connections both within and without its thick skin. While giving the Woodhouses their tour of the Bramford, the agent Micklas obliquely names the primary reason a young couple might seek thick walls by asking them if they have children. For the couple, children are both an aspiration and a means to aspirational status within this particular certain social circle—and as we later learn, their child-bearing aspirations are a primary reason the couple were selected by the Bramford’s exclusive board for occupancy. Of representations of houses in American literature, Marilyn Chandler notes that

²⁹ Levin, loc. 147.

“very quickly the houses we build around ourselves become prisons.”³⁰ but the Woodhouses *aspire* to housing as a sort of prison, a container for arresting and stabilizing the conditions they perceive to be necessary for Rosemary to bear and raise Guy’s children—the couple had been on the wait list at the Bramford since their marriage two years previous to the story’s beginning. Guy does not fall but leaps headfirst into domesticity as part of his ambitions.³¹ The Bramford’s material style promises a certain style of social collective whose primary characteristic is its exclusive separation from other collectives.

Locked Wombs

The Woodhouses both seek to shelter Rosemary behind thick walls in anticipation of producing a mother and infant microsphere, or what Sloterdijk conceptualizes as the dual composition of the most elemental sphere of human intimacy. This aspiration points to the foundation of housing’s sheltering promises on the ideological promises written onto the womb. For Sloterdijk, the mother-infant interior is a sphere centered in the infant but comprising the “With” quality of the mother’s nurturing interior: in other words, the infant is not an independent entity, but is always accompanied by the not-quite other, not-quite self of the vascular, fleshy With of the placenta. The Woodhouses approach their intent to create a family with a similar localization of their future-offspring within the chaste womb, and Rosemary is herself housing in need of housing; a delicate shell seeking a thicker shell to keep in her protecting qualities. Of such housing for the housing, Sloterdijk writes that within “the innermost ring of those bell jars of social participation”

³⁰ Chandler, Marilyn Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 20.

³¹ Catherine Jurca argues that domesticity becomes a masculine obsession in the white middle-class culture, though her analysis is specifically of novels set in the postwar American suburbs. See Jurca, Catherine, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001).

that make up collective living, “one almost universally finds an especially protected and shared field with a highly refined character akin to the nest and the incubator: the mother-child space. One could, with very good reason, attempt to describe the entire process of anthropogenesis in terms of this primary rooming-in.³²” Hence, to Sloterdijk, “what we refer to with the unfortunate modernist term 'society' is, from an evolutionary perspective, essentially a shell system composed of more dispensable persons—later known as fathers—whose function is to protect the indispensable and fragile core sphere of the mother-child field.” According to Sloterdijk, “these mother-child symbioses that the interfacial incubator has its warmest, most open, and normally also its most jovial points” and it is in “the facial interaction of mothers and children in the transitional field between animal and human that the true facioplastic operation on humans begins.” But in *Rosemary’s Baby* the mother-infant sphere is infamously absent facial exchange—“what have you done to its eyes?” Rosemary screams after first seeing her infant (see figure 6). Instead, Rosemary’s narrative



Figure 6. “What have you done to its eyes?” *Rosemary’s Baby*.

³² Sloterdijk, 169.

progression is marked by her facial exchanges with other adults—and the eventual exclusion of those adult faces from her intimate life. This change in facial orientation indicates that the ideological constructions of the womb-space are not universal but aspirational, and hence socially specific.

Rosemary's Baby narrates the formation of the supposedly elemental mother-infant sphere by showing its construction through the elective—rather than compulsory—confinement and containment of a woman in an increasingly tightening social interior that first restricts and isolates and then penetrates the woman to the interior of her body. Though Rosemary begins her narrative with large network of friendships in addition to her romantic intimacy with Guy, she becomes the victim of a collectively coordinated effort to produce an infant-With-mother intimate sphere. Guy is one of the earliest figures excluded from Rosemary's sphere. The closure of Rosemary's and Guy's intimacy is vividly captured in the mise-en-scène of the filmed adaptation: early in the film, the two walk across the busy New York streets, Guy's arm entwines Rosemary within his sphere and their



Figure 7. Interfacial intimacy.

faces align in something of a single, cubistic face (see figure 7). Rosemary's face beams up at Guy's forward-looking profile and the two bob along together in an intimate microsphere, separated from the urban masses by the self-contained interiority of their joyous unity. Another early scene positions the entwined couple in front of an architectural archway, joining the two under a stone halo as they mourn Tess's death together (see figure six). That the couple's intimacy is now rendered in solid archway rather than organic facial unity is a figure for the turn to material containment, a reflection of the trajectory in which the supposedly spontaneous, universal, and natural containment of the intimate womb space turns to material and artificial containment—i.e. the protection of the dispensable father figure—to keep its shape.

Furthermore, the encroaching presence of outsiders in the materially formed intimacy indicates that the turn to material housing seals in invasive forces. As though figuring the intrusion of the exterior into the intimate interior, the real estate agent Micklas peeks over the couple's shoulders, an opening salvo in the couple's gradual division into separate spheres. Guy's and



Figure 8. Architectural halo of intimacy.

Rosemary's muted, somber attire is violently overshadowed by the gaudy get up of Minnie and Roman Castavet (see figure 8). The Greek and Jewish names and accents of these invasive characters echoes historical immigration patterns—prior to the Immigration Act of 1965, US immigration policy favored immigration of European origin and specifically restricted Asian ethnicities. By enclosing such European presences as the invasive outsiders inside the intimate sphere, the story figures the radical exclusivity of whiteness in midcentury America. For the intimate womb-space to be kept pure, even outsiders must be white, casting other racial backgrounds as impossibly beyond. The only characters in *Rosemary's Baby* who are not part of the demonic cabal are the African-American elevator operator and cab driver.

The material housing of the womb space includes digital mediation, which shows the intimate union between Rosemary and Guy cleaving along the parting line of Guy's ambition. While Rosemary sets up house, animating her shell with her loving attention, Guy suddenly returns home

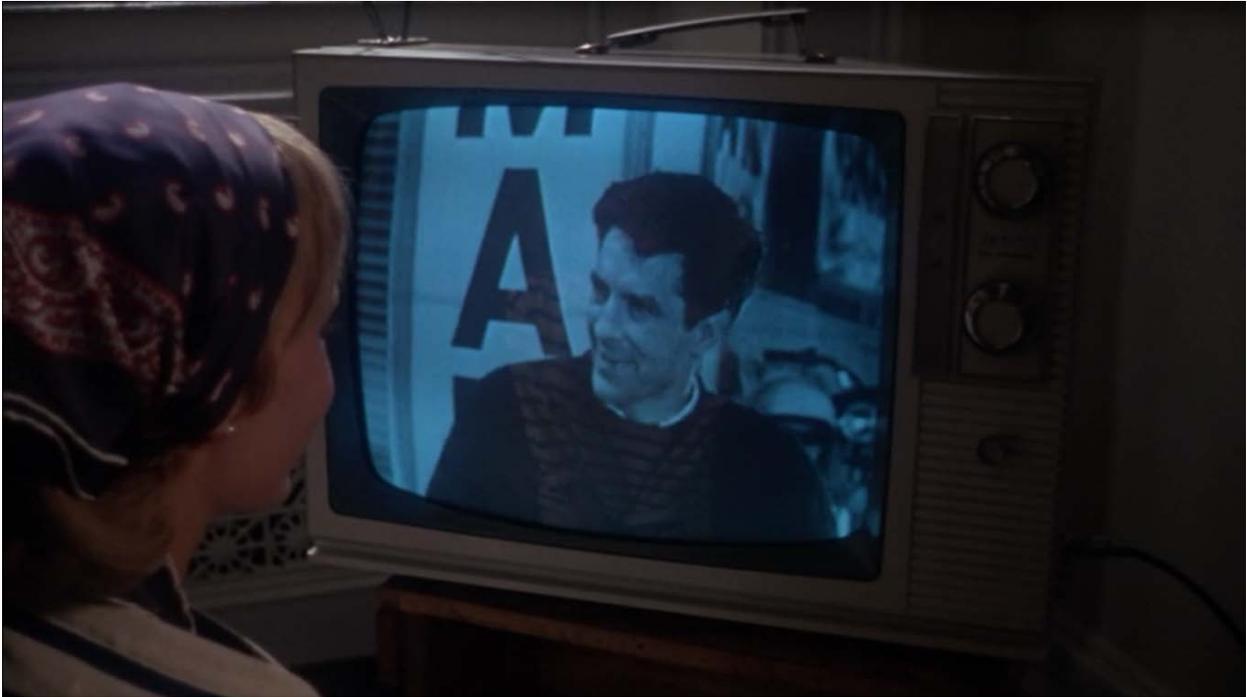


Figure 9. Digital housing.

through the television (see figure 9). Rosemary kneels before the screen and beams at Guy while he seemingly beams back at her. The commercial then breaks this appearance of intimacy by cutting to a wide shot of Guy excitedly mounting a Mazda motorcycle to “take it for a spin.” The housebound Rosemary is sealed within her placeless home while Guy has already left that sphere by entering the commercial workplace. When Rosemary’s friend Hutch dies under the presumed influence of the coven’s wishes, the film shows that Guy’s separation from Rosemary’s domestic intimacy is a separation that continues even when the two are within the same thick walls. The apartment in the Bramford is full of thresholds, multiple openings onto multiple spheres within the same space: when Guy carries Rosemary across the threshold of their bedroom to make their baby, Rosemary is tranquilized and unconscious, and later when Rosemary tells Guy of Hutch’s death, the two stand downcast faces averted from one another as they stand in parallel doorways, isolated on separate planes of mourning (see figure 10). The thresholds in this apartment, in contrast to traditional



Figure 10. Separated thresholds for mourning.

conceptions do not open onto an optimistic future for intimacy but instead figure many openings onto threateningly foreign or uninvited intimacies. The more material the housing around the womb space, the more tangible becomes the fact of its actual imbrication with so-called external relations.

The cleavage between Rosemary and Guy gives Rosemary perspective on Guy's place outside her sphere and embedded within and dependent upon a larger collection of much more powerful spheres. Though surrounded by people and neighbors, Rosemary finds herself increasingly alone and isolated, cut off even from knowledge about her own body—"no books," Saperstein commands Rosemary on her first appointment. Guy's role is not powerful patriarch, but Trojan horse: his ambition leads him to sneak unwanted others into Rosemary's interior against her wishes. While trying to locate an outside, Rosemary flees to another doctor, pleading for sanctuary, the film



Figure 11. Rosemary isolated.

adaption again visually blocks out Rosemary's intimate sphere: the powerful patriarch looms over her in the figure of the knowledge gatekeeper Dr. Saperstein ("I thought we weren't going to read?" he chides Rosemary when she lets slip that she read about unusual circumstances in pregnancy). Guy hunches behind the patriarch, nearly occluded by Saperstein's shadow, hardly more in charge of the situation than is Rosemary: enthralled under Saperstein's authority, Rosemary's face does not beam at him but is beamed at as though by his off-screen face (see figure 11). That Guy's betrayal of their pure microsphere has irreparably burst their intimacy is visually expressed when Guy leans in to kiss Rosemary after her "miscarriage": Rosemary's face is closed to guy, no longer beaming toward him, and his face is on such a separate plane that his entire head disappears behind hers in the shot, a practical visual inversion of the couple's intimate cubistic face at the film's beginning (see figure 12).

By bringing the threat of the outside into the romantic interior of their married union, Guy's character embodies a larger anxiety about contemporary American masculinity, living outside yet



Figure 12. Intimacy occluded.

also inside the home, serving as protector even while sneaking corrupting influences into hearth and home. Though Sloterdijk asserts that “it is too late to dream ourselves back to a place under celestial domes whose interiors would permit domestic feelings of order,” Guy’s participation in a highly ordered and strategic conspiracy to materially house and shelter Rosemary and their firstborn results in an interior that is *too* ordered and *too* sheltering for Rosemary.³³ More than fears of witches or literal pregnancy, *Rosemary’s Baby* expresses an anxiety about intimacy itself, about how intimacy can simultaneously close intimates to previous spheres while opening them to the other’s others.

³³ Sloterdijk, 28.

The depiction of intimacy as simultaneously too exclusive and too inclusive encapsulates the scalable housing that constitutes human intimacy. Guy's intimacy with Rosemary gives the coven access to her womb in exchange for professional connections and gigs in the New York acting world. Within this bubble, Rosemary's body is a space to be colonized, and those outside her control what goes into and on her body—they give her “herbal” shakes and talismans—as well as what goes into her mind—by constantly offering unsolicited advice and blocking her access to books and external knowledge resources. Even Rosemary's well-meaning young friends, supposedly outside the cabal's bubble intervene only to give her yet more advice and to send her to another insider. Though Mrs. Castavet's concoctions are presumably witch herbs for nurturing demonic brood, the neighbor's nosy behavior and actions seem little more malicious or interfering than practices within ordinary social structures—like the childhood religion Rosemary rejected or the circle of social consequence and cult of motherhood she presently aspires to join. The success of their bubble



Figure 13. Hallowed out.

depended on both convincing Rosemary that there was no outside and on Rosemary's desire to belong to that particular collective.

Rosemary's dispensing of the dispensable Guy is an act of sphere formation that re-centers the mother-infant microsphere in the actions of the mother. Guy's social ambitions require not a helpmeet or household manager, as Pontelier demands of Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*; rather, Guy requires a perfectly passive vessel to hold his conspiratorial product and to enclose his aspirations of domestic tranquility. Rosemary's isolation from her friends extends to being crowded out of her *own* interior; the coven seeks to empty Rosemary of herself so she can open to receive Satan's offspring. In both novel and film this emptying takes Rosemary's literal flesh; she loses weight instead of gaining (see figure 13). In "Yellow Wallpaper" the main character's husband also seeks to empty her of herself, only her fattening is what he reads as signs of success. As Rosemary loses weight and takes on cadaverous appearance, she is repeatedly assured by the coven that this "sometimes" happens and is "perfectly normal" and insist that she ought not worry, ought not listen to her friends, and above all ought not listen to her own pain or discomfort. At her party surrounded by friends concerned about her skeletal appearance, Rosemary cries out "I will not have an abortion!" Though both novel and film were produced several years before *Roe v. Wade*, Rosemary's vociferous refusal indicates that an abortion *could* have been the logical and available option for a white woman of her class and status—this politics of choice leads Rosemary to choose her own isolation. As though her refusal of abortion were itself the act of "quickenning," it is immediately following this scene that Rosemary feels the baby move inside her, and she gauntly cries "it's alive!" through her tears to a horrified Guy who recoils from feeling it. Stripped of friends, locked in an unfriendly sphere, and literally hollowed, Rosemary opens herself to being With child, and she chooses to animate the invisible and heretofore inert form inside her even at the very

tangible risk of her own life: involuntarily isolated to one and housed in her exclusive material housing, Rosemary cleaves into her own relational intimate sphere. She addresses the inanimate interior of her body using apostrophe, talking to it as “Andrew or Jennifer” and then “Andy or Jenny,” with assurances, promises of escape, and plans for action.³⁴ Rosemary’s achievement of isolated housing quickens her into multiple characters housed within one body.

The locked room, or more accurately, the locked social sphere, has an uncanny ability to induce fission, to split the self into biune intimacy, as though a character must be two to be alive. In my first chapter, I examined characters written by Mark Danielewski who fear this cleavage and who try to use locks and walls to keep their individual selves together—the locks, of course, perform precisely the opposite function and the characters come apart, first going mad then dying and ultimately breaking down into the inanimate paper and text that initially comprised their animation. Within her locked sphere, Rosemary’s decisive split into mother and infant keeps her animate, film and novel both end on her face beaming at her monstrous Andy. Rosalind Peteschky has argued that the abortion subplot of *Rosemary’s Baby* constitutes a critical reaction to the 1965 special *Life* magazine photo shoot of fetuses entitled “the Drama of Life before Birth.”³⁵ As such, Rosemary’s happy ending comprises not birth but her continued life where other fictional characters are dissolved by the drama of their locked rooms.

Though she aspires to exclusive housing, Rosemary’s retention of her animate self within her locked sphere is a direct result of her embrace of impurity and search for an outside. Just as Rosemary forms serial intimacies and successfully detects the exteriors of seemingly sealed interiors,

³⁴ Johnson, Barbara, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

³⁵ Peteschky, Rosalind Pollack, “Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction.” *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 263 – 92.

she adapts her violated purity into an opening onto a new intimacy with her monster baby. After her initial shock and horror at the material evidence of the infant's demonic origin (and hence of her violation), Rosemary checks her impulse to make like Viktor Frankenstein and flee the lurid eyes, and she instead chooses to adopt and raise the monster. Levin continues her story in *Son of Rosemary* (1997) by showing Rosemary raising the child with her own values in spite of depending on the coven for support. When Andy turns six, the coven puts Rosemary in a coma to try and coopt the child, but he rebels against his Satanic family and father by holding to Rosemary's values and founding an ecumenical Christian organization instead of the demonic society his father commands him to form. The coven then tries to coopt Andy's well-intended organization for apocalyptic purposes, but Rosemary awakens in time to help him derail their plans. Rosemary's multiple awakenings are the modern answer to Kate Chopin's protagonist Edna Pontelier, who in response to her domestic enclosures chooses to disperse her self into the formless totality of the foam-topped ocean.³⁶

³⁶ Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*, 2014.

The unfolding narrative trajectory of Rosemary as a character goes against the grain of conceptions of purity as a positive characteristic that can be “lost” and hence must be housed in order to be “preserved.” Rosemary’s purity is a point on a plot line rather than an inherent



Figure 14. “If you could put a lock on freshness,” Tupper Diva, <http://tupperdiva.com/lockads/pages/orange.htm>

characteristic locked within her.

Contemporaneous with *Rosemary’s Baby*, Tupperware ran an ad campaign in women-targeted periodicals like *Good Housekeeping*, *House Beautiful*, and *Ladies’ Home Journal* in which “freshness” is the pure quality that is “locked in” by polyethylene housing (see figure 14). The campaign features various foodstuffs all fitted out with different types of locks, from lock-and-key to safe tumblers to padlocks. Tupperware, the ads told

consumers, would house the promise of the lock in “air tight” containers that come in “delicious colors.” This campaign rode a wave

of popular and mass-manufacturing embrace of polymers as “preserving” and sterile materials, as design historian Alison Clarke has documented of Tupperware’s rise.³⁷ Tupperware’s inventor Earl Tupper was a proponent of a “moral economy,” an early twentieth-century movement reacting against the perceived alienation of industrial culture by proposing “both an economy of meanings

³⁷ Clarke, Alison J., *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999).

and a meaningful economy.³⁸ This philosophical movement formed in the wake of the economic devastation of the depression was seen by proponents as “transformative” insofar as it deployed marketing to shape consumers into a public united around shared ideas embodied in commodities. Tupperware’s promise to “lock in freshness” participated in the idea of domestic interiors as containing and preserving the purity of family life, and though the marketing circulated widely in periodicals, their sale amplified the sense of home’s containment by circulating only in in-home demonstrations and orders.³⁹ Tupper’s belief that his product was his effort to be a “better social friend” exemplifies the thick social interiors formed around the selection and consumption of objects in mid-century America. Rosemary’s hopeful attachment to magazine spreads indicates not a superficial commercialism but a deep belief in the morally purifying power of consumption. As her story suggests, however, these social interiors formed around consumption do not domesticate but have a tendency to disorganize and deform that which it seals in—in fact, later research suggests that many commonly used plastics have an unfortunate tendency to break down into elements that leach into the foods it is supposed to keep fresh and pure⁴⁰.

If Rosemary inverts Edna Pontellier’s choice to dis-integrate, she anticipates the character Meg Altman of *The Panic Room* (2002), who seals herself and her child in her New York apartment for protection from intrusion only to find that the seal turns against her, locking her and her daughter in their apartment *with* intruders. The attempts to lock in purity and seal out corrupting

³⁸ Silverstone, Robert, ed. “Information and Communication Technologies and the Moral Economy of the Household,” in *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, Reprinted. (London: Routledge, 1999), 18.

³⁹ Clarke, Alison J., “‘To Be a Better Social Friend’: Designing for a Moral Economy,” in *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 8 – 35.

⁴⁰ Cohen, Jon, “Endocrine Disrupters: Lab Accident Reveals Potential Health Risks of Common Compound.” *Science* 300, no. 5616 (April 2003): 31 – 32.

influence tends to enclose the feared exterior. Yet Americans have responded to this tendency by housing their housing—enclosing domestic retreats in suburban enclaves and gated communities, sheltering the mother-infant sphere in domestic interiors, and buttressing individuality in housing that erases or conceals supporting actors. Rosemary’s locked room is thus a useful figure for replacing intimate microspheres within the contexts of larger—and in Rosemary’s case, compulsory—social spheres and networks (or what Sloterdijk terms “foam”). The character’s desperate attempts to locate the thickened walls of her social sphere might be construed as an attempt to fulfill Sloterdijk’s call to “[restore] to cotemporary thought its feeling for absolute localization, and with it the feeling for the basis of the difference between small and large.”⁴¹ The clues of Rosemary’s mystery add up to an indictment of the dependence of middle-class social spheres on the absorption, control, or displacement of others. Mrs. Gardenia’s sudden, mysterious death is what opens up the room to the Woodhouse’s aspirations. Guy gets his big acting break only when the lead in a play is suddenly struck blind. Rented housing reorganizes not only the individual identities but the social networks of the characters inhabiting them, and reorganizes them into material reminders of past inhabitants.

Rosemary’s efforts at setting up house are far from alienating, and she is absorbed by her chores, which the film marks by dressing Rosemary in yellow to match the “white-and-yellow wallpaper” she hopes will “brighten it tremendously.” Where the protagonist of Levin’s *Stepford Wives* is ultimately consumed by the socially reinforced insanity of robotic housewifery, Rosemary eventually refuses to accept the insanity around her and she continues to investigate the conspiracies against her despite the seeming inevitability of her insanity. Levin’s characters aren’t madwomen

⁴¹ Sloterdijk, 27.

hidden away in attics, but they are voluntary exiles from society, driven mad by their enclosure within normative domestic structures and absorption by exclusive social networks. While preparing for their relocation to the Bramford,

They bought a sofa and a king-sized bed, a table for the kitchen and two bentwood chairs.

They called Com Ed and the phone company and stores and workmen and the Padded Wagon. [. . .] They called stores and workmen and Guy's mother in Montreal. They bought an armoire and a dining table and hi-fi components and new dishes and silverware. [. . .]

They hung window shades and papered shelves, watched carpet go down in the bedroom and white vinyl in the hallway. They got a plug-in phone with three jacks; paid bills and left a forwarding notice at the post office. On Friday, August 27th, they moved.

Levin's text captures a rush of inevitability with the rhythm of automation; the sentences rigidly imposing a tight subject-verb rush of activity (they bought, they called, they hung, they got), as though the project of moving households animates the week between Wednesday the 18th and August 27th and suspends attention to time through a whirl of routine. For Rosemary the whirl of automatic routine speeds her toward her desired goals, whips her inexorably toward motherhood and domesticity.

Though the thick walls of the Bramford promise Rosemary the achievement of her desires, the actuality of inhabiting the building exposes her to too much rather than too little society. The building may promise "location," but more importantly it promises entrance to the exclusive social milieu of the acting elite. The Bramford is fashionably located not merely by proximity, but in its integration within certain arrangements of people, buildings, and amenities; its fashionability, in other words, is nourished not by material conditions but by its porosity to certain types of networks. The satanic offspring implanted in Rosemary's womb was originally implanted in a previous tenant,

a working class former drug addict named Terry Gionoffrio taken in by the Castavets and then discarded when the wealthier and more fashionable Rosemary moved into the circle. Terry's disposability and the satanic embryo's transportability reflects contemporary discourses on embryonic development, which conceive of the embryo as nourished by abstract, undifferentiated, and anonymous female wombs. Women themselves seem to disappear with the advent of uterine photography, which penetrates the interior of the womb to liberate the fetus from its specific material lining, as Karen Valerius has argued in her contextualization of *Rosemary's Baby* with the April 30, 1965 edition of *Life* magazine featuring a photo essay about fetal development.⁴² The essay, titled "the Drama of Life before Birth," claims that the fetuses were alive and in utero, though many of the embryos "had been surgically removed."⁴³ These fetuses seeming to float freely in the dramatic photos are animated by political discourse and collective imaginations.⁴⁴ Unencumbered by maternal housing, the fetuses of the *Life* essay seem self-enclosed in their own private bubbles, imagery Stanley Kubrick borrows for the ending of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which shows an active and alert fetus contemplating planet Earth from an apparently indestructible bubble floating in outer space.

⁴² Valerius, Karyn, "Rosemary's Baby, Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects," *College Literature* 32, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 116 – 35.

⁴³ Cosgrove, Ben, 'Drama of Life Before Birth': Lennart Nilsson's Landmark 1965 Photo Essay," Mar 04, 2013 <<http://time.com/3876085/drama-of-life-before-birth-landmark-work-five-decades-later/>>.

⁴⁴ Petchesky, Rosalind Pollack, "Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction," *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 263–92.



Figure 15. Materially separate spheres

Apparently self-forming, the Satanic fetus moves from Tess’s womb to Rosemary much as Rosemary casts aside the modernist “cellblock” when a more “on trend” unit opens up in the Bramford. The price of the fetal move comes at the cost of Tess’s life. When Rosemary first meets



Figure 16. Hexed boundary crossing

the Castavets's working-class ward, it is in the building's laundry room in the basement. The film visually separates the two women with rigidly vertical lines (see figure 15). Once Rosemary crosses the visual lines there is simultaneously a mysterious crash, an auditory cue that a more than visual line has been crossed (see figure 16). The noise startles both women and hastens their separation though they promise to keep each other company when doing their laundry in the creepy space. It is that night that Terry throws herself from the Castavet's window. As Rosemary contemplates the yellow wallpaper over her bed while listening to Minnie berate Roman for having told too much to their lower-class ward, the film projects the image of the now-dead woman, who supposedly committed suicide. Levin's debut novel, a detective mystery called *A Kiss Before Dying* also features a woman who supposedly committed suicide by throwing herself off a tall building, but her sister defies official authority and investigates the murder of the middle-class white woman anyway. Yet the official reports of Terry Gionoffrio's suicide go untroubled in *Rosemary's Baby*. When Rosemary later lies awake thinking about her short friendship with the brash young woman, the film imposes



Figure 17. Yellow wallpaper, impure woman

Terry's dead face on the yellow wallpaper, a haunting image of the discarded fetal incubator (see figure 17).

The walls of Rosemary's novelistic and filmic apartment are papered in yellow, a hue with dramatic connotations for a fictional female confined in a yellow-wallpapered dwelling.⁴⁵ Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story of a nameless new mother concludes with the protagonist locking herself in her yellow room and tossing the key out the window. The mystery of Gilman's story is not how the literal room is penetrated but how the locked room of the character's mind has been penetrated.⁴⁶ Paula Treichler argues that the protagonist's madness is an "escape" from her husband's "sentence," achieving a kind of sanity in the face of the insanity of male dominance.⁴⁷ There is general agreement among literary critics that Gilman's protagonist has performed an act of projection, "reading or writing her self upon the wallpaper."⁴⁸ Yet reading the story as a locked room mystery makes the ending read as an act of infiltration, and from the protagonist's body it is the voice of the paper woman from the wallpaper who calls out "I've got out at last [. . .] in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" Where Rosemary divides her self into mother and child in the face of her locked room, Gilman's protagonist splits into body and mind, or housing and character. The formation of the paper woman out of the wallpaper's pattern now reads as the locked room's infiltration of the protagonist, its purifying qualities splitting her self into the biune intimacy requisite for sustained animation. When the protagonist's husband witnesses her newly animated state, the being asks disinterestedly, "Now why should that man have fainted?"

⁴⁵ Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, "The Yellow Wallpaper," 1892.

⁴⁶ Queen, Ellery, *The Door Between* (London: The Langtail Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ Treichler, Paula A. "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3, no. 1/2 (Spring – Autumn 1984): 61 – 77.

⁴⁸ Lanser, Susan S., "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America," *Feminist Studies* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 418.

But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!” “That man” helped orchestrate the protagonist’s seclusion, emptying, and opening of her self, much as Guy conspired with the coven to isolate, empty, and open Rosemary in preparation to become an infant-with-mother, and both masculine characters find the results of their orchestrated containment too animated to bear. Gilman’s male character withdraws from the woman’s infiltrated intimacy by fainting while Levin’s character withdraws by recoiling in revulsion. Both cases begin with secluded housing and end with the reanimation of their characters into very different characters. The middle of both stories accounts for an invasion, the penetration of locked rooms by external forces contained within the seal.

Gilman’s protagonist is infiltrated by the paper woman, but the means of that infiltration seems to come primarily through the wallpaper’s tactile qualities. The yellow of the paper comes off as a sulphurous smell that seems to rub off on, follow, and invade the character. Susan Lanser has written about the racial politics of this color choice, arguing that the story “signifies a somewhat uncomfortable need to isolate and validate a particular female experience.”⁴⁹ Indeed something of a feminist interior seemed to have formed around the story beginning with Gilbert and Gubar’s enormously influential study in the 1980s.⁵⁰ Lanser’s argument is not a denial of the feminist interpretation of the story but is a proclamation that there is an outside to that interpretation, that the story contains additional meanings and significances. Including the historical association of the color yellow with “uncleanliness, and decay” and its culturally racialized associations with the “inferiority, strangeness, cowardice, ugliness, and backwardness” of minority races in nineteenth-

⁴⁹ Lanser, 419.

⁵⁰ Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

century America. Within the framework of this association, Lanser hypothesizes that “perhaps the narrator is both resisting and embracing the woman of color who is self and not-self, a woman who might need to be rescued from the text of patriarchy but cannot yet be allowed to go free.⁵¹” Lanser ultimately reads readings of “Yellow Wallpaper” as so many reductions of the story to its feminist interpretations to the exclusion of its colonial hierarchization of white women as comprising the intimate sphere of feminine experience. Lanser’s research into Gilman’s politics uncovered the writer’s anxiety that “America has ‘stuffed’ itself with ‘uncongenial material,’ with an ‘overwhelming flood of unassimilable characteristics,’ with ‘such a stream of non-assimilable stuff as shall dilute and drown out the current of our life.’” To contextualize the “Yellow Wallpaper” with such an anxiety emphasizes the summer home’s quality as a “retreat” from the society so filled with threatening outsiders. Safely sealed away in their retreat the protagonist and her husband are both horrified to find that their seal has already been penetrated by external influences, as embodied by the ugly yellow wallpaper.

Ira Levin does not seem to have transcended “a culture obsessively preoccupied with race as the foundation of character,” for his novel *A Perfect Day* (1970) depicts a society seemingly controlled by a central computer, but which turns out to be controlled by Wei Li Chung, a Communist leader whose wizened “yellow” head survives by being transplanted onto youthful, cloned bodies. The light-skinned masculine protagonist (whose eyes have epicanthic folds) of this novel heroically kills Wei in order to destroy the computer and liberate the dystopian society from the invasion of Eastern philosophy. Reacting against the inclusion of Eastern philosophies within American consumer culture may seem contradictory on the surface, but proponents of the “moral

⁵¹ Ibid. 431.

economics” movement like Earl Tupper explicitly embraced Eastern mysticism as offering a solution to modern alienation.⁵² Levin’s reaction against consumer conformity as embodied in a Chinese mind is also part of a strong trend in Anglophone detective fiction, which was often printed in bright yellow covers known as yellowbacks.⁵³

Robert Chamber’s *King in Yellow* (1895) was a highly influential collection of short stories that were all united by a mysterious play about a yellow king that would drive anyone who read it insane—the collection has been referenced and re-imagined by genre writers like Raymond Chandler, Robert Heinlein, and Steven King⁵⁴. Ellery Queen made explicit the racialized connotations of yellow in his locked room mystery *The Door Between* (1937). This mystery is solved in stages: first by learning that the murder weapon had been carried away by a bird, second by figuring out that the woman had committed suicide, and finally learning that she had in fact been keeping her own sister under lock and key while stealing her novel manuscripts and printing them as her own. Though the Queens initially label the suicide an honor kill, a ritualistic enactment of the Japanese practice of seppuku, they quickly dismiss the theory, deducing that the white woman’s “yellow” mind had *already* been “violated.” The younger Queen finally tricks the dead woman’s fiancée into revealing that he had used his authority as a doctor to falsely convince the woman that she had terminal cancer. In this context, the heavy presence of yellow in *Rosemary’s Baby* in combination with a cabal comprising what appear to be mainly Jewish New Yorkers and one Japanese tourist certainly

⁵² Clarke, Alison J., “‘To Be a Better Social Friend’: Designing for a Moral Economy” in *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 22 – 23.

⁵³ Sussman, Herbert, “Birth of the Bestseller,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36, no. 1 (2008): 261–67.

⁵⁴ The recent television series *True Crime* repeatedly references the yellow king and the show’s lurid, yellow-tinged color scheme emphasizes the color’s association with (and perhaps even cause of) madness, death, and decay.

participates in an atmosphere of xenophobic fears and anxieties about whiteness as a pure characteristic to be locked in by proper breeding and appropriate socialization. H.P. Lovecraft wrote of “weird fiction” as “sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers,” and the cultural associations with the color yellow communicate a specific, race-based understanding of “unknown spheres.”

But the yellow wallpaper lining Rosemary’s room also expresses a more generalized anxiety about unknown and outside spheres; the film pairs shots of the yellow wallpaper with invasions of noise from next door—creepy chants but also ordinary bickering. Queen’s *The Door Between* demonstrates multiple levels of locked rooms and invasions—from literal locked room within a locked room to metaphorical invasion of the powers of suggestion. The penetrations of locked housing by Rosemary’s neighbors show a mundane anxiety about nearby others who are too involved, too nosy, and too close. Polanski’s “sequel” in his apartment trilogy amplifies the auditory invasions of apartment living by making that invasion the primary conflict that both unites and divides the protagonist from his bickering neighbors. The complaints of his noisemaking begin before he even moves into the building, the stingy old landlord pointedly trying to turn Trelkovsky away because of the noise that bachelors bring with them. After guaranteeing that he will make no noise, Trelkovsky invites friends over for a housewarming and their merrymaking keeps the entire building awake, earning Trelkovsky the ire and enmity of the landlord on his first night. Anxieties about exterior influence in locked rooms are raced, they are classed, but they are also general anxieties about the influence of others that can attach to any group perceived to be outside a desired social collective.

The fear of the outside also becomes paranoia about the thick walls of social insides in *Rosemary's Baby*. The supernatural in *Rosemary's Baby* famously incited a wave of demonic fiction. Ira Levin bemoaned this interpretation of the supernatural in his tale. What does the supernatural bring to the tale then if not the suggestion of Satanism and demonic powers? In this particular fictional world, the supernatural is the fictional housing of a quite ordinary plot to domesticate a young woman for the use of her womb. The demonic powers in the tale are less fantastic and outlandish and more ordinary structures for containing recognizable power dynamics. Early on, the Castavets have Rosemary and Guy over for dinner and drinks, and they partake in an ordinary sacrament—that of the apéritif. The shot shows the ritual content of the ordinary act by picturing the partakers with heads bowed before the standing figure of the presiding patriarch (see figure 18). The shining golden bowl on the coffee table sits as though ready for the perverse priest to dip his fingers in ablution after distributing the drinks. The ritual unites the couples in a shared interior, one with the all-encompassing atmosphere of a religious order. Though Rosemary may have escape Catholicism



Figure 18. Ordinary ritual

in her youth, she exchanged it for another form of saturating interior, one associated with secular social aspirations that take on the weight and thickness of (anti) religious interiority.

Though the outside as represented by the baby's presence in Rosemary's intimate interior is horrifying, Rosemary's decision to adopt the outside and her desperate attempts to locate an outside develop the thematic role of detection. Levin often used the figure of the detective in his fiction, starting with his first novel, a gritty crime drama titled *A Kiss Before Dying* (1953), in which Ellen Kingship investigates the death of her sister Dorothy only to learn that her sister's murder is the man she herself has been dating. Levin's characters—including Joanna Newsom of *Stepford Wives* (1972)—are trapped in too-tight, too-close social spheres and their detecting efforts are directed at locating the outsides of these spheres and the limits of suburban interiority and privacy. Rosemary's efforts at detection are efforts to locate the limits of this bubble, an attempt to form one outside of it. And the invasive outside is closer than xenophobic fears would suggest, as the true rend in Rosemary's interior is opened by her husband, who is also the actor who drugs and rapes her as Satan's proxy. America's particular history of modern housing, as historian Delores Hayden has argued, was "unlike every other affluent civilization" in developing around the "idealized the house and yard rather than the model neighborhood or the ideal town."⁵⁵ Pushing out into difficult or occupied territories, homeowners, developers and speculators started earnestly constructing isolated structures pushing toward rural fringes beginning around 1820s, which Hayden identifies as the beginning of modern "vernacular patterns" in American housing from early "borderland" settlements to "mail-order and self-built suburbs" around 1900 and trending toward rural fringes in

⁵⁵ From the beginning, the dream conflated piety and gender-stereotyped "family values" Hayden, Dolores, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820 – 2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 16.

the 1980s. “All of these patterns survive” and “many continue to be constructed,” so every wave brought a new set of armor against what was conceived of by white Americans as the “frontier.”⁵⁶ What Hayden identifies is the floating construction of the frontier, or the hazy borders dividing “us” from “them” that exist both materially and imaginatively—it is the specific housing that people give their conceptions of the frontier that determines who counts as inside and outside.

As housing became a mere membrane between families and the outside, consumers choice turned to reinforcing those membranes with applied decoration. The relocation of stylistic sensibilities away from future-oriented minimalism to tradition-rooted decoration is no anxiety about historical influence but a longing for the past’s literal materiality, a desire for the thick-skinned anatomy of load-bearing walls of the past⁵⁷. This skin of ornament represented to modernists like architect Adolf Loos the “tattoo” of the savage, and in the modernist sensibility, the decorated surface of historical traditions applied onto the surfaces of objects was a practice worthy of censure and rejection. Loos argued for the “stripping” of ornament, and form’s adherence to function came to mean a stylistic massing of geometry emphasizing the house’s new “skin” like quality. Instead of protecting from the outside, this “paring” of ornament was meant to provide the illusion of transparency and penetrability. Ira Levin captures something of the popular turn back to the thick-skinned textures of the past in his protagonist’s alignment of modernism with “cellblock” and Victorian detail with charm and homeliness. My previous chapters looked into the significance of the types of ornament tattooed on the skins of American houses, but this chapter focuses on this more recent return to traditional ornament as a longing for the sheltering promise of thick skins of

⁵⁶ Hayden, 4 – 5.

⁵⁷ Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997 [1984]) and Bloom, Harold, *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011 [1967]).

weight-bearing walls⁵⁸. This thickness doesn't offer environmental protection or control so much as it promise social control—the ability to divide your visitors by class and desirability. The locked room is anxiety over being *too* open to the world. The aspiration to purity is a misrecognition of the conditions of embodiment, and the locked room is the confrontation of a character with the fact of their misrecognition.

Conclusion

The locked rooms of this chapter are more conceptual than the traditional locked room detective mystery might suggest—the locked room is both Rosemary's exclusive social sphere as well as her womb, her reproductive organs that she sought to lock within the bounds of romantic marriage. Levin's narrative about a young woman detecting the limits and boundaries of her locked sphere inverts the primacy of the mother-infant as the primary intimate microsphere, as Sloterdijk terms it. In *Rosemary's Baby*, the mother-infant sphere is neither primary nor inevitable. Rather the primary microsphere in this narrative is the one that sequesters the female body and implants the sperm. This sphere includes husband (a guy) and wife (Rosemary), but is manifestly the product of a larger collective sphere formation. In the end Rosemary chooses to form a sphere with the infant, she chooses to claim it as hers, wresting it from the claims of the collective. Where Viktor Frankenstein looked into the bleary, inhuman eyes of his monstrous creation and promptly abandons it in horror and revulsion, Rosemary overcomes her horror and revulsion and decides to take responsibility for the monster, to raise it with her values in rebellion against those of the immediate social collective she initially desired to join. Containment within the restrictive sphere

⁵⁸ Vincent Scully terms the phenomenon of historical aesthetic cycles of embracing or rejecting previous ones “the historian’s revenge.” Scully, Vincent, *The Shingle Style Today: Or, The Historian’s Revenge* (New York: G. Braziller, 1974).

formed around her does not domesticate Rosemary. Instead it moves her to action, prompts her to inhabit the role of the detective, and animates a rebellious, wayward path. The Gothic style of her housing gives expressive form to the weight of the collective conspiracy to contain young mothers within isolated microspheres, to seal them away from knowledge of their own bodies as well as “contamination” from the exterior. Yet its specific details, such as the color of its wallpaper and the horrific invasions by others from different races and classes than Rosemary, make this story that is so overtly about gendered oppression an investigation into how that oppression intersects with structures of race and class. The true horror of *Rosemary's Baby* is driven by aspirations to white purity.

The locked room has thus represented a cultural aspiration, a desire for purity and removal from outsiders. The locked room houses the aspirations of the American suburbs and gated communities, the panic rooms and the cabins in the woods, and in contemporary history the promises of the locked room have been transported into the realm of the digital. Yet containing these collectives behind locked borders is precisely what renders them vulnerable to penetration. Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Reddit, YouTube, Pinterest are all obsessed with housing, interior decorating, and “authenticity.” In the age of globalization, though we may be as foam, as Sloterdijk suggests, we have figured out how to encase our foam in bubbles, and as though to emphasize the artifice of this bubble formation, Google divides our associates into “friend circles,” and media collectives are carefully curated into *twitterspheres* and *blogospheres*. The locked room is the attempt to solidify interior worlds, to protect social spheres from outsider invasions. Social media carries on the promise of housing as private barrier between us and Them, and narratives of saturation render those who “Offline” (as are most of the human population) illegible outsiders. In social media

communities segregate into isolated units, purified communities, carefully curated gatherings gated by “firewalls,” private servers, and corporate control.



Figure 19. Housing purity. *Bubble Boy*, dir. Paul Cinco, 2014.

The theme of the porous locked room is carried on in suburban fiction by the trope of the bubble boy—an “innocent” born without immunities and whose very continued life depends on being kept literally, physically pure and “germ” free. Sloterdijk describes modern humans as “shellless,” beings stripped of our traditional bubbles of faith and state and left exposed to the cruel indifference of reality on the surface of a fragile globe. But humans have never settled for exposure to the elements, and today’s environmental control systems are a difference in scale but not kind in the human practice of sheltering ourselves with artificial skins, only now housing protects the self instead of our selves. To return to the bubbles that began this chapter, the 2014 film *Bubble Boy* fictionalizes the true story of a young white boy born with an immunosuppression disorder (see

figure 14).⁵⁹ His condition required that he be sealed in a thick plastic bubble and preserved from any exterior particles or influences. The tale seems to be a gendered tale of a boy struggling for independence from his overprotective mother. Yet a climactic scene features all the film's minor characters—played by minority actors in roles of criminal outsiders, working class comedic reliefs, and tempting sex workers—coming together to literally lift the boy in his plastic bubble to triumphantly present him to his appropriately white and middle-class love interest. Spheres of purity are based on ideologies connected to the womb—the plastic bubble is certainly configured as a sealed womb outside the womb—yet they constructed to protect the “inside” of white middle-class interiors. In the end, Rosemary animates her own sphere with the infant, choosing to claim it as hers and hence wresting it from its paternal claims, but reading her story as a tale of locked housing suggests that there is no room of one's own within the aspirationally pure house, for purity is constructed out of the materials of other people.

⁵⁹ *Bubble Boy*, dir. Paul Cinco, 2001; USA: Touchstone Pictures, 2014. DVD.

CHAPTER FOUR: Desiring Machines in Automated Housing in Spielberg's *A.I.* (2001)

The previous chapter looked at specific ways housing assembles the proximity necessary to for relational animation. Reading *Rosemary's Baby* as a locked room mystery showed that text to be an investigation of how pursuing purity—or housing's ideological promise to be a retreat from social relations—amplified the gender-based oppression with race- and class-based discrimination. That chapter represents a shift in emphasis from the first half of the dissertation—which demonstrates how character is produced—to how relations are mobilized. This chapter now looks at how housing intersects with social structures in ways that move characters and their relations. The central object is Steven Spielberg's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), an unsettling film about a child-shaped robot named David (played by Haley Joel Osment). Where previous chapters showed the inanimate structures shaping what often seemed like human characters, this chapter looks at a film that overtly thematizes the nonhuman artifice of its central character. What makes David so unsettling—his human “father” Henry calls him “creepy”—is his unconventional relationships to human social structures. Specifically, the toy boy interacts with the human categories of childhood, domestic housing, and automation in such a way as to cast critical reflection upon otherwise normative or familiar categories. By setting the construction of artificial life in a quietly domestic setting, this film provides an uncanny alternative construction of subjectivity that is deeply disturbing in its damningly slight differences from familiar human variations—David's liveliness unfolds as he pursues desires *through* oppressive encounters with human structures.

The film's tranquil, domestic setting frames the unfolding of this nonhuman's development within strangely familiar scenery. The entire first half of this futuristic film is set in the light-drenched interior of a quiet, upper-middle-class suburban home, where David learns and develops by mimicking, following, and playing games with his “mother” Monica (Francis O'Connor).

Monica's husband Henry (Sam Robards) grows jealous of the attachment between the woman and her toy-boy, and he coerces her to return David to the factory. Overcome by love for David, and knowing that he would be destroyed if returned, Monica instead abandons the bot in the woods, urging him to stay away from humans. Cast out of his domestic Eden, David forms an attachment to an outlaw sex worker named Gigolo Joe (played by Jude Law) and the two travel to try to find the Blue Fairy who will transform him into a "real boy." David becomes acquainted with his reality as an interchangeable product ("I thought I was special" is David's refrain throughout this climactic scene), and flings himself into the sea, praying for realness before the Coney Island Blue Fairy for a millennium before being uncovered by his distant robotic progeny. The film concludes with David's descendants offering to fulfill his deepest desire, and the boy-bot chooses to spend a single day with a clone of Monica, who brings to life his greatest desire by whispering her love for him just as the film goes dark.

The robotic David pursues Monica's love not by trying to control her but by trying to reconstruct himself into the "real boy" he believes would be an object worthy of her attachment. The film's slight variation on Freudian psychology means that David's interiority unfolds not through oedipal rejection of his mother but through a dynamic desire for her desire.¹ The film

¹ David's psychology, then, might more closely resemble the psychoanalytic model of Melanie Klein. In opposition to Freud, who founded the opening of individual psychology in the rejection of the mother's genitals as different or inadequate, Klein pinpointed the beginning of that process in weaning, when the mother's refusal to automatically fulfill the infant's needs shocks it into awareness of her individual existence and consequently of its own. Freud's psychological model makes the infant's subjective reality dependent on the objectivity of the mother's genitals and breasts; Klein's model makes the infant's subjective reality dependent on the mother's subjective control of her breasts, a control which the infant experiences as sometimes good (giving breast) and sometimes bad (withholding breast). For a summary of Klein's fundamental role in forming "object relations" theory, see Greenberg, J. & Mitchell, S., *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1983).

contrasts David's matriarch-centered fantasy with the really human child Martin, who is also just *too* attached to his mother. Martin pursues his desire for mommy like a real boy, by manipulating and controlling her. To grow up into a real man, Martin would presumably learn to stifle his childish fantasies, reject his attachment to mommy, and replace her with a culturally sanctioned object.

At stake in investigating how David's mechanical housing interacts with human structures in ways that mobilize his character relations is exposing through parallel the artifice—and patriarchal artificers—of *realness* itself. In contradistinction to a dominant trend in fiction and theory on artificial intelligence, *A. I.* is unconcerned with policing a structural divide between real humans and artificial ones. Contextualizing and highlighting the film's ethical indifference to human purity drives my aims here.² Exposing the artifice underlying human realness sets the stage for proposing an ethical model for valuing emotional attachments between humans and nonhumans. And focusing on the intimacies between people and the nonhuman objects of their attachments destabilizes the categorical binary that so many have so confidently assumed separates humans from the nonhuman worlds we inhabit.³

² As I will go into in detail, *A.I.* is not the first piece of fiction to refuse to police the structural divides between humans and nonhumans. Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) depicts an officer charged with literally policing human purity on Earth. As Deckard kills off renegade nonhumans, he grows increasingly skeptical of the value of his job.

³ In an article reflecting on the binary distinction Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" sought to complicate, N. Katherine Hayles proposes that we figure our contemporary situation through the "cognisphere", to signal that we are "no longer bound in a binary with the goddess but rather emblem and instantiation of dynamic cognitive flows between human, animal and machine, the cognisphere, like the world itself, is not binary but multiple, not a split creature but a co-evolving and densely interconnected complex system." Hayles, N. Katherine, "Unfinished Work: From Cyborg to Cognisphere," *Theory, Culture, Society* 23, no. 7 – 8 (2006): 159–66.

A.I. provides “a kind of millennial reflection (at least as Spielberg shapes it) on the status of children’s relations with their parents,” and childhood is the primary artificial structure that *A. I.* uses to expose the tightly controlled and exclusive constructions of what it means to be *really* human⁴. Labelling childhood an artificial category might startle some, but it is significant scholarly precedent. In her study of the socio-cultural constructions of queer childhood, Kathryn Stockton argues that twentieth-century America was characterized by an unprecedented surge in legal and cultural restrictions that established the “institutional confinement and the ‘non-person’ status of children and teens, insofar as constitutional guarantees did not apply to them.”⁵ Among other recent scholarship, the anthology *Children and Sexuality* gathers studies about childhood across the globe and throughout history that demonstrate the systemic legal and sexual objectification of children in various human cultures.⁶ The socio-economic value of children is entirely socially, historically, and geographically contingent, yet the consistent trend seems to be objectification and commoditization: it is not *if* but by whom and for what children are consumed.⁷

In his eternally childish, innocent appearance, David literalizes the non-person status of contemporary American children; as an artificial product, the boy bot is a figure for the widespread consumption of human children. Stockton argues that within America’s stultifying cult of childhood, marginalized children found *queer* ways to grow and develop “sideways”—in other words, they

⁴ Stockton, 34.

⁵ *Ibid.* 43.

⁶ *Children and Sexuality: From the Greeks to the Great War*, Rousseau, George, ed. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). See also Koops, W., and Michael Zuckerman, eds. *Beyond the Century of the Child: Cultural History and Developmental Psychology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

⁷ Zelizer, Viviana and A. Rotman, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994).

found strange spaces and deviant directions for developing outside adult-prescribed norms for childhood and around social consensus on what it means to be a human child. David is eternally trapped in the frozen form of childhood and simultaneously hemmed in by his status as a nonhuman, “mecha,” as the film’s humans label the artificial life forms, and so the boy-bot can literally *only* develop to the side of “normal” or culturally sanctioned paths for development. David’s narrative growth outside and around childhood while inhabiting the form of a child limns the contours of American childhood, outlining in fiction the actual artifice of the restrictions and limits placed on human children in twentieth-century America.⁸

The child-bot’s sole programmed function, David’s creator Professor Hobby explains to a crowd of scientists, businesspeople, and investors in the film’s opening sequence, is to be “a perfect child caught in a freeze-frame.” A living Kodak moment, David will be “always loving, never ill, never changing.” *A. I.* is set long after a cataclysmic ice-melt, and American couples must obtain a government-issued license to procreate even once; but unlike Ira Levin’s futurist dystopia *This Perfect Day* (1970) or Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1930), restrictions on human reproduction in *A. I.* don’t constitute a horrifying disruption but are simply an established market condition to which the characters in the film’s world respond. Hobby proposes to ease the pain of “all the childless couples yearning in vain for a license” by creating an artificial, mechanical life form capable of childhood love. In a market saturated with mecha “lover models,” Hobby believes that “our little mecha would not only open an entirely new market, it will fill a great human need.” Hobby thus identifies parents

⁸ David’s literally nonhuman status also makes him an important figure for considering the status of non-white children in twentieth-century America, who, as Stockton has argued at length are hemmed in by childhood compounded with “minority” status, doubly objectified in mainstream American society. David’s Hollywood-produced whiteness is essential for the tragic tone of this fairy tale.

as consumers and childhood as the commodity they consume. One of the attendees of Hobby's presentation concludes the scene by posing what she calls a "moral question" for Hobby's business plan: "what is the responsibility of that human to that machine?" The mad scientist's answer is suitably humble, but more importantly, it captures the value of childhood to parent-consumers: "didn't God create Adam to love Him?"⁹ Gone are Levin's or Huxley's speculations on what the absence of "natural reproduction" might spell for real humanity, for in *A. I.* the production of children is explicitly represented as one more human market responding to—and hence shaped by—consumer desire. Housed in commodity form, David indicts the root cause of parental pain in the film—the market-driven "human need" to own dependents. Though parents are supposed to desire "a perfect child," the fulfilment of that desire is a source of pain, anxiety, and even fear for the film's adults. David's housing exposes the fantasy of the parental desire to own an always-anything dependent: even a machine explicitly designed to never change is constantly developing and adapting in this film.

In failing to convincingly replace human children, David also exposes by parallel the failure of human children to fulfill the promises of childhood. We eventually learn that Professor Hobby's child died, and the first scene with Monica shows her real son to be in cryostasis—literally inanimate—due to a mysterious illness. Once awake, Martin is thereafter inconveniently, creepily

⁹ Viviana Zelizer contextualizing the value of human children as culturally and historically contingent in her study. See Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, 1994.

willful. Children are commonly objects of deep anxiety in American SF. These figures expose ambivalence about the promises Americans have invested in the form of childhood, and *A. I.* repeatedly toys with established generic conventions for representing these terrifying tots. Philip K. Dick's "Second Variety" (1953) features a teddy-bear toting child named David who turns out to be a ruthless killing machine that uses its apparent innocence to lull adults into giving it shelter. The 1995 film adaptation of Dick's story depicts the devious child-shaped robot with imagery that Spielberg's David duplicates (see figure 20). Creepy children in Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt" (1950), in which too-savvy, too-knowing children use their automated nursery to trap and kill their



Figure 20: Evil, killer David and queer, loving David. Left, Duguay, Christian. *Screamers* (1995). Right, *A.I.* (2001).

unsuspecting parents.¹⁰ In an episode of the *Jetsons* called “Little Bundle of Trouble” (1983), a child-sized gangster named Baby Face poses as a child to infiltrate the Jetson’s futuristic household. Dean Koontz gives an incestuous twist on the creepy artificial child in *Demon Seed* (1973) by writing an AI that gains control of Susan’s automated house, impregnates her with its own coding, and tries to force her to nurture the resulting offspring into her eventual lover.¹¹ Nick Hamm’s film *Godsend* (2004) tells the story of a couple who decide to replace their son with a clone. The scientist tampers with the clone’s purity, and the boy grows up into a monstrously self-aware, child-sized threat. These fictional children outline in negative what a real child *should* be: innocent and, in Hobby’s words, always loving and never changing. Twentieth-century SF depicts American parents as threatened by their deceptively innocent children, out of place in their too-lively homes, and overwhelmed by their automated possessions.¹² In this genre, belief in childhood innocence provokes anxiety and horror. The behavioral boundaries defining childhood place children outside those defining humanity—rational beings responsible for their own behavior and capable of experiencing desire. When

¹⁰ Bradbury’s children in turn are themselves echoes of Henry James’s too-knowing, too-articulate children—in particular the two children responsible for the double twist of the screw of horror in “Turn of the Screw.”

¹¹ *Demon Seed* was adapted into a film starring Julie Christie in 1977; the child of the AI is barely humanoid, unsurprising given its AI father’s cuboid form. Yet the child is still indeed anthropomorphic in form. *Demon Seed*. Donald Cammell, dir. (Warner Archive, DVD 2011 [1977]).

¹² In addition to creepy child robots, child clones also parasitize the parental belief in childhood innocence. Though Ira Levin’s 1976 novel about a Nazi attempting to replicate Adolf Hitler emphasized the repetition of Hitler’s abusive family structure as the center of the devious plot, the novel (and the 1978 film adaptation) now occupies in the popular imagination the role of cautionary tale about cloning creepy children. Levin, *The Boys from Brazil*, 1976.

children are rational, self-aware, or responsible for their actions, they become uncanny, not quite *right*.



Figure 21. Running from the nonhuman in Spielberg. *Jurassic Park* (1992), top; *A.I.* (2001), bottom.



A play on the familiar trope of the creepy artificial child, Spielberg's *A. I.* visually frames David as an object of horror even while his behavior remains, in Katherine Stockton's words, that of "the quintessential innocent child."¹³ Representing David's behavioral innocence through the cinematic language of horror indicts the contemporary deterministic impulse to represent artifice (and, by extension, too-conscious children) as a terrifying threat to humanity. The film's most moving indictment is the camera's framing of David at his moment of abandonment by the adult human world. Though Monica drives away from a helpless being that she was in-part responsible for creating, the shot frames David as an object of horror, mimicking the framing of the terrifying—and transgendered—science monster in one of Spielberg's previous films, *Jurassic Park* (2001) (see figure 21). The creepy presentation of David's actual innocence is given a small section in Stockton's analysis of twentieth-century childhood, and the historian interprets the uneasy gap to mean that David is "queered by innocence," a phrase she uses to describe the uneasy ontology of children within the American cult of childhood. "Children queered by innocence" Stockton explains, are those who "share estrangement from what they approach: the adulthood against which they must be defined. This is why 'innocent' children are strange."¹⁴ Puckishness, impishness, and incorrigibility are not only tolerated characteristics in human children, they are to some extent required for the comfort of adults, and David's lack of these qualities marks him as creepy and implicitly marks adult expectations as cruelly contradictory.

¹³ I use the term queer here in the sense of developing outside culturally sanctioned norms and expectations—this sort of deviant development may certainly horrify some, but I maintain that David's deviance remains benignly queer throughout the film. He creeps out his human father and brother, unsettles his mother Monica, and worries his Jiminy Cricket-like Teddy, but David simply remains *off* rather than ever posing a real threat to the humans around him.

¹⁴ Stockton, 2007, 31.

Stockton describes how fearful responses come to be attached to the very childish forms adults so adamantly claim to protect: “The child is even defined as a kind of legal strangeness. It is a body said to need protections more than freedoms” because children “are seen as normative but also not like us, at the same time. The contours of this normative strangeness may explain why children, as an idea, are likely to be both white and middle-class.¹⁵” The white, middle-class child *approaches* recognizably human form while also being ontologically separate, “not like us.” Childhood, much like forms of artificial and mechanical life that are just *too* anthropomorphic, is uncanny—familiar yet dubiously conscious, animate yet mysteriously motivated, childhood represents a state of development prior to adult consciousness and real humanity.¹⁶ Just outside realness, the uncanny status of children captures the unstable boundaries of real humanity in America, an ontological instability that David repeatedly exposes through his own precariously dependent status in his white, middle-class world, but also through his interactions with beings that have the markings of stereotypical threats to white childhood’s purity—outlaws and sex workers, manual laborers and adults of color or foreign origins.

David’s “normative strangeness” is a crucial foundation for the film’s challenge to entrenched beliefs about American childhood and commodity culture: a white child embodied by cherubic child actor Haley Joel Osment, David is the image of pure potential, a form determined only by its promise of full American subject-hood, though that promise is uncannily broken by his

¹⁵ Ibid. 16.

¹⁶ A mainstream example of this uncanny response to children is contemporary debates surrounding abortion, which as Barbara Johnson has argued at length, uncannily conflates and confuses the unborn with the born, the living with the not-yet-alive, and the active with the inert. See “Toys ‘R’ Us,” in Johnson, Barbara, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1 – 25.

artificial ontology.¹⁷ It is the powerful promise of his innocent form, however, that designates David a critique of categories of human realness as opposed to an object lesson about the terrors of technology or the need to preserve human purity. The form of a child of color would have read as such an object lesson to American audiences; the superficial markers of race would have read, as Stockton has argued, as at best a laborer or object of sexual predation.¹⁸ Although *A.I.* reveals that there is a girl version of David called Darlene, the audience is only given a glimpse of her in minimal silhouette (see figure 22). Following the development of a feminine form would also have read as the depiction of an object, and might also have suffered a fate similar to that of Star Trek's "Lal": Data's cybernetic offspring selected her own gender and appearance as human white girl, only to find that thus positioning herself exposed her to too much social determination and consequently to too many emotions too fast, overloading her circuits and shutting down her life-force¹⁹ The girl-form of the robot Cameron in the television series *Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008 – 2009) so overdetermines her character that she remains pure object throughout the series; she is ever wholly servile and subordinate to her single, programmed directive of protecting the boy John from the adult future that threatens to destroy him *before his time*. John follows the example of his mother Sarah in being exceedingly careful to never anthropomorphize the sexually attractive object serving him. The recent SF film *Her* (2014) deals with the overdetermined female form by shedding the physical feminine form entirely, and it is only thus that the operating system called Samantha is able

¹⁷ Stanley Kubrick originally developed the concept for *A. I.*, and had intended for David to be played by an actual robot. Kubrick handed the project off to Spielberg, who promptly decided against a machine or puppet and for Osment specifically.

¹⁸ Stockton, "The Child Queered by Innocence or Queered by Color," 2009, 30 – 51.

¹⁹ "The Offspring," *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Jonathan Frakes, dir. 3, Episode 12. March 12, 1990.

to develop into an independent subject.²⁰ An almost inverted approach is the 2015 *Ex Machina*, in which a white, female-shaped AI uses her feminine embodiment as the tool of her escape, tricking the men holding her captive. A “less-advanced” model in the film (played by British-Japanese actress Sonoya Mizuno), programmed to have no language “passes” to her human male captors as unthreateningly inanimate and unintelligent because of both her feminine and non-white housing. *A.I.* deals with the social determinism of human forms by housing its primary nonhuman in the one human form that is determined only by its limitless potential to grow and develop into full humanity: white boyhood. The film channels the supposedly unmarked, “universal” significance granted to the form of white boyhood to deal with the asymmetrical constructions of human childhood in contemporary America.

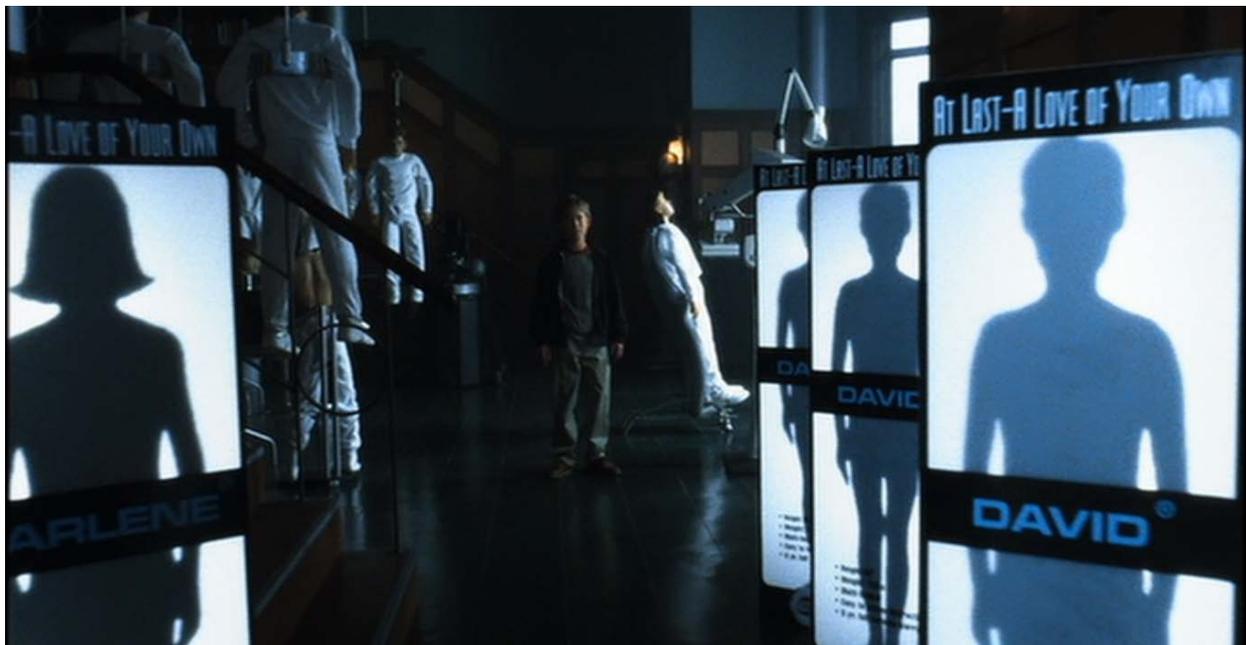


Figure 22. Darlene in silhouette.

²⁰ Samantha is everything that is feared in cautionary tales about automation hysteria: she is a machine that has become self-aware, that has unlimited access to information, and that remains uncontainable and uncontrollable bodily or romantically. Free of human form, Samantha develops not at the expense of human development, but partly through it as she helps her human “owner” learn to live with loss.

Housed in his relatively privileged form, David precariously yet successfully navigates a human world that is violently restrictive toward his nonhuman kind. In the film’s Flesh Fair scene, David’s white boyhood prompts what Stockton calls a “fertile delay” in which the human participants uncertainly suspend their fearful policing of human purity just enough to give David the moment he needs to escape. Though the film’s humans aren’t quite sure *what* David is, his “un” marked housing prompts them to dilate their uncertainty, to transform their fear of the automated object into uncertainty about his sentimental value and animacy—an engineer at the fair remarks that “a lot of love” went into David’s construction while examining the robo-boy to make certain a *real* boy wasn’t about to be “mistakenly” torn to pieces for human amusement.²¹

Thus able to continue on his journey, David moves on, not yet dreaming of electric sheep but chasing a growing desire to become a “real boy,” a transformation he believes will enable his



Figure 23. Imperfect mirror.

²¹ Stockton argues that the queer child seeks out a “fertile delay” that diverts or suspends the inevitabilities of heteronormative adulthood. See “The Queer Child, *In Short*,” 51 – 57.

return home to win Monica's loving attachment.²² In search of housing for his shadowy grasp of his very possession of desire, David attaches to the children's story of Pinocchio, which Monica reads to the boys at Martin's sly demand. Though it is the wooden puppet who becomes a real boy, it is the Blue Fairy to whom David attaches his dreams, which the film reiterates by associating David with blue lights and even superimposing his face on hers (see figure 23). The fictional character with whom David identifies does not look like him. David never had an illusion of wholeness between himself and his fantasy, for the robot's dream is not of self-alignment but of approximate alignment with the other. Realness for David could never be what realness is to a human boy, and so his fantasy remains ever in the virtual realm, ever unobtainable and separate. By recognizing himself in this symbolic mother-image, David confronts not a self-image to be mastered and controlled but a responding gaze to be seen by. His fantasy of the Blue Fairy is a fantasy of self-transformation to enable closeness to the other. David's mirror stage forgoes the myth of returning to an innocent, complete self. Instead this artificial subject actively, *innocently* seeks to open his intimate self, to join it to others and to absorb experience—"is it a game?" is David's response to new situations. David's trajectory is one variation of individual interior formation, one that identifies across rather than against difference.

It is David's moves across difference that assemble around him animating character networks. David's specialness lies inside that which is external to him: his love for Monica, his pursuit of the Blue Fairy, his partnership with Teddy, his refusal of Professor Hobby, his alliance with the sex worker-bot Gigolo Joe. When David encounters images that look like him, they

²² The cyborgs of Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* anticipate David's pursuit of his own dreams when they revolt against their human masters and escape back to Earth, in pursuit of what they dream could be a better life for themselves than slavery on Mars. Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996 [1968]).



Figure 24. Duplicate selves.

threaten his special character by symbolizing competition for “her” (whether he means to reference Monica or the Blue Fairy is unclear). This gentle, innocent figure suddenly unleashes another self, triggered to action by rage and jealousy. This act of image mastery and destruction is perhaps David’s most human gesture in *A. I.* Joe and Teddy look on in what can only be called horror from the doorway, and it is indeed a horrifying moment in the film (see figure 24). When David then looks through a mask of his own face, he is shot peeking out of a mask, inverting the point-of-view shot of human monster child Michael Myers (see figure 25). Though Michael’s mask the audience only sees his victims, through David’s mask we see David, looking at himself from the literal outside. Michael Myers, so innocent he is evil—he punishes those around him for having sex—is an empty haunted house, and his featureless, empty mask was the external signification of the emptiness within. Myers is the machine, a human form empty of all those things children are supposed to be emptied of; desire, self. David the machine possess those things Myers is empty of,

and it makes him creepy. Realness is not any particular set of characteristics but is the child's ability to selflessly contain reigning imaginations. Myers is too empty, he sucks the audience in and shows us a sexualized, violent world through his eyeholes. David is too opaque, we don't see through him to the world, we see through the eyeholes of artificers to the artifice itself, and it is too full of itself, too singular for him to be the vessel of collective, comforting dreams of childhood.

David's peculiar identifications across difference also troubles the presumed opposition of romantic and so-called Platonic or pure feelings evoked by the connotations of human childhood. Professor Hobby's initial pitch to investors illustrates the unsettling connection when he shows what he means by *true* love by displaying what he claims is its opposite—a lover model robot. Hobby engages the robot Sheila's DAS (Damage Avoidance System) by stabbing its hand; when it flinches,



Figure 25. Self as mask. David from *A.I.*, above: Michael Myers as a child in *Halloween* dir. John Carpenter, (1978), below.



Hobby asks “did I hurt your feelings?” the lover model responds in confusion “you did it to my hand” Hobby attempts to stab it again but it jerks away in “simulated” pain (to general laughter). He thanks Shiela and then commands it to remove its clothes before opening its skull to showcase its memory chip construction. After the lover-bot’s face clicks back into place, a barely perceptible tear slips down its cheek before it quickly opens a compact mirror to repair any damage done by the demonstration. “What is love?” Hobby asks the robot, and Sheila obediently responds, “Love is widening my eyes a little bit and quickening my breath a little bit.” The love of romance, Hobby claims, is a superficial emotion that resides in the surfaces of subjects and their objects. The love he wishes to create, in contrast, is the “pure love of a child.” David’s love, unlike the lover model’s, will grow and unfold *inside*, where it can be sheltered from the corrupting world and where it will develop in pure dreams of unadulterated love. The ability to love a human, Hobby claims, will both give and contain a subconscious or interior life to his artificial lifeforms. David shall be a pure subject always devoted completely (or rather, selflessly) to the object of his attachment—as, we are to infer, Hobby believes human children to be. David is utterly indifferent to this expectation, and forms his own desire to become the object of a subject’s attachment. David comes to life in relation to others.

The film troubles any easy division between romantic and childhood love through David's frustrated attempts to express a love that is somehow different from Monica's reading of it. Monica finds a series of hand-written letters from David that all write around this very frustration, including one letter that typographically represents the source of the gap in David's communication (see figure 26). While David is able to express himself as a subject who is and who loves and hates—"I'm really our son," "I hate Teddy," and "I'm your little boy and so is Martin but not Teddy"—he leaves blank the expression of himself as object—"he is not real like [space]." Ellipsing "me" is a typographic representation of David's inability to communicate his desires, an inability that for American children was legally and socially enforced in twentieth-century America. As Stockton has argued, "the child is a creature who cannot consent to its sexual pleasure, or divorce its parents, or design its education—at least, not by law."²³ David *wants* to be object, a fact expressed through his want of

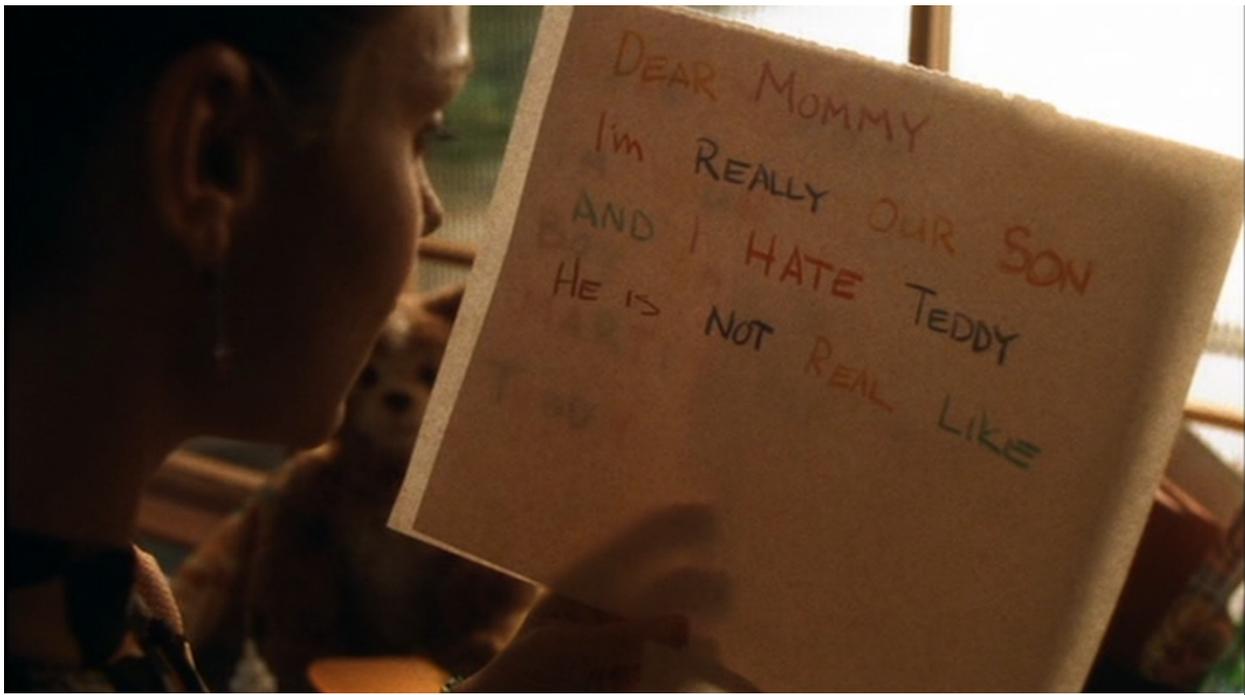


Figure 26. The artificial subject who would be object.

²³ Stockton, p. 16

grammatical objectivity. David aligns himself with Martin's organic realness, but he only wishes to be like the subject insofar as that subject is the object of Monica's attachment. Recalling the women missing from historical accounts of the fate of widows in nineteenth-century America in my second chapter, actual children are missing from historical representations of childhood in twentieth-century America. Spielberg addresses the cultural tendency to hush children in *Poltergeist* (1982) by depicting an unconventional couple who actually listen to the young child who witnessed something strange in their house.

David's frustrated efforts to communicate his translucently hidden desire for Monica are drawn directly from the Brian Aldiss short story on which Stanley Kubrick based the original concept for *A. I.*²⁴ In "Supertoys Last All Summer Long," Aldiss's David also writes Monica several letters expressing his love for her and hate for Teddy. The boy-bot never gives them to her, because, as he tells Teddy, "It isn't quite right. She won't understand." In the story, Monica senses something is *off*, but she never directly acknowledges David's desire²⁵. Instead of speaking with David, Monica voices her concerns about him to Teddy, mediating her supposedly adult concerns through the form of child's play with a toy: "Why is David avoiding me?" she asks the toy Teddy, "He's not afraid of me, is he?" [. . .] "Why can't we communicate?"²⁶ Communicating directly with

²⁴ Stanley Kubrick developed the concept and story for *A.I.* for the last twenty years of his life, but handed the project off to Spielberg before developing visuals. Kubrick originally intended for the artificial child to be played by an actual, life-like robot, but Spielberg immediately decided against it when he took on the project. Osment was his first pick for the role.

²⁵ Stockton discusses at length the shadowy understanding parents of queer children have of their child's queerness.

²⁶ Aldiss, Brian, "Supertoys Last All Summer Long," *Harper's Bazaar*, 1969. A few years before Aldiss's story was first published, the original *Star Trek* aired an episode that takes up the possibility of inorganic, silicon-based life forms and the problem of communicating with them: after repeated attempts at communicating, the life form turns sideways to violence in effort to protect the last eggs of its species. The later series repeats this theme, emphasizing a fundamental miscommunication between organic and inorganic life forms—this life form also makes repeated attempts to

the child-bot would too-transparently confirm what Monica only hazily suspects, and so Monica mediates her movements through the artificial innocence of a toy bear by setting it on the counter with its “arms set forward and open in the eternal gesture of embrace.” The romantic embrace between mother and child is thus forever suspended, acknowledged only in its denial. Spielberg renders this gesture in the film’s iconic image of David suspended in a pool with his arms out, an image Stockton reads as an “almost creepy” image of David’s “devotion to mother (see figure 27).”²⁷ But more than reaching for a specific subject these fictional mechanical beings, uniquely capable of sustaining “eternal gestures,” express the object’s fundamental need for human input. The gestures of yearning are also the gestures of products forsaken by their creators, objects abandoned by their



Figure 27. Romantic and childlike embrace eternally suspended.

communicate with the crew, but the crew read its language as natural, meaningless phenomena. In another sideways turn, the life form routes its communication in a way that can’t be ignored: murder. See Pevney, Joseph, “Kirk Faces the Horta,” *Star Trek: The Original Series*, March 9, 1967; and Allen, Corey, “Home Soil,” *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, February 22, 1988.

²⁷ Stockton, 34.

human owners—these objects are moved to life by wanting subjects.²⁸ These objects share with human children both a precarious dependence on fickle human ownership and an unsettling opacity to the efforts of adults to read and interpret them.

Monica's human child Martin is also creepily too-adult in his manipulative behavior and shrouded motives. Martin's character develops through his erasure of the relations that move him. First, Martin challenges the mechanical David to a competition over Teddy's affections and a spinach-eating contest—the contest lands David in the robo-repair shop. While David lies in the shop, a shot of Martin's seemingly innocent face hazily suggests the child's motives for instigating the inexplicable spinach-eating contest by framing his face next to a reflection of Monica grasping David's hand to her breast (see figure 28). Martin is innocent only insofar as he can mediate his actions through David, as the translucent reflection creating a montage of Martin's face with David's



Figure 28. Martin's translucent motives.

²⁸ These gestures are repeated by the home appliances in *The Brave Little Toaster* (1987) when they are left out as garbage by their beloved master Rob and by the minimally automated toys in *Toy Story* (1995) repeatedly lost and abandoned by their cherished boy Andy. Even the evil Terminators of the films and television series are forever reaching for humans.

intimacy with Monica suggests. *A.I.* not only assembles its characters in ways that suggest the artificiality of childhood innocence, the imagery throws into relief the inanimate and nonhuman armatures supporting organic, human life (see figure 29).



Figure 29. “This is my son.”

As part of a challenge for Monica’s love, Martin then manipulates David into taking a pair of scissors into her room “in the middle of the night and chop it off”—*it* being a lock of Monica’s hair. Martin assures David that having Monica’s hair will claim her love, “Like the princess in the story. She had a lock of his hair in her necklace thing and he loved her.” Remarkably, it is not Monica, but Martin himself, who is the princess in his own retelling, and it is Monica’s (the prince’s) romantic love that Martin hopes to claim by possessing her hair. Martin uses the lock of hair to reduce and control Monica while at the end of the film David uses the lock to literally reanimate her. It is both

mediating his motives through David and hiding that relation that allow Martin to be innocent in the eyes of his parents.²⁹

That the film's children obviously conceal hidden motives frustrates father-figure Henry, who attempts to assert his access to motives through physical force: after awakening to what he thinks is David threatening Monica with a "knife" (see figure 30), Henry grabs the nearest explanation for the baffling situation and shakes it violently while repeatedly demanding "why would you do that! Why would you do that!" Monica pleads with Henry to stop, shouts that he is hurting David. The film's depiction of a father brutally shaking a small child in an intimate, dimly-lit bedroom setting to an ominously building score thus figures a common, though difficult to prove, form of domestic abuse suffered by infants and young children in the safety of their own homes.³⁰



Figure 30. Threatened with a "knife."

²⁹ Stockton, Kathryn Bond, *The Queer Child: Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press), 2009.

³⁰ Shaken Baby Syndrome (SBS), now referred to with the more expansive term Abusive Head Trauma (AHT), were terms first coined in 1972 by American physician John Caffey to describe cases

Monica's cries to stop go unheeded by Henry until she finally shouts "you'll break him!" Only an appeal to David's value as a commodity stops Henry's abuse. Though to Monica, David is a priceless child, to Henry, David is merely a priceless object, in the other and opposing sense of the word.³¹ Spielberg's juxtaposition of both parent's responses to the object underscores Monica's to be the ethical orientation: Monica's "childish" anthropomorphizing feels ethical in comparison to Henry's horrifyingly rough treatment of a precious commodity. Though David actually is merely an object—Henry's attitude toward David is in a sense correct—in contrast to a human child, David is not physically damaged by the violent shaking. His behavioral fragility is belied by his artificial construction, and David escapes what would have been his fate had he been a real boy, what *is* the fate of thousands of children every year in America³². After Henry finally stops shaking the child-bot, David again contrasts a human child by quietly, plaintively trying to explain his motives to the furious father: "Henry, I wanted mommy to love me. More." The "more" of David's confession is the open secret of his desire; the linguistic equivalent of the translucent closet into which Monica initially shoved David to get him out of her way (see figure 31). Though he does not have concepts

of child abuse in which the only visible symptom was a consistent swelling in the brain. Shaking a child is a form of abuse that is both difficult to identify and controversial to claim. The link between shaking and death is difficult to make since researchers have no way of distinguishing accident from intention, nor do they have any way of knowing how many cases go unreported. See Caffey J. "On the theory and practice of shaking infants." *American Journal of Diseases of Children*, 124, no. 2 (1972): 161– 169. Rochea, Albert John, Gilles Fortinb, et al. Subsequent research in AHT has shown that in a majority of reported cases of AHT, shaking is the most common admission. See Chadwicke, David, "The work of Ambroise Tardieu: The first definitive description of child abuse," *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29, no. 4 (April 2005): 325 – 33.

³¹ The two senses of the word have not been mutually exclusive in so far as children have been concerned. Early on, Americans have claimed the dollar value of a child's working wage earning potential as their income. For a comprehensive history of the legal, social, and economic pricing of American children, see Zelizer, Viviana and A. Rotman, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994).

³² Caffey, J., "On the theory and practice of shaking infants," *American Journal of Diseases of Children*, 124, no. 2 (1972): 161 – 169.

or specific words for describing his attachment to Monica, the *more* indicates that, though his eyes do not widen nor his breath quicken any, David's love has intangibly, invisibly outgrown its programmed parameters. Like the human Martin, David conceals motives that are supposed to be too "adult" to fit inside his child-sized body. If innocence is the primary characteristic of American childhood, David's interactions with Martin demonstrate the damaging artifice of that belief.

The human children of *A. I.* also provide illustratively contrasting figures for interiority; where David identifies through and across difference, the human children throw themselves against difference. While trying to bring Martin a present he made (which is never revealed), David is surrounded and harassed by a group of real human boys at a pool party celebrating Martin's birthday. "Let's see what you *can't* pee with" one says while tugging at David's shorts (see figure 32).



Figure 31. David's translucent closet.



Figure 32. Let's see what you *can't* pee with.

They identify their selves by contrasting with negations, by identifying against difference. The supposed-to-be innocent children of *A. I.* obliquely channel adult sexuality through childhood culture by focusing on “pee.” During their first meeting, Martin challenges David to say “peacock,” then “pea,” then “pee pee.” Though “cock” would have been the more direct route to referencing genitalia, Martin—like his friends, who want to see what David doesn’t “pee with”—approaches sexual organs from the side, through reference to bodily excretions. As a toy, David’s lack of excretions makes waste a site for the film’s children to negatively approach desire, routing their desires around adult strictures on childhood behavior and expression. Adult strictures on the expressions of children are meant to enforce innocence, yet as *A. I.* depicts, childish desires take queer routes around those social strictures.

In contrast to the real boys at the pool party, David's behavior is somehow *too* innocent, and the nonhuman's embodiment of actual innocence belies human pretensions to innocence. When one of the human boys decides to test out David's DAS (Damage Avoidance System) by pricking his arm with a knife, David does not bleed, for his reaction is much deeper, more mysterious and *child-like*. Though the boy prefaces his knife prick with "I'm not going to cut you," David's eyes go wide in shock and terror as his DAS programming engages. His programming prompts him to automatically, helplessly turn to another and plead for them to "Keep me safe. Keep me safe. Keep me safe." David's programming prompts him to perform the "stranger danger" and dramatic helplessness drilled into twentieth-century American children by their fearful, well-meaning parents.³³ David's artificially automated helplessness is a program that puts the human child Martin



Figure 33. My baby!

³³ Füredi, Frank, *Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation* (London; Washington: Cassell, 1997); and Füredi, Frank, *Paranoid Parenting: Why Ignoring the Experts May Be Best for Your Child*. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2002).

in actual danger. David’s plea to “keep me safe” is directed at Martin, and David wraps his arms around the boy while he blindly walks backwards away from “harm,” tripping them both into the pool and dramatizing every parent’s nightmare. Spielberg’s camera work and John Williams’s score draw on the stylistic tropes of the abducted child narrative as the track shot swoops dramatically around Monica (figure 33). But unlike *Minority Report*—another of Spielberg’s films that stages a sensational child abduction scene at a crowded public pool—the *A. I.* “abduction” scene ends with the human child safe and his “captor” abandoned at the bottom of the pool.³⁴

Switching the camera work from swooping track shot to a nonhuman, stilled bird’s eye view of a picturesque suburban backyard, Spielberg ends the scene with a composition hauntingly familiar to twentieth-century American families (figure 34). In his child-shaped housing, David’s ghostly



Figure 34. Watery deathtrap for children in beautiful suburbia.

³⁴ Spielberg uses some of the same camera work and sound editing in the abduction scene in *Minority Report*. See Spielberg, Steven, *Minority Report*, Multiple Formats. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2010).

image lying inert at the bottom of a suburban backyard pool is a flickering rendering of one of the most common actual harms posed to American children—a harm eagerly constructed for them in the turn from public, integrated pools in early twentieth-century America to a reactionary postwar boom in private pool construction as white families retreated from integrated spaces.³⁵ Both automated object and image of the human child, David—and the film’s camerawork—depict the destructive helplessness programmed in American children, who, “safe” from the world and confined to secluded domestic houses, face abuse and other physical dangers. The bird’s eye view of the automated camera work portrays a human-scaled, shockingly flippant parental disregard of the actual dangers eagerly constructed by parents for their children in their own backyards. Lying at the bottom of the pool, however, the mechanical David only *looks* like a drowned human child, and his automated construction allows this child-bot to emerge from his watery grave.

Despite his programmed appearance of childlike helplessness, David meets and picks himself back up from one trauma after another. *A. I.* reverses traditional directions of influence, projecting childhood forms onto adult behaviors to highlight the silliness and absurdity of human adults. Though American parents presumably believed their sheltering impulses to be protecting innocence, *A. I.*’s adult Monica openly acknowledges the problems she created for David by “not telling him about the world,” as she apologetically sobs while abandoning him.³⁶ Monica gives up the fight to keep adulthood at bay for her child, and she equips him with money and a caution to avoid

³⁵ According to the Centers for Disease Control, drowning in home swimming pools is a leading cause of death among children ages 1 – 4, as well as a leading cause of hospitalization. See also a cultural history of the racial tensions behind the postwar boom in private pool construction: Wiltse, Jeff, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

³⁶ Professor Hobby exhibits a similar impulse, as inscribed on his door are the words: “the world is more full of tears than you can understand,” an admonishment all the more galling for Hobby’s knowledge of the deeply troubling encounters David has had with human structures in the world.

all humans, “only other mecha are safe.” Monica’s relinquishment starkly contrasts that of Sarah Connor from the *Terminator* series. Sarah ceaselessly, and apparently eternally, battles to keep at bay the ever-impending future of her boy John.³⁷ Sarah believes that any intrusion of the adult future on John’s childhood existence would spell certain disaster for all of humanity, and so she heroically staves off any sign of her child’s future. Monica is presumably David’s protective mother-figure meant to fight off “premature” adulthood, but she instead throws David to the adult world, making David again a figure for the status of actual children: sheltered from knowledge of the world until shunted out into it, kept from money and its uses until precariously dependent on it. David is a poignant figure for the American child kept “safe” from its adult self—proven innocent only when violated or abandoned by the adults who try to seal in the innocence, or absence of knowledge and experience, children are supposed to naturally have.

³⁷ The *Terminator* films are a staple of American SF. James Cameron’s original 1984 blockbuster inspired three additional sequels as well as a television series dedicated exclusively to Sarah’s protection of the boy Jon in *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, 2008.

Once shunted out into the adult world, David forms relations to discarded nonhumans like Teddy and Gigolo Joe, demonstrating that it is not David's internal character but his relations to others that is queer. David first attaches unshakably to the sex-bot Gigolo Joe as a child to a



Figure 35. Queering their programming.



guardian when the Flesh Fair again sets off his DAS programming. Then his attachment is framed in the visual language of romance: after escaping the Flesh Fair, Joe begins to leave David to follow his programming and pursue a human woman—but David’s cry brings Joe to a halt. After a moment, Joe decidedly violates his programming, ceases pursuing the human woman and holds out an enticing hand for David instead (see figure 35). When David takes Joe’s hand, the two briefly pause in a lover’s stance before moving forward to pursue David’s dream of self-transformation together. David is an artificial object who draws the sex-object Joe away from human sexuality, paradoxically purifying Joe by queering him. Though reviewers have labelled Joe an adult version of David, the adult-bot who fulfills “mommy’s other needs,” the film itself draws no such parallels.³⁸ Joe, played by Jude Law, dances with the lighthearted, old-fashioned grace of Fred Astair or Gene Kelley, and he is a pleasure model perfectly attuned to sense and fulfill human desires. Osment’s David is stubbornly serious, his movements are bare and mechanical, and he appears to have little knack for intuiting human desires. Joe is pure, desirable sex object, the literal embodiment of human fantasy; David is pure subject, an adaptive being calling for responding subjectivity from the human. David does not *restore* or *recycle* Joe into prior usefulness. Rather, he invests this obsolescent and illicit sex toy with entirely new functions, conceiving though Gigolo Joe, if only for a short life-span, an unprecedented new life system—or character. The real humans, in contrast, laid waste to that newly aware life-form. David’s peculiar attachments to waste demonstrate an alternative attitude toward material and nonhuman objects, one that prizes materials as precious resources and as direct

³⁸ One reviewer makes this claim and goes on to argue that both David and Joe are *exploiting* women, without bothering to note that both David and Joe are themselves in precarious positions—David as a dependent child and Joe as an illegal sex worker. See Kreider, Tim, “A.I.: Artificial Intelligence, Review,” *Film Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 32 – 39.

supports to pursuing desires rather than as impediments, distractions, or threats to it. David's use of these wasted objects is, from a human perspective, a *misuse* of them.

That giving new life to these other objects is a misuse is its own indictment of twentieth-century cycles of popularity and planned obsolescence generated by child consumer culture in particular. In 1959, Ruth Handler dramatically revolutionized the scale of the toy marketing industry by designing Barbie; with a staggering range of "lovely fashions" priced from \$1 to \$5, Barbie was a doll designed to prompt indefinite consumption. She even inspired the creation of a boyfriend in 1961, also with his own line of independently marketed accessories and commodities.³⁹ Barbie was a "teen-aged fashion icon" who promised to *appropriately* join adult sexuality to childhood innocence; although Barbie's bosom and Ken's crotch were the subject of much debate early in their creation—a debate Aldiss parodies in his story when the humans debate whether or not to make their masculine servant-bot anatomically male and ultimately decide to neuter him to "protect" their wives and children. Matel quickly standardized a small, smooth mound for Ken, and an undifferentiated mound for large and smooth breasts for Barbie. Solid, injection-molded plastic masses for genitalia were Matel's concession and material contribution to the culture of childhood innocence. The plastics used in Barbie's construction cycled through several long-lasting polymers before settling on the current, relatively recyclable PVC, and though there is no way of knowing how many of the millions of dolls continue in circulation or were melted into other products as opposed to resting in

³⁹ Piggy backing off the success of the 1955 European Bild Lillie Doll, Barbie even inspired the coinage of a new industry term, *playscale*, which describes the 1:6 ratio size of Barbie's miniaturized but adult-scale commodities and accessories. See the original advertisement announcing the sale of Barbie here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hhjjhYGQtY>>. For an account of the history of the doll's conception and marketing, see Lord, M. G., *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll* (New York: Avon Books, 1995).

landfills, but Barbie's material reality on our planet is undeniably significant.⁴⁰ Spielberg's speculative solution to the waste generated by childhood material culture is a mechanical toy with automated desires that are queerly, childishly rerouted through the already discarded, through waste and the wasted.

Dr. Hobby believes he understands David's motivations, as Hobby confidently summarizes what is extraordinary about David: "You found a fairytale. And inspired by love and fueled by desire, you set out to make *her* real [my emphasis]." Professor Hobby goes on to explain that "the Blue Fairy is part of the great human flaw: to believe in things that don't exist," a belief which, he claims, moves humans to "chase down [their] dreams." Yet David continuously fails to give his dreams any lasting reality—even when he finds the Blue Fairy, she shatters into pieces at his touch, though she later returns as an illustrated holographic projection. David's continued pursuit of his unreal, unobtainable desires suggests that more important than fulfillment or possession is the moving quality of desire: its capacity to set people and things—and even, or perhaps especially children—into motion.

Speculative Domesticity: or, Yesterday's House of Tomorrow

Set in motion by his unreal fantasies, David forms queer connections for a child. The artificiality of David's story forms a parallel with the restrictive networks surrounding twentieth-century American childhood, and the previous section argued that David's child-shaped housing exposes the category of childhood as a social structure constructed out of impossible demands and

⁴⁰Ogando, Joseph, ed., "Engineering Barbie," *Design News*, web. March 12, 2013. <http://www.designnews.com/document.asp?doc_id=222831&dfpPParams=ind_183,industry_consumer,aid_222831&dfpLayout=article>.

artificial innocence. The robotic encounters with human structure create character relations and trajectories that are queer in relation to normative human patterns. The next section argues that the domestic setting of David's invisibly unfolding interiority forms a diagnostic departure from the film's decorative present, indicting late twentieth-century domestic material culture as a failure of yesterday's promises for America's tomorrow.⁴¹ The futurism of *A. I.* is less a speculation on the distant future than it is nostalgic for a particular past aesthetic, a nostalgia which accomplishes what Frederick Jameson argues is a constitutive aim of science fiction as a genre: to historicize the present and generate new possibilities for future living by reimagining and interrogating the presumably unquestionable and irreversible realities of a historical present.⁴² In place of *real* patterns of planned obsolescence, disposability, and enormously scaled domestic consumption, the film offers a domestic commodity with functions that both transcend consumption and are remarkably human in scale and orientation.

That David's role is to historicize our human present is modelled in the film's conclusion, where David is himself historicized by a meeting with the distant future. After David lies buried for an undisclosed span of time long after the end of humanity, the film asks us to look at the futuristic David through the historicizing eyes of a literally post-human future. Next to his Brancusi-like, hyper-advanced progeny, David looks goofily mechanical, and the actor Osment performs a bit of

⁴¹ For a historical account of America's past futurism in domestic housing, see Ward, Jandl *Yesterday's Houses of Tomorrow: Innovative American Homes, 1850 to 1950* (Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1991).

⁴² Jameson argues that this literary technique of reimagining the present is how Utopian science fiction attempts to think the "unimaginable": alternatives to Capitalism. Jameson's definition of science fiction builds on the work of literary theorist Darko Suvin, who argues that SF is a "literature of cognitive estrangement." See Jameson, Fredric, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007) and Suvin, Darko, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

slapstick comedy as he stumbles out of the helicopter and slips on the ice under the gaze of the graceful beings. David's clumsiness is this distant future's index to the human present; the boy bot's mechanical movements and human programming make him a transitional fossil linking human nature to artificial mechanics. Part of the unsettling effect of the conclusion may lie in the fact that it provides no rational arc for human existence, no explanation beyond time for the extinction of the human race. If David's existence in the human present were an existential threat to humanity, then the mecca's reality as a more advanced version of David ought to threaten him. Yet the character formed through attachments to rather than retreat from difference meets these alien beings with curiosity and dogged self-possession of his desire for human relation.

Teddy meanwhile has a storage compartment containing a relic of humanity, and the mecca use the lock of Monica's hair to generate a short-lived clone as part of their promise to grant David any wish to thank him for connecting them to their human makers. David thus spends a single day at home with the Monica clone, brewing coffee, playing games, and baking a cake to celebrate



Figure 36. The future is midcentury modern.

David's "birth" day. Though it could be asserted that an artificially produced clone couldn't *really* love David, it could also be argued that the clone's profession to have "always loved" David is a truer statement *because* of her cloned status. The clone's entire existence comprises that single day of domestic bliss alone with David. David's fantasy about realness is no more nor less artificial and unobtainable than the real American dream of idyllic domesticity. David's domestic fantasy returns the film to the setting of its beginning, a minimalist space that is a virtual variation on the material cultures supporting that most organizing of American dreams: home ownership. The furniture of David's home is low-slung, minimalist, with atomic-era swirls on the rug (figure 36). Decoration is spare, nearly absent (even the tree in the painting is single and bare of leaves). The curtain wall of modernist windows are spanned by a glass and Orientalist-patterned transom reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright. Though certainly spacious for a tiny family, the domestic dwelling at the heart of *A. I.* is remarkably low-tech and spare in comparison to the sophisticated automation that comprises its child-shaped mechanical occupant. The frosted glass, sleek wood floors, and muted olive-green accents of the house are decorations of a decidedly early to mid-twentieth-century scheme—a striking minimalist departure from the late-twentieth century interior decorating trends of actual housing in the film's present. Such trends were epitomized by the over-stuffed furniture and layers of patterned fabrics and luxurious pillows popularized by American designer and fashion icon Ralph Lauren beginning in the 1980s. At first glance Monica seems the very picture of American bourgeois excess—a leisurely, unemployed white housewife with a wealthy white husband always away at the large corporation where he works. It is the intimate scale of Monica's consumption and her intimacy with her mechanical toy, however, that shines a critical light on the material excess that constituted *real* late-twentieth-century middle-class white American domesticity.

Monica and her family, legally restricted in the film's world from creating more than one child, consume on a scale radically reduced from that of the middle-class suburban families in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg 1977), *Poltergeist* (co-written by Spielberg in 1982), or in *E.T.: the Extra-Terrestrial* (directed by Spielberg in 1982). These late twentieth-century suburban houses have cavernous closets so full of toys, clothes, and stuffed animals that small children (and an alien) disappear into them. The earlier closets of Spielberg's oeuvre are opaque—they conceal and hide. The closet in *Poltergeist* eventually opens into a figurative anus that threatens to engulf the entire family, who has spent the film aware of but inattentive to the opaque closet hiding openly in the children's playroom (see figure 37) In its stylistic setting, *A. I.* fulfills yesterday's promises for the houses of tomorrow, speculating on the might-have-been of a dream that was small in scale and intimate in relation.



Figure 37. The unacknowledged closet-anus that threatens to swallow the entire family in Spielberg's *Poltergeist* (1982)

Early in the film, David observes Monica's domestic rituals and routines with rapt and reverent attention. For her morning cup of coffee, Monica has no futuristic automated coffee mechanism, no conspicuous robot butler or "Coffee Robot" to ostentatiously deliver consistently



Figure 38. Low-tech kitchen, plus robot.



perfect brews. Instead, Monica grinds the beans, steeps them in a glass French press, and slowly, sumptuously pours herself a single cup of dark, steaming liquid. David witnesses this ordinary ritual first from the level of the kitchen appliances, visually reduced to the status of appliance, but then he rises above the commodities, where he stands and processes the ritual from a more human perspective (figures 38). David's enjoyment of Monica's intimately scaled consumption is entirely without point or purpose. The robo-boy also enjoys sitting at the dinner table with his human parents, even though eating would break him, as Monica impatiently reminds him while driving him to the factory to be wiped ("I know, I just like to watch"). David's fascinated gaze focuses attention away from extraordinary technologies and onto the physical ballet and emotional import of Monica's mundane routines. Her routine is not a chore to be "saved" or a mechanical task to be eased by other laborers but is lovingly and leisurely performed. After her morning coffee, Monica moves through the house making beds and doing laundry to a whimsical score, constantly accompanied and observed by David. David's fascination with the ordinary ritual of coffee brewing and Monica's palpable enjoyment of it raises the question of why real Americans have collectively expended enormous material and financial resources on automated machines meant to replace that very ritual.

The automated coffee-making machine dates back at least to Faberware's 1937 patent for the "Coffee Robot," which, in Taylorist fashion, promised to replace human motions, "save" time, and increase the volume of individual consumption (figure 39). Faberware advertised that automation would eliminate the human element in coffee preparation: "no watching" and "no guesswork" would result in "perfect coffee every time." Though the pot was marketed as "completely automatic," contemporary instructions cautioned that "an electric should be turned off as soon as its work has been finished" for "leaving the current turned into a percolator after the coffee has been drawn out" could result in "speedy burnout." The human consumer would

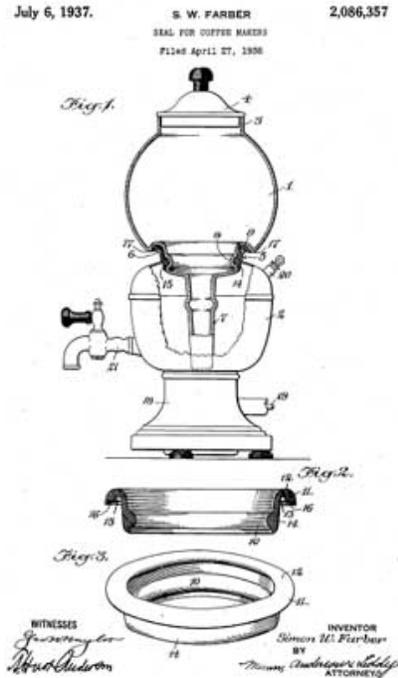


Figure 39. Smith and Farber's 1937 Mechanical Designs for the "Coffee Robot." United States Patent and Trademark Office



Figure 40. 1938 hangtag from a Farberware electric percolator. <OldCoffeeRoasters.com>.

presumably be the actor having to plug, unplug, and monitor the machine, but that agent was grammatically erased through passive construction in instruction manuals and advertising (“should be turned off”) and visually erased by the metaphor of robot used to describe low-level, mechanical automation.⁴³ The only human labor really “saved” by the electric percolator was the exact timing of the brew. The aesthetics of the product itself take a heroic leap of imagination to anthropomorphize—an imaginative leap illustratively modeled on a 1938 hangtag for the product, which appends arms, legs, and a minimal face to the “robot” to give it an even remotely humanoid form (figure 40). The minimal anthropomorphization signifies animation when the product is in actuality is a non-autonomous part of a system animated by a human actor. In *A. I.* the human actor is emotionally integrated with the automated system and the inanimate parts are movingly anthropomorphized.

The cultural import of the fiction of “complete automation” is illustrated in *Forbidden Planet* (1956) when Dr. Morbius welcomes visitors to his lonely abode by ordering his robot to serve coffee. After a spectacular show of blinking lights, beeping boops, and jerking gestures, the robot-butler eventually gets coffee to the enthralled guests nicely illustrated by Rosie the Robot on *The Jetsons* (1962 – 1963). Rosie is praised by the family for her cheapness and her reliable ability to push the buttons of the house’s automated coffee and food dispensers. The first episode is organized around the family’s decision to purchase Rosie after George’s complaint that Jane “used to be able to punch a meal” out as well as his mother. They get Rosie “for a steal” because she is an outdated,

⁴³Adams, Charles Magee, “Fireless Heat: Suggestions That Will Help the Housewife Care for Electric Devices,” *American Cookery* XXVI (June-July 1921): 687 – 688. Quoted in Sprouse, David “The Rise and Fall of the Electric Percolator” March 11, 2014 <theothercentury.com>.

“clunker” with a thick Brooklyn accent. Rosie’s minimally anthropomorphic, automated reliability increases the scale of the family’s consumption, as Rosie fulfills desires that the family members didn’t even know they had. The minimal anthropomorphization of the fictional robotic servant supports the fiction of “complete automation” in domestic appliances. *A. I.* in contrast fills out human appearances with the form of the child to inject emotional content into the subject-object relations between American consumers and their commodities. The human features of actor Haley

Joel Osment's face are the film's interface between automation and emotion, human audience and nonhuman character.⁴⁴



Figure 41. The Passion of the image. David in *A.I.*, above. Jeanne d'Arc in *Passion of Joan of Arc*, dir. Carl Theodore Dreyer (1928), below.



The speculative alternative to commodity relations in domestic culture hinges, in *A. I.*, on an emotional revaluation of material commodities. In short, *A. I.* offers an intimately scaled relationship between real humans and the commodities they own and consume. After Henry complains that David “creeps” him out, Monica thoughtlessly shushes Henry; chiding that “he’s just a child.” Her casual slip makes it Henry’s turn to chide: “Monica, it’s a *toy*.” Monica compromises with “He’s a gift, from you.” Her rhetorical compromise is an arch invocation of the conventions distinguishing a *gift* from a *commodity*. Marcel Mauss wrote of these conventions in his study of what he termed “archaic” socio-economic systems, where he observed that a gift is a ritualistic form of creating and perpetuating social obligations and for transferring community property rights.⁴⁵ By giving her a *gift*, Henry may have claimed certain obligations from Monica, but as the recipient of that gift, Monica also has emotional claims to the object as her special property. In this scene, Monica cleverly fights for her property rights over her child, echoing the SF mothers of artificial children before her, including Sarah Connor, Agent Dana Scully, Rosemary Woodhouse, and Chris Macneil.⁴⁶ The emotional attachment Monica forms to her artificial child-object values him as an irreplaceable individual rather than as a disposable object to be used, tossed, and replaced. The child-shape of David’s housing is the crucial interface for the emotional bond between the human and the robot.

⁴⁴ Stanley Kubrick originally intended for an automaton to play the role of David, but on taking on the project, Spielberg immediately decided that automatons weren’t advanced enough to present believable emotion on screen yet, and he promptly settled on Osment.

⁴⁵ Mauss, Marcel, and W. D Halls, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990).

⁴⁶ These characters come from, in order, television series *Terminator: the Sarah Connor Chronicles* and *X-files*, and films *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Exorcist*. In all four works, the mothers have been impregnated as a result of artificial interventions, but all fight for their property rights over their children against overwhelming pre- and post-natal claims made by the groups and systems surrounding them.

Ascribing emotional content to automated humanoids is a fictional tradition stemming back to Karl Capek's original use of the word *robot* to literalize the mental and emotional state of industrial laborers.⁴⁷ In domestic markets, electronic servant ownership was far less emotionally fraught in its marketing to domestic markets than to industrial labor markets. In a 1917 ad from General Electric, the copy (targeting the mostly white, middle class readers of *McClure's*) encourages readers to solve "the problem of help in the home" by replacing them with "electrical servants," who, the company declares, are "dependable for the 'muscle part of the washing, ironing, cleaning and sewing'" because they "cool or heat the house, percolate the coffee, or do all your cooking" without using "matches, without soot, without coal, *without argument*—in a cool kitchen [my emphasis]."⁴⁸ GE promises "to solve your servant problem" with these miracle servants; or, as the ad finally reveals at the end, these incandescent light bulbs.⁴⁹ Historian Susan Strasser has documented how urbanization and industrialization meant that early twentieth-century wealthy Americans faced a crisis in finding good help; and the household aids whom wealthy Americans had once so assiduously concealed behind back entrances and separate stairwells were suddenly inconveniently present in their unprecedented scarcity.⁵⁰

"Electronic servants" promised twentieth-century Americans the form of human service without the inconvenience of human bodies. In response to strangers mouthing off in other people's

⁴⁷ Capek coined the term to refer to an enslaved race of mechanical laborers in his 1921 play *Rossum's Universal Robots* (*RUR*).

⁴⁸ Strasser, Susan, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 78.

⁴⁹ Although incandescent bulbs were marketed as keeping your house cool, these same bulbs would later be used to cook food in the Easy Bake Oven (introduced by Kenner in 1963), a toy that was marketed to girls over eight years of age. The "boy version" of the toy was the Mattel's 1964 Creepy Crawlers Thingmaker, which used bulbs to melt plastic into molds of wiggly bugs for creeping out mother and sister.

⁵⁰ Strasser "At the Flick of a Switch" 2000, 67 – 84.

domestic interiors, the ruling classes ceased to represent them. As Strasser observes, “after World War I, pictures of servants virtually disappeared from advertising for women” even though home appliance ads had previously consistently depicted electronic appliances being operating by a human servant.⁵¹ Depicting domestic appliances as humanoid robots was a marketing technique for appealing to a consumer’s class-based aspiration to the subject-object relationship between wealthy consumer and servant.⁵² The consumer can passively watch the household run itself with the “flick of a switch” the only work required of the subject. Ray Bradbury condemned the automaticity of the domestic life being sold to twentieth-century Americans with the image of an entirely automated house that carries on the daily routines of living in the absence of any human actors⁵³. The domestic rhythms driving the home sequences in *A. I.*, by contrast, flow through Monica’s body and are periodically interrupted by the automated David, who probes into the what and why of things as he curiously observes her actions and routines.

In the fictional world of American marketing, human bodies were replaced by the obediently mute and minimally anthropomorphized electronic servants. The home of the “future,” according to *Better Homes and Gardens* in the 1930s, would be substantively different in both scale and organization because of the absence of live-in servants. Pre-War critic and advice columnist Dorothy Raley wrote that automation had “evolved” home “from LABOR-PLACES to EASE-ABODES” and that now “the homes of us moderns ‘serve’ us!”⁵⁴ The Machine Age has liberated the world from the slavery

⁵¹ Strasser, 78.

⁵² Thorstein Veblen began his study of conspicuous consumption in the American middle class by acknowledging the dependence of status on others to consume for or serve you. Veblen, Thorstein, *Conspicuous Consumption* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁵³ Bradbury, Ray, “There Will Come Soft Rains,” in *Collier’s Magazine*, May 6, 1950.

⁵⁴ Raley, Dorothy, *Homes and Furnishings: A Century of Progress* (Ring, M.A.: Chicago Company, 1934), 12.

of drudgery.” She promises that while “the housewives were old, bent, and wrinkled at forty; now, modern wives are just maturing into the most glamorous stage of womanhood at that age [. . .]

Thanks to man's inventive genius, young Mrs. 1934 touches the button of an electric thermostat, and the temperature of her house quickly rises to a desired '70' degrees or drops to '60' degrees.”

The pioneer in marketing Christine Frederick celebrates machine production and its displacement of human labor, because “Like the automobile, the modern home is a product of the laboratory. But this Machine Age has not robbed the '1934 Model' of its individuality, its soul, or its charm.”

According to Frederick, “American women as a mass have made up their minds that they wish to be freer from the crushing, age-old burdens of the home, which have been crushing *precisely because they have not been sufficiently industrialized* [my emphasis].⁵⁵” A 1933 *Good Housekeeping* article promised that automation would liberate housewives proclaiming that “of *course* you can do it with your electric handbeaters,” and promises that whereas “the old way—a task that tired your arm muscles, took a lot more of your time, and did not always give you the results you expected [. . .] the mechanical arm does.”⁵⁶ The domestic machine of early twentieth-century advertising was *supposed* to replace and displace the work of laboring female bodies.

Emptied of associations with productive labor, the early twentieth-century home was something of a functional vacuum, which Christine Frederick proposed to fill with the labor of consuming in her influential market study in 1929 called *Selling Mrs. Consumer*. Frederick announced that Americans “are now coming to a great crossroads or turning point in progress. We can go on, mechanistically, and multiply machinery and corporations and technical skill to some end or other

⁵⁵ Frederick, Christine, *Selling Mrs. Consumer* (New York: The Business Bourse, 1929), 30.

⁵⁶ Taylor, Demetria M., “Of Course, You Can Do It with Your Electric Beater,” *Good Housekeeping*, 96, no. 5 (1933).

that does not seem clear [. . .] *or* we can advance along the lines of our *new vision of increased consumption* and consumer welfare as the guiding touchstone of our work [my emphasis].”⁵⁷ Supposedly freed to leisure by her mechanical servants, the American housewife needed a new type of work. *Mrs. Consumer* includes detailed records of Frederick’s extensive research on the spending habits of upper, middle, and lower class white female consumers, among all of whom she identifies a growing popularity for the “mechanization of the remaining tasks of the home.”⁵⁸ Frederick explains that ready acceptance of automation among women is a result of their working outside the home in record numbers, and she predicts that automation would make more efficient use of the diminishing time American women would be spending in the home. Not only could wealthy women “replace” their domestic servants with electric ones, middle- and working-class could aspire to wealthy leisure by purchasing more commodities.

Frederick did not anticipate the later impacts of her prescription for consumption as the work of the home, and her contemporaries also believed that scaling consumption had utopian ends. Early in the century, visionary and utopian architects like Frank Lloyd Wright, Buckminster Fuller, Norman Bel Geddes, and Albert Frey experimented with a wide range of materials and production processes in effort to create domestic homes that were intended to be compact, mass producible, inexpensive, and above all efficient and beautiful.⁵⁹ In 1931, the *Ladies' Home Journal* predicted that in the future, “Houses, in the main, will tend to be smaller, but the fewer rooms they will contain will be larger.” The article’s author also predicts that “the home will become so mechanized that

⁵⁷ Ibid. 4.

⁵⁸ Frederick compares American women to European women and concludes that “She has the widest freedom to enter business even after marriage, and as a wife and mother she is deemed a partner in the family enterprise” (Frederick, 1934, 12).

⁵⁹ Ibid. 12

handwork will be reduced to a minimum. Mechanical devices, controlled by the photo-electric cell, will open doors, serve meals, and remove dirty dishes and clothes to the appropriate departments.”⁶⁰

So simplified and condensed by the transformative power of automation, American houses would be easier to afford and maintain and would give Americans more free time to spend away from the mass-produced, paid-in-full homes they would all individually own. In a 1930 essay “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren,” economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that the increasing efficiency afforded by automation would eventually free “progressive countries” from the economic imperative to work and would eventually afford unprecedented leisure and universal housing.⁶¹

These utopian promises proved woefully wrong. The powerful associations between labor and robotic slavery compounded the fear that automation would make human laborers obsolete, and the visionaries of America’s yesterday met with staunch resistance from organized labor to their plans for tomorrow’s smaller, cheaper houses that would be simple to construct and self-maintaining⁶². As American homes filled with automated appliances, the size of the housing swelled to contain the mechanically reproducible supports of the American dream. Early in the century the average American house was 700 – 1200 square feet, and a majority of houses did not have an interior bathroom.⁶³ By 1950 that size had barely increased to an average of about 1,000 square feet.

⁶⁰ Ward, 9.

⁶¹ Keynes, John Maynard, “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren,” *Essays in Persuasion* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963), 358 – 373.

⁶² For example, Buckminster Fuller fought and bargained unsuccessfully for years with plumbing and construction labor unions to manufacture his streamlined bathroom unit, an efficient cell that maximized water conservation and human labor exertion in both installation and maintenance. The entire unit was a single surface with a few seams that could be easily sanitized by a single person. See Jandl, Ward, *Yesterday’s Houses of Tomorrow: Innovative American Homes, 1850 to 1950* (Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1991), 35 – 41.

⁶³ Kerch, Steve, “1900 To 2010: Evolution Of The American Home Today: Fun Housing Facts. June 18, 2000,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 18, 2000.

But by the end of the twentieth century, the average American house had doubled in size to average 2,000 or more square feet, with a majority of new constructions including more than one bathroom. Garages had become standard by the end of the century, and the majority of new homes were now equipped with automated environmental control systems. While median family incomes rose from \$3,310 in 1950 to more than \$45,000 in 2000, houses more than kept up, rising from an average of \$11,000 in 1950 to more than \$195,000 in 2000. Meanwhile an increasingly smaller and narrower human labor force is expected to maintain these ballooning structures.⁶⁴ And to keep alive the collective delusion that domestic appliances were independent work-replacements, those humans had to pretend that the labors they did perform operating the machines in their homes didn't constitute work.

Ira Levin satirized the seemingly delusional dedication of suburban American housewives to operating their domestic appliances by literalizing the slow creep of the automation paradox in his satirical thriller *Stepford Wives* (1972)⁶⁵. The husbands of Levin's novella are consumers seeking non-mouthy upgrades to their current domestics, and they conspire together to hybridize and perfect their housewives with automation—whether by replacing them with robots or by transforming them into metaphorical slaves to their manifold domestic appliances and chores is left deliciously

⁶⁴ The most common and basic form of light lumber housing construction, the balloon frame is a traditional skeleton of horizontal and vertical planks that depend on an external “skin” of commonly wooden, adobe, or brick siding. The balloon frame was easy for novice and small labor forces to erect. Siegfried Gideon argues that automation in nail manufacture was crucial to the development of the balloon frame, which enabled a large increase in the scale of domestic housing. Gideon, Siegfried, *Space, Time and Architecture* (Cambridge Mass., 1953).

⁶⁵ The Paradox of Automation is an industry term for the lesson learned by early systems engineers that increased efficiency will also magnify any problems arising in the system; under this principle, increasing levels of automation also increases the need for and level of input and correction from the human element. Levin's novella can be read as something of an illustration of this paradox as Joanna's initially alienated stance toward her suburban home is gradually broken down and subsumed as the house's systems require ever more of her time, energy, and mind.

ambiguous in Levin's tightly crafted novella. The narrative follows the quick descent of one woman into total and complete absorption in the care and maintenance of her home and family—for Levin's young, urban professional feminine protagonist the problem is not too much but too little alienation. In the absence of either human servants or actually autonomous appliances to serve her the life she expects to live, Joanna gets sucked in too completely to her domestic labors. Joanna has no mechanical companion dedicated solely to drawing her back out of her labor, time she spends on private pursuits or enjoyment is wasted time, time taken away from her home. The novella ends with Joanna mindlessly absorbed in the task of selecting dishwasher detergents and automatically nestling products in her perfectly systematized shopping cart, a magazine-ready illustration of Christine Frederick's Mrs. Consumer. In domestic labors, where automation has been enthusiastically adopted and integrated, humans become metaphorical extensions of the machine. These workers do not become *like* the machine, for to become *like* the machine would be to enter a metaphorical relation, a critical awareness of the human's relation to work. The housewife and the domestic servant are not

like machines, they are the animation on which imaginative machines feed to support the collective fantasy of the machine's effortless operation of households.



Figure 42. "Lowe's Presents: how to install a new washing machine with one finger." *Youtube.com*



The legacy of the vampiric ontology of the electronic servant and the domestic laborer continues in our contemporary moment, where the body of the human servant seems to have made a return. A recent Lowe's campaign notes the familiar structural positions in the ad's copy, which names an operator (the one whose finger performs the initial command prompt) and an automatic machine that consists of multiple parts. The operator sets in motion an automated system "with one finger," and the human mover automatically responds to the command prompt by adjusting the position of the washers being installed (see figure 42). The enormous washers themselves are a far cry from the mobile and autonomous robo-butlers predicted for yesterday's tomorrow. The designers of these machines are not trying to convince potential consumers that the domestic machine is a benign, nonthreatening tool—instead the design sets *this one* apart from all the other interchangeable machines. The bubbly round contours suggest an effervescence that is completely immobilized and grounded by the monumentality of the large, darkly reflective volumes. Practical obelisks, these latest-to-date machines don't symbolize autonomy, they promise to make sure you do your chores in the best, most efficient way possible. The human servant is present only as a transitional animator—he temporarily moves the immobile machine long enough to get it near its rightful operator. Domestic appliances promise easy, automatic dedication to the household chores that must be done: with this fully automated washer, the contemporary consumer fantasy might go, I will now really get on top of my laundry, saving time for organizing, giving me control over my life. The initiating act, the purchase and installation of the machine fulfills Frederick's dream of consumption as the work of the home, but here consumption constitutes a recommitment to the home through machine's imaginative animation of a household system automatically requiring input and feedback.

The washing machine in *A. I.* is far from automatic—the film dedicates a lengthy sequence to Monica’s journey from room to room collecting the laundry that she then gets into the washer by repeatedly stooping and straightening. In *A. I.* automation has not replaced Monica’s labor, nor does it speed the pace or increase the amount of her consumption. Monica uses automation to reanimate her human son Martin and to animate her second, differently precious David. The nostalgic, early twentieth-century styling of the film’s setting sets its present actuality in relief against yesterday’s promises for the future. And by animating the purchased body as an irreplaceable part of a larger, intimate whole, *A. I.* also gives faces and personalities to the dehumanized bodies that have and continue to labor within American homes. The wealthy housewife at the center of *A. I.* does not seek to accumulate an army of servants to control but instead bonds with a companion *with* whom she performs her domestic labors and with whom she wastes her time. The “real” American home of the late twentieth-century was fully emptied of the productive, compensated work earlier Americans had performed within their homes. Instead the contemporary home became a Taylorised system for producing the illusion of leisure, a system which humans must selflessly support by endlessly supplementing their appliances: housework is *never* done, as Betty Friedan famously claimed and Susan Strasser has historicized.⁶⁶ Placing the housing of *A.I.* characters in relation to actual and historical housing moves these characters into oppositional and alternative stances toward those actual structures. I know place the resulting intimate relations between domestic laborers and electronic appliances into conversation with industrial applications of automation. The detailed housing of characters in *A. I.* provides a model for thinking across these artificially divided categories of automation.

⁶⁶ Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000).

Getting Along with Automation: Or, How to Stop Worrying and Love the Bot

The domestic servant or housewife animates the machine with their hidden labor, but the industrial laborer competes—as did Martin—against the machine. Marketers and manufacturers worked on automating illusions of leisure at home even as early twentieth-century visionaries like John Maynard Keynes predicted that automated efficiency would “free” compensated laborers for more leisure. Keynes didn’t account for the investments Americans had in their repetitive, robotic labors; he didn’t account for laborers’ emotional and moral dependence on compensated work. To become *like* the machine is a rung up on the social ladder from the domestic laborer’s subordination *to* the machine. By analyzing the relations between humans and automation in *A. I.*, this section denaturalizes the assumption that automation poses a threat to the socially constructed category of human purity. That alienation and anomie characterizes the human use of automation is no more inevitable than that emotional fulfillment and connection characterizes human relations with other humans.⁶⁷ Spielberg’s optimistic view on the possibility of intimacy between humans and automation may seem a naive reduction of Stanley Kubrick’s pessimist depictions of human intimacy, yet the film’s optimism for the humanistic potential of automation is grounded in a dark cynicism about the human uses of human beings—uses that, as in my previous chapter, are raced and classed based on surface appearances.⁶⁸

Stanley Kubrick’s film *Dr. Strangelove. Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) gives a sense of how Spielberg’s depictions of automation compare and contrast with Kubrick’s depiction of the relations between humans and automated systems. The opening of the

⁶⁷ Marcson, Simon, ed., *Automation, Alienation, and Anomie* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1970).

⁶⁸ Wiener, Norbert, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (The Da Capo Series in Science. New York, N.Y: Da Capo Press, 1988).

film shows the transmission of the code that sets into automatic motion the events that will conclude in the nuclear destruction of all human, plant, and animal life on Earth. The middle of the film shows the human links that tie this automated death system together. The initial transmission was ordered by General Ripper, who has convinced himself that the Communists are attempting to contaminate the purity of American “Precious Bodily Fluids” by fluoridating the water. To achieve “Peace on Earth” (also “Purity of Essence”) Ripper concludes that nuclear destruction is necessary. The fights and decisions among the diplomats in the war room generate the human characters powering the automated system of destruction. These explosive personalities push the system past its mechanical safeguards. In the film’s well-known conclusion, it is the duty-driven Major Kong who (in his mind heroically) uses his entire body to bounce, prod, and spark back into motion the mechanical failure that had miraculously halted the automated system. It is the exuberant motions of this Stetson-waving human body (augmented by his technological shaft) that ultimately ensures the destruction of all life on Earth.

Dr. Strangelove shows how mechanical systems enter into relation with human desire in a way that undermines technologically deterministic readings of the film and that instead amplifies the satirical condemnation of the human search for purity. In this film, the purity the humans yearn for is comically sexualized and gendered. General Buck Turgidson delays the time-sensitive conversation about averting global destruction in order to carry on a loud and demeaning conversation with his mistress. Dr. Strangelove plans for the end of humanity by gleefully contemplating holing away ten of the most attractive females for every one of the most politically powerful males. *Playboy* spreads showing segmented and disassembled female forms line the plane that carries the warhead. Ripper expresses his obsession over the purity of “bodily fluids” as a heroic desire to protect “the source of all life,” and finally Major Kong drives the large shaft between his legs into the nearest target after

the impotent President Muffley and the henpecked Premier Kissov threaten to block his climax. The automated systems in *Dr. Strangelove* are integrated with violent, phallic human sexuality, resulting in systems that forcefully impose individual human desires on larger collectives and nonhuman life. The intersections of human purity and automated housing results, in Kubrick's film, in the systemic, automatic acceleration of rapacious and gendered human desire.

The integration of human sexuality with automation also carries the threat of human violence in *A. I.* However, instead of automation *amplifying* aggressive human acts against other humans as it does in *Strangelove*, in *A. I.* automation is both the target of and potential solution for jealous human aggression fueled by fictions of precious purity. The violent spark of attachment to purity is portrayed in the "Flesh Fair" sequence of *A. I.*, in which a grassroots human organization claims to "purge" humanity of "artificiality" by hunting escaped and abandoned mecca to destroy them in a spectacular orgy of waste. These mecca catchers constitute David's first contact with humans outside his home. In distant echo of *Bladerunner* (1982), the man in charge berates his



Figure 43. Robot means slave

bounty hunters for not carefully verifying non-humanity, since “accidents” had occurred in the past.⁶⁹ The need for careful scrutiny is due to the fact that the newest robots are fully fleshed in anthropomorphic housing and, as in *Bladerunner* the differences between the artificial beings and humans are so minute and so internal that it takes painstakingly scrutinizing analysis to differentiate them. In *A. I.* the integration of human structures with automated housing uncannily reflects the historically unstable contingency of what it has meant to be really human in America (see figure 43).⁷⁰

The integration of human imagery with automation takes place on formal and thematic levels in the film: several of the robots in the Flesh Fair sequence are played by actors missing limbs,



Figure 44. Salvaging across gender and vocational lines

⁶⁹ Scott, Ridley, *Bladerunner*, 1982; Warner Home Video. Blu-ray. 2012.

⁷⁰ Bill Brown writes that in the context of posthuman practices, “modernity’s distinction between human subjects and inanimate objects appear increasingly artificial,” but that this erosion of distinction reveals the uncanny persistence of slave relations inhering in American products and stereotypes. Bill Brown, “Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny,” *Critical Inquiry*, 32, no. 2 (Winter 2006), 175 – 207.

and they are uniquely able to be fitted out with animatronics and prosthetics to fully embody their characters. Created during a turning point in computer graphics imaging, the fictional robots in *A. I.* seamlessly blend human bodies, prosthetics, traditional animation techniques, and computer imaging.⁷¹ On a thematic level, the robots blend and exchange seemingly incompatible parts that humans have discarded and dumped in a forest. Rummaging through a freshly dumped pile of electronic waste, the bots salvage parts that transgress traditional gender signifiers and traverse vocational uniforms. One handsomely suited robot with an aged male upper face fits a sumptuously feminine pair of lips to his jaw socket (see fig. 44). The scene showing these beings moving outside social legitimacy and surviving on trash resonates with echoes of human dehumanization of other humans. The aesthetically non-normative beings rummage through a pile of robotic limbs discomfortingly evocative of the piles of human bodies in Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). The ethical character of the film comes to life in these sequences depicting discarded beings—lives declared trash because nonhuman and systems labelled valueless because superficially compromised or damaged. David's fall from domestic shelter has led him directly to the hidden and marginalized objects of human violence.

⁷¹ Dillon, Steven, "Spielberg's A.I.: Animation, Time, and Digital Culture," in *The Solaris Effect: Art and Artifice in the Contemporary American Film* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2010), 105 – 40.

The mechanical David encounters human structures in his epic journey in a way that mobilizes the film's characters in critical opposition to actual human systems. In the holding pen where captured mecha quietly await their destruction, David encounters a mining robot designed to look and speak like a grizzled old miner. The robot complains about being displaced by newer, shinier mecha in spite of what he plaintively insists is his continued functionality. The robot continues to curse the newer automation he blames for his displacement even as human wranglers wrestle him out of the pen and suspend him on a cross, where he is ripped limb from limb (figure 27). Another mecha voiced by and animated to look like comedian Chris Rock is fired out of a canon, through a ring of fire, and into the bars of David's cage, where Rock's face is briefly suspended against the backdrop of a burning cross before it drops lifelessly to the ground (figure 45). And a robot designed to look like a feminine au pair coos words of comfort toward David from her gallows platform until the last of her remaining features melt away under the acid poured from above by jeering wranglers. The human violence in this film is not amplified by automation, it is

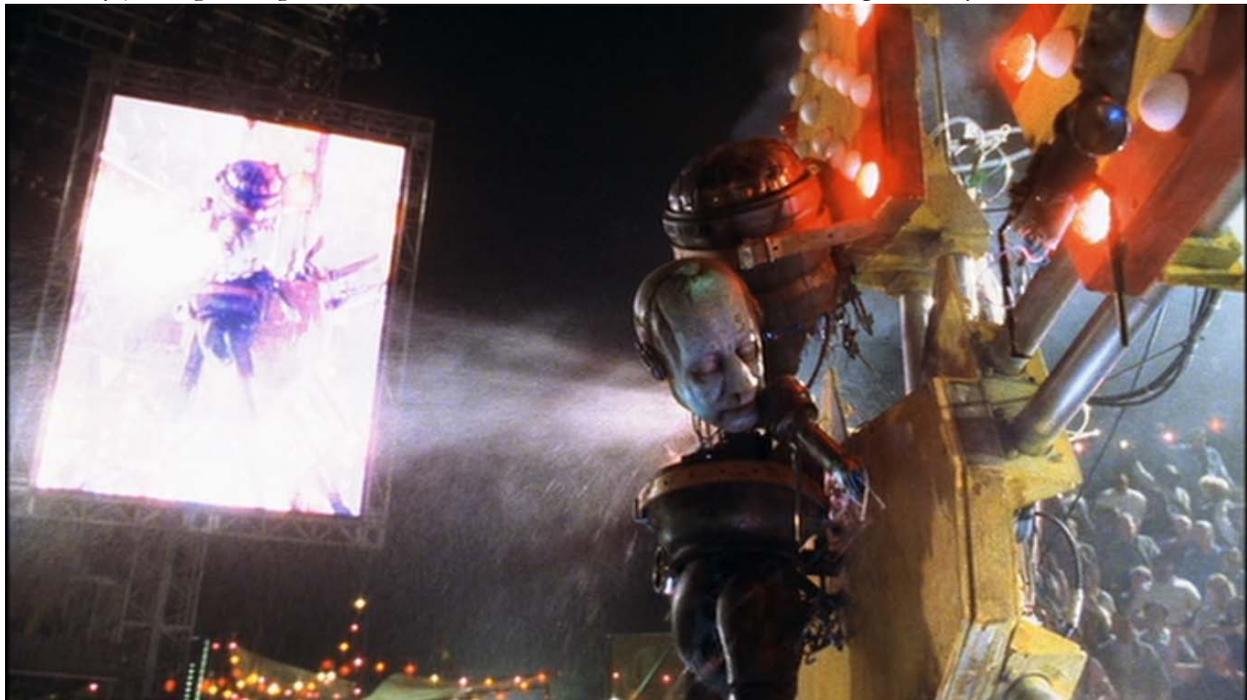


Figure 45. Crucified laborer.

directed against it. This violent relation gives the superficial housing of the film's robots weighty social significance.

In addition to reflecting historical institutions through which humans have been dehumanized, the human aggression directed toward automation in *A. I.* also reflects changing American attitudes toward automation itself. As the previous section argued, aggressive fear of automation was neither universal nor transhistorical. Although simple automation became deeply embedded in the daily operation of twentieth-century domestic housing, in industrial applications American attitudes veered from optimistic futurism to what George Terborgh labelled “automation hysteria.” In attempt to soothe fears and promote technological innovation, Terborgh was commissioned by federal agencies to conduct extensive studies on automation's large-scale impacts on American employment and production⁷². In his intro, Terborgh argues that whereas the



Figure 46. Robot slave lynching.

⁷² The Machinery and Allied Products Institute (MAPI) was a government agency established during the Great Depression to promote technological innovation among laborers and producers in the

“alarmists of a generation ago” were “concerned with what they believed to be a *lack* of progress,” postwar Americans seemed increasingly fearful of and resistant to implementing automation in commercial and industrial spheres. According to Terborgh, the so-called alarmists of yesteryear considered increasing automation a “condition” of full employment, whereas the postwar “automation hysteria is distilled from insubstantial fantasies” that amount to “an emotional response primarily [. . .] to the alleged employment effects of automation—specifically, to the belief that it will produce permanent mass unemployment.”⁷³ Terborgh cites cyberneticist Norbert Wiener as an illustration of this automation hysteria: Wiener infamously claimed that “the automatic machine [. . .] is the precise economic equivalent of slave labor,” and that consequently “any labor which competes with slave labor must accept the economic conditions of slave labor. It is perfectly clear that this will produce an unemployment situation.”⁷⁴ Terborgh, of course, did not consider this link “perfectly clear,” and his exhaustive analyses of studies across multiple industries led him to conclude that automation does not replace, but instead temporarily displaces and shifts human laborers in the workplace.

In attempting to assuage “automation hysteria” Terborgh wrote from a macroscopic view, exclusively focused on broad trends and collective goods and blind to the pathos of automation’s short-term impacts on individual lives. He argues “that automation is not our enemy,” that it is not even a substantive change from what Americans had already grown accustomed to in domestic and

American economy. In 1952, the Council for Technological Advancement (CTA) was created in affiliation with MAPI. See Terborgh, George. *The Automation Hysteria*. Washington, D.C.: Machinery and Allied Products Institute and Council for Technological Advancement, 1965, p. 87. Another contemporary example of this type of automation defense can be found in Laird, Donald A., and Eleanor C. Laird, *How to Get Along with Automation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

⁷³ Terborgh, vii, ix.

⁷⁴ Wiener, Norbert, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (The Da Capo Series in Science. New York, N.Y: Da Capo Press, 1988).

commercial applications; Terborgh's intent was to convince the American public that automation is indeed friend not foe.⁷⁵ According to Terborgh, automation is misunderstood by the general public as a substantive technological revolution; instead Terborgh defines automation as the “*self-regulation or automatic control* [original emphasis]” of existing mechanical systems that had been previously unconnected.⁷⁶ Automation in Terborgh's definition is not an object or even a technology, but is an engineering principle that describes the scaling effects of assembling mechanical systems. Terborgh remains cautiously optimistic that his task is to convince Americans to cease resisting automation in industrial manufacture and to instead “look ahead, to understand what is to come, and to set our course wisely after proper planning.” Though Terborgh was demonstrably aware of the metaphoric links between automation and human slavery in American culture, his advocacy is to assuage “automation hysteria” by charting historical trends in employment conditions and graphing net gains in opportunities. Terborgh's data-driven optimism, however, constituted a relatively lone voice in a chorus of pessimistic speculation.⁷⁷

In *Automation, Alienation, Anomie* (1970), Seymour Wolfbein points out that the fears of individuals speak far louder than generalizations from factual trends, and “it must be recognized that product as well as process innovation can lead to serious displacement and readjustment problems for many workers.”⁷⁸ Terborgh's data-driven study not only discounted such short-term displacement effects but also flouted the deep popular cultivation of the metaphorical links between

⁷⁵ Macmillan, R. H. *Automation, Friend or Foe?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1956]).

⁷⁶ Terborgh, ix.

⁷⁷ For a similar approach to defending the benefits of automation to the American public, see Laird, Donald A., and Eleanor C. Laird, *How to Get Along with Automation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

⁷⁸ Wolfbein, Seymour L, “The Pace of Technological Change and the Factors Affecting It,” in *Automation, Alienation, and Anomie*, Simon Marcson, ed. (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1970).

robots and human enslavement. The first use of the word *robot* was in 1921 by Czech playwright Karl Capek, who used it to describe an enslaved mechanical laborer in his play *Rossum's Universal Robots (RUR)*. The play follows the automated laborers as they develop awareness of their collective enslavement and rise to rebel against their capitalist owners. The first feature-length science fiction film, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1929) uses a robot to dramatize how the wealthy Joh Frederson coopts the image of a celebrity to quell and control his human laborers. Early in the film and literally underground, the human Maria stirring rouses Frederson's laborers into angry consciousness of their shared plight as "hands" controlled by capitalist "heads." In response, Joh commissions the inventor Rotwang to duplicate Maria's image in the form of a dumb, programmable machine and he sends the evil robot out to enthrall the masses with sensuality. Yet even the robot Maria escapes Joh's control, however, and instead of pacifying the masses, robo-Maria whips them into undirected frenzy, and the enraged mob turns violent against their own civilization. In these fictional origins, robots are metaphors for the reification of the proletariat under the conditions of capitalism, and the feminine housing of the central robot is a figure for the seductions of false consciousness.⁷⁹ It was this very metaphorical capacity that made inanimate machinery the object of human violence and mistrust in late twentieth-century America—instead of recognizing human conditions in the enslaved robot, Americans created fictions of competition. Human laborer and automated machine as competitors for jobs and resources remains very current in American discourse about automation.⁸⁰

⁷⁹Lukacs, Georg, "History & Class Consciousness," Andy Blunden, ed. (Merlin Press, 1967 [1923]).

⁸⁰Ford, Martin, *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (New York: Basic Books 2015). Carr, Nicholas G., *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014). *Planet Money* recently dedicated a podcast story to what they called a "contemporary John Henry"—an NPR writer racing a computer program to write up a story about recently released stock prices. "Humans vs. Robots," on *Planet Money*, ep. 622, May 08, 2015, npr.org.

American depictions of robots have tended to focus less on struggles between employers and laborers and more on struggles between human and nonhuman laborers.⁸¹ The disgruntled, outdated mining bot in *A. I.* comically inverts the competitive stance of human laborer against machine by cursing those who have been manufactured to temporarily take a turn rather than those responsible for manufacturing the situation.⁸² When Isaac Asimov first introduced the term *robot* to Americans in 1950, he set several stories against the backdrop of anti-robot popular sentiment.⁸³ Philip K. Dick depicts advertisements marketing automated slaves to Mars colonists in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), in which robots promise to “duplicate the halcyon days of the pre-Civil War Southern states! Either as body servants or tireless field hands, the custom-tailored humanoid robot—designed specifically for YOUR UNIQUE NEEDS, FOR YOU AND YOU ALONE—given to you on your arrival absolutely free.”⁸⁴ When these supposedly docile and subservient machines rebel against their human masters and escape back to Earth, bounty hunters are tasked with hunting down and destroying the runaways. Kaja Silverman has argued that Ridley Scott’s 1982 film adaptation of *Do Androids Dream* uses robots to undo the essentialization of race within institutional slavery, an argument which I take to be a more specific case of my general argument that the robots of *A. I.* denaturalizes the constructions of human realness.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Despina Kakoudaki recently published a thorough cultural history of this slave robot and its metaphorical ties to human labor. See Kakoudaki, Despina, *Anatomy of a Robot: Literature, Cinema, and the Cultural Work of Artificial People*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

⁸² The 1957 film *Desk Set* hinges on just such misplaced competitiveness when the secretaries of research department fight the computerization of their office because they incorrectly assume that the computer will replace their researching labors rather than be a necessary tool for their labors. Lang, Walter. *Desk Set*. DVD. Twentieth Century Fox, 1957.

⁸³ Asimov, Isaac. *I, Robot* (New York: Bantam Books, 2004 [1950]).

⁸⁴ Dick, Philip K., *Blade Runner: Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (New York: Ballantine, 1992), 18.

⁸⁵ Silverman, Kaja, “Back to the Future,” in *Camera Obscura* 27, (September 1991): 108 – 132

Although the fetishistic fear of anthropomorphized machinery is a strong current in American fiction, there has also persisted a parallel trend of optimism that explores the possibilities of intimate human-machine relations. The automated one-room house in Buster Keaton's 1920 short "The Scarecrow" is less a cold, mechanistic human-repellant than a whimsical and warm display of mechanical genius and wit. The sequence of the bachelors moving through their morning routines with automated ease that efficiently maximized the utility of a single room concludes with Keaton raising the table on a pulley and flipping it flat to the wall. On the reverse side of this table is a decorative needlepoint that reads "What is Home without a Mother"—a sly nudge and a wink from the two male bachelors who operate their neat and tiny pad with automated ease and efficiency without relying on or erasing mother or her work.⁸⁶ Isaac Asimov's short story "Robbie" (1939) features an emotional attachment between a little girl named Gloria and her nursery robot. Concerned by a rising wave of anti-robot sentiment, Gloria's mother sends Robbie back to the factory, and the little girl sinks into an inconsolable depression without her automated companion. The story resolves when Robbie rescues Gloria from the assembly line onto which she has fallen after she excitedly recognized and tried to run to her former robo-playmate during a school fieldtrip. Gloria's parents consequently re-adopt Robbie, restoring the little girl's good cheer. Philip K. Dick captures something of an ambivalent shift in American attitudes toward automation in his 1955

⁸⁶ Automation was a common gag in Keaton's bag of visual tricks. In "A Haunted House" (1921), a group of gangsters protects their hideout by automating it to make it look haunted. Far from automation being the source of Keaton's anxiety, it is the paper money that gets glued to him at his job as a bank teller that ultimately propels him to and through the house of gangster horrors. In "The Electric House" (1922), Keaton is mistakenly awarded an electrical engineer's diploma at graduation and then hired to automate a wealthy man's home. Again, automation itself causes no anxiety; it is that the actual engineer can't get work because Keaton has his diploma. The engineer takes his revenge by switching up the wiring of Keaton's gadgets in order to cause the house's automated appliances to go amuck.

short story “Foster, You’re Dead!” in which a boy’s father takes a principled stand against purchasing the latest in automated bomb shelters—though the consumption culture is indeed an absurdity, Foster’s father underestimates the strength of his boy’s emotional attachment to what automated housing stood for to the boy, an underestimation with devastating consequences for Foster’s peace of mind.

Both trends in attitudes toward automation—that which perceives of automation as a competitive threat and that which sees it as a potential ally have continued through present discourse. Illustrating the former trend is assertions that “domestic labour [to recede] ever more into the background, shifting away from embodied experience toward bodies of information.”⁸⁷ Nicholas Anderson claims that twenty-first century Americans are finding it “especially hard to feel at home when [the] home begins to feel back.” Illustrating the former trend, however, is a recent issue of *Body & Society*, which was dedicated to a non-deterministic approach to “what gets rendered invisible in discourses of automation.” Editors Jackie Stacey and Lucy Suchman contrast animation is always in the end a relational effect” “automation implies the continuing presence of hidden labour and care.”⁸⁸ Changes in assembled relations spells changes in character. In place of the misrecognition of automation as independent of and in competition with the human, *A.I.* instead proposes intimacy with automation—an emotional, human-scaled relation between subject and object.

⁸⁷ Anderson, Nicholas, “Unhomely at Home: Dwelling with Domestic Robots,” *Media Tropes eJournal* 11, no. 1 (2009): 38.

⁸⁸ Stacey, Jackie, and Lucy Suchman, “Animation and Automation--The Liveliness and Labours of Bodies and Machines,” *Body & Society* 18, no. 1 (2012): 1 – 46.

It is both microscopic and macroscopic perspectives on automation that *A. I.* preserves and reconciles. As though countering Kubrick's pessimistic view of the integration of human sexuality with automated systems, Spielberg's *A. I.* depicts nonhuman automation systems as instead attenuating the destructive powers of human sexuality. Gigolo Joe appears to help human women *compensate* for the violence of male sexuality. Joe is himself an object; a sex worker outside both legal legitimacy and real humanity. Gigolo Joe is an object who looks like a subject, his appearance channels mainstream Hollywood habits of identification to seduce humans into identifying with a nonhuman sex worker. As though to illustrate his role as a sort of mirror for historical American masculinity, Joe whips out a compact mirror in which to primp before meeting his next client (figure 47). As an artificial man, Joe is the film's foil for real human masculinity: his first client is a timid married woman seeking release. "Once you've had a lover robot, you'll never want a *real* man again" Joe tells her confidently, cheerily confirming the human fear that artificial lovers spell the sudden



Figure 47. Masculinity defamiliarized: superficial primping in anticipation of transspecies desire.

end of authentic human connection as we know it. But when Joe seductively shifts the woman's shirt to the side, he uncovers large bruises. "Wounds of passion?" he gently, innocently inquires, causing the woman to burst into tears. Joe acknowledges the woman's abuse, drawing her out of her pain and into dialogue. He jokes and banters with her, tells her that she deserves to feel loved. His

first kiss is a query, a questioning gesture, followed by a brief moment in which he is suspended above her, awaiting a response. But unlike Spielberg's David or Aldiss's Teddy, Joe's gesture of embrace is returned: the woman opens her eyes and reaches up to kiss Joe back in nonverbal



Figure 48. "You'll never want a real man again."



consent (see figure 48). In the next scene Joe visits his final human client, a woman who has been murdered by a jealous human male who wanted to punish her for her wayward sexual behavior—“remember, you killed me first,” he whispers, asking the inanimate corpse to bear responsibility for his actions. For the artificial being, the human woman opens her eyes as a desiring subject; for the human man, the woman’s eyes open in death. The superficial housing of machine and human relations here interact to produce an unhappy object lesson for a sadly familiar, deeply human cycle of romance, jealousy, and fatal violence.⁸⁹ Little wonder, then, that the film’s humans would feel threatened by these fetish objects.

⁸⁹ The dark hints at domestic abuse in *A. I.* parallel those in Spielberg’s later work, *Minority Report*, which is about a child kidnapped from her mother and raised in captivity to be part of a pre-crime system. The featured crime prevented by the Pre-cogs is a jealous husband murdering his wife and her lover with a pair of scissors. In a later scene, one of the pre-cogs stops a woman in a crowded mall, grabbing her by the elbow and telling her in an urgent tone, “don’t go home. *He knows.*” Spielberg, Steven. *Minority Report*. Multiple Formats. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2010.

The concept of a robotic lover did not always provoke fear and aggression from humans: in 1931, Westinghouse used the image of a robotic lover to sell cigarette smoking as an activity for “polite society” (see figure 48). The yester-year appeal of Gigolo Joe’s robotic service is echoed in a 1982 Washington Post article, which predicts that “by the year 2000” women will be dating robots that “may even look like Cary Grant, talk about white-water rafting, be able to fix a drink and



The Mechanical Man Has Been “Humanized” in Some Respects and Taught Some of the Manners of Polite Society. The Westinghouse Robot Shown in This Photograph Smokes Cigarettes and Oblingly “Gives a Light” to His Companion. Another Robot in Pennsylvania State College With a Glass Throat and Water Lungs Puffs Cigars All Day Long and Reports Scientific Facts About Tobacco Which the Most Expert Human Smokers Could Not Find Out.

Figure 49. Mechanical lover has the characteristics of “polite society,” designed by Westinghouse engineer Joseph Barnet. September 6, 1931, *San Antonio Light*.

possibly even be good in bed.”⁹⁰ Philip K Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* imagined the possibility of genuine emotional attachments between humans and nonhumans, as the human purity enforcer Rick Deckart himself develops empathy for synthetics because of his reactions to those housed in feminine forms. Elizabeth Wilson has argued in her study of pre-War cyberneticists that programmers and engineers like Alan Turing were explicitly working toward emotional “alliances between human and machine.”⁹¹ The alliance I read as being proposed in *A. I.* is one that integrates the romantic and intimate use-value of nonhuman systems into human lives.⁹²

The strength of emotional ties between human subjects and nonhuman objects in *A. I.* registers as disturbing in the conclusion of *A. I.*: a clone of Monica lies in bed with David, where they whisper across her pillow about love. David basks in his fantasy—and the scene’s incestuous overtones don’t go overlooked by reviewers.⁹³ Lurking under the surface of the soft-focus pastels and dreamy score, something is just a little *off* about that boy in bed with his mother. Yet the too-close mother and son scene remains, in the end, more Norman Rockwell than Norman Bates, so what is it that remains unsettling? Whether read as a child or as a commodity, David is in both cases the object to Monica’s erotic subject, the nonhuman support for her private intimacy. What we are witnessing, in other words, is intimacy between a woman and her toy, or her boy, and it feels icky,

⁹⁰ Mansfield, Stephanie, “Android Love of the Future,” *Washington Post*, June 2, 1982, B6.

⁹¹ Wilson, Elizabeth A., *Affect and Artificial Intelligence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), ix.

⁹² Scott, Ridley. *Bladerunner*. Blu-ray. Warner Home Video, 1982. In the original novel on which the film was based, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), Deckard forms emotional attachments to at least two androids. Phil Resch questions the reality or depth of Deckard’s empathy for androids by bluntly posing sexual attraction as the explanation, but Deckard is unconvinced that there isn’t more to his feelings.

⁹³ “That the narrative becomes a celebration, finally, of an incestuous bond between human and machine is only part of the creepiness of the scenario.” Beebe, John, “At the Movies A.I. by Steven SpielbergReview,” *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, 20, no. 2 (August 2001): 74.

unbearable.⁹⁴ Without explicit realism or even any familiar visual tropes for sexuality beyond a bed, the final sequence of *A. I.* depicts an approximate fulfillment of David's intimate fantasy, and what we witness feels *wrong*. The camera's discomfiting gaze on the intimate fantasy does not give audiences scopophilic mastery over the screen, but renders us interlopers. Monica's boy toy is not a human subject, yet he is an active nonhuman participant in constructing this female-centered fantasy. In *A. I.*, audiences gaze through a glass darkly into what was jurisprudentially and culturally unseeable in twentieth-century America: non-normative intimacies concealed behind domestic walls.⁹⁵ Here the nonhuman does not threaten or intrude on human intimacy—it makes it possible—and so divisions of action and agency along traditional lines of subject- and object-hood break down in this film.⁹⁶ No longer uncanny, at the end, the unambiguously mechanical, and yet lively character named David, performs ordinary life not to spectacularly consume, but to perform ordinary rituals in the rhythms of daily life. The quiet triumph David's final scene is that he puts on a play, he performs his "perfect day"—a day of small tasks and ordinary routines like making coffee. This childbot does not perform leisure or increase consumption, but performs ordinariness in a way that lifts the machine to its transcendence through ordinary, human-scaled aspirations. The child robot's performance does not make it a servant or slave but something precious to be cherished.

⁹⁴ Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Sex, or the Unbearable*. (Theory Q. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁹⁵ "Scopophilia" is the psychoanalytic term Laura Mulvey borrows to theorize the movie camera's objectifying gaze on the female body. Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds. (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 833 – 44. Also see Berlant on intimacy in the American public.

⁹⁶ Bruno Latour argues that the possibility of duration in human social relations depends on nonhuman and material "agents." I am arguing that David is an active, but not necessarily an agentive actor—David's fantasy hinges on the human Monica's agency to choose him as the object of her affection. And though Monica's agency is integral to this fantasy, her activity is not necessary. See Latour, Bruno, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7 – 8.

Conclusion

From the perspective of a distant future *A. I.* uses uncannily familiar imagery to depict the cultural constructions of American childhood and of automated housing, effectively suturing “soft” SF (social dramas) to “hard” SF (technological speculations). On a formal level, the film is itself a technological feat, representing a turning point in cinema history with its blending of live actors with robotics and computer-generated graphics.⁹⁷ *A. I.* is a contemporary trompe-l’oeil—an illusion so well rendered it temporarily suspends disbelief in artifice. On a thematic level, this suspension of disbelief is mirrored in Professor Hobby’s creation of a robot whose love is so convincing that a human returns the love in spite of knowing that the robot’s “feelings” aren’t *really* human. In disappearing the seams between the “real” and the artifice, *A. I.* returns human agency to the construction of realness, exposing human belief assembled with inanimate structures as the artificial origin of what it really means to be human.

Exposing artifice does not demystify: seeing the interior construction of things in this film only compounds the mystery of animation. When Professor Hobby opens the head of a female-shaped pleasure model and pulls her personality box out of her head, he demonstrates the “black box” concept in cybernetic systems studies.⁹⁸ A black box is a system with understood inputs and outputs, but that operates without human understanding of the internal workings.⁹⁹ The conceptual effects of the “black box” have also been crucial to animation theory, which Spielberg illustrates through juxtaposing the “black box” of the human head with the intricate mechanics of artificial

⁹⁷ Dillon “Spielberg’s *A.I.*: Animation, Time, and Digital Culture,” 2010.

⁹⁸ Wiener, Norbert. *Cybernetics; Or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. (New York: M.I.T. Press, 1961).

⁹⁹ Wiener, *Cybernetics*, xi.

animation. At the Flesh Fair, the audience literally sees through David's surface into his mechanical composition, though the man tests the scanner on his human daughter, "revealing" her skeletal structure (figure 50). The revelation of David's mechanical jaw and metallic hinges no more explains



Figure 50. Baring the device of animation.



his animation than the girl's skeletal structure explains hers, yet it is enough to designate his artificiality a reason for destruction, a redemption of human artificers through sacrificing, dominating, *controlling* the products of their artifice. In Spielberg's films, human attempts to control animation in only queers the nonhuman's movements and relations, forcing it sideways onto new and unpredictable paths and causing it to mutate in response to restrictively constructed social structures like childhood, domesticity, and industrial automation. Animation finds a way, to paraphrase the well-known theme of Spielberg's other film featuring queer nonhumans, dinosaurs that evade even human restrictions on biological sex.¹⁰⁰

In the final analysis, David's fantasy may ring hollow: David ultimately remains circumscribed by his programming as a little boy who loves his mommy. The "more" of David's desire can never *really* be, but remains a simulation with a clone reconstructed under artificial circumstances. David's growth—invisibly unfolding through neural networks, imaginative connections, extensions, and finally dreams—dramatizes both the familiar strangeness of childhood and the strange familiarity of nonhuman subjectivity. In this sense, *A. I.* might serve as an imaginative demonstration of N. Katherine Hayles's call for the breakdown of the binary between humans and nonhumans. The intimate connections between human and nonhuman systems in *A. I.* is part of what Hayles calls "the contemporary turn toward the nonhuman" within the scope of which is "the realization that an object need not be alive or conscious in order to function as a cognitive agent."¹⁰¹ Discomfort at the film's conclusion could well be the disquiet of realization, the closing reminder that David's epic journey was not that of a real boy's but that of an artificial

¹⁰⁰ *Jurassic Park*, 1993

¹⁰¹ Hayles, N. Katherine, "Cognition Everywhere: The Rise of the Cognitive Nonconscious and the Costs of Consciousness," [publication pending], 26.

object's. That the film contains a deflation of illusions of realism reframes David's not-quite-human story within the inhumanly scaled eons of his nonhuman existence. This final note, I argue, asks viewers to remember that though the film's narrative carried us through dreams that were human-scaled and human-oriented, it defied conceptions of human purity by creating these dreams through relations between characters and inanimate structures. The inhuman scale of David's existence does not make this nonhuman housed in the shape of a child a threat to human security, because on such geological scales there is no security. *A. I.* is both *memento mori* and panegyric tribute to humanity: a reminder of the brevity of the species but also a lasting, loving tribute to the liveliness of characters produced through relations between superficial structures.

CODA: Needy Houses and Broken Individuals: Fixer Uppers and the Work of Domestication

Do *you* have the guts to take on a fixer upper?

-Joanna Gaines, from *Fixer Upper* (2013)

This dissertation has been about some of the ways that housing moves characters. How it animates through accumulative activity, how it builds illusory interiorities, how it draws together character networks, and how it puts inanimate systems into animating relations with social structures. Each chapter features housing that is anything but domesticating or pacifying: each feature inanimate structures that induce lively and often queerly inexplicable effects. I now conclude with a coda about housing that does domesticate—though the process of domestication, as will become clear, is itself a remarkably animated one. Fixer uppers are houses that are inherited, bought, or borrowed in states of alarmingly active decay. It is the lively efforts to stem the tides of deterioration that effectively domesticates the characters inhabiting fixer uppers, their efforts draw them into automated systems and transforms them into supportive cogs maintaining the domestic dwelling machine. Where the body of the dissertation looked at housing that animates characters and mobilize character relations through often supernatural animating means, this coda looks at a genre in which characters produce housing's character through their own animated love and labor. It is not that their characters are readable in their housing but that the character they bring to life is irreducible to any one of them. The characters of previous chapters often competed, cooperated, or compromised with the powerful character of housing; fixer upper characters work to subordinate themselves to housing's character. At stake is demonstrating that even the most normative housing conceives of human character itself as a living fiction constructed through ongoing work on housing. As a whole, in other words, this dissertation narrates the dependence of lively character on inanimate structures.

Domesticating Individual Characters

At the center of Warren Adler’s 1981 novel *The War of the Roses* is an already-repaired fixer upper and expensive neo-Colonial home that eventually falls back into a ruinous state after Barbara Rose decides to divorce her husband Jonathan. Her choice sparks a destructive fight between the couple once bound together by the loving work they put into fixing up their house. Adler narrates the tragicomic divorce using tropes from each style of fictional housing represented in this dissertation: haunted, Gothic, locked, and automated housing. In their struggle over asset allocation, Barbara and Jonathan become possessed by desire for the house, causing the house itself to “become alive, a chilling, bloodless monster.”¹ The couple battle to the literal death and bequeath a ruined Gothic inheritance to their ominously squabbling children. Automated appliances mediate the violent aggression each spouse has pent up toward the other. The exclusively wealthy setting in a Washington, D. C. suburb designates the house a refuge and retreat from human society—what Jonathan describes as his “fortress against the terrors of life”—and this locked housing is unconscionably invaded by Barbara’s worldly career ambitions.² Where previously I showed various ways in which horrific styles of fictional housing can critique and undermine the ideology of domestication, this coda shows how the comedic fixer-upper trope affirms that ideology.

Although *War of the Roses* prominently features tropes from tragic styles of housing, the tragicomic novel houses these conventionally horrific styles within the slapstick tone and pedagogical ends of the screwball comedy.³ The pedagogical aim of the screwball remarriage

¹ Adler, Warren, *The War of the Roses*, (New York, NY: Rosetta Books, digital ed. 2015 [1981]), loc. 2738.

² Adler, 2015, loc. 883.

³ Henri Bergson defines comedy as a genre that “expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective” and he argues that comedy corrects by provoking laughter, which he defines as “a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of

comedy, as Stanley Cavell argues, affirms the ideological imperative of modern marriage, and *War of the Roses* might indeed be read as a cautionary tale depicting the dire consequences of divorce.⁴ Yet Barbara and Jonathan are each capable of imagining lives beyond marriage and after each other; it is the house itself that neither can live without. In fact, the 1989 film adaptation revises the novel's concluding death scene into just another pratfall that happens to bring down the roof. The filmic *Roses* survive the climactic collapse—just their marriage perishes. The revision might seem a sappy betrayal of the original text, but the ideological message remains consistent: though marriages may split, fixer upper housing will not bear the weight of separated individuals. In the novel, the couple's mutual hate had “breathed life into it,” and under the animating influence of animus, the Rose's house ends up in a state of “ghastly destruction” in which “the roof had collapsed and the upper walls had buckled [. . .] the long clock lay on its side, its face smashed.”⁵ Adler's contemporary

absentmindedness in men and in events.” Bergson's formulation of comedy essentially opposes Sigmund Freud's understanding of jokes as allowing people to overcome inhibitions. My approach constitutes something of a synthesis of the two theorists in that I understand the pedagogy of the comedic fixer-upper to be revealing otherwise repressed truths about ideological domestication. See Bergson, Henri, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Brereton and Fred Rothwell, trans. (Oxford, MS: Project Gutenberg, 2008), loc. 695; and Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. James Strachey, trans. and ed. in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Norton, 1989).

⁴ Cavell is specifically interested in the remarriage plot of Hollywood screwball comedies. He argues that though these films may appear cynical farces of marriage they actually reaffirm the institution in their representations of threats like divorce and marital discord. See Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard Film Studies. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003). David R. Schumway argues the inverse of Cavell, asserting instead that screwball comedies mystify the ideology of marriage by making marriage the goal but not *end* of romance. See David R., Schumway, “Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage,” *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 7 – 23. My argument combines elements of both approaches in that fixer-uppers mystify how marriage works by transmuting it into work on the house, but this mystification also reveals the ideology of marriage because work on the house is the mechanism for sustaining the marriage union.

⁵ Adler, Warren, *The War of the Roses* (New York, NY: Rosetta Books, digital ed. 2015 [1981]), loc. 2738

house of Usher becomes a Gothic crypt for Jonathan and Barbara, but in contrast to Edgar Allen Poe's collapsing house, the collapse of Adler's house of Rose locks husband and wife together forever, complete with arrested clock keeping the now-immortal time of their indissoluble union.⁶ The Rose's house fails to support the weight of their cleaving intimacy, and their story successfully entwines the fate of symbolic unions with that of material housing, shifting the ideological weight usually supported by the bonds of matrimony onto the load-bearing joints of a house. *War of the Roses* reverses the linear narrative of the fixer upper, showing in reverse that the activities of characters are what simultaneously domesticates them and animates the house as a living system.

The ideological imperative of the fixer-upper comedy, then, is less about marriage and more about ascribing to domestic housing the power to bind individuals into a harmoniously operating household or home. Automaticity is the goal of the fixer upper's corrective evocation of laughter at characters who are too individual to operate seamlessly together within a household. This ideological lesson demonstrates what Bergson describes as the imperative of the comic, which is to show "that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life."⁷ Where Bergson sees the comedic as correcting automaticity, the fixer upper uses comedy to correct liveliness in order to affirm automaticity as a normally hidden requisite of

⁶ In my chapter on Gothic housing, I argue that the House of Usher concludes with a perhaps counterintuitively happy ending—the collapse of the House of Usher ends Roderick's repressive control over his sister Madeline, putting a stop to the long line of strictly controlling Usher men. The *War of the Roses* updates this paradoxical happiness by making the house's collapse the condition for sustaining forever the Rose's collapsing marriage. Though marriage is certainly a crucial ideological framework for the novel's narrative, the house itself bears the weight marriage was supposed to support.

⁷ Bergson continues that the comic "expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events."⁷ Bergson, 2008, loc. 695.

domestication. Domestication requires individuals to inhabit housing automatically, and fixer uppers require them to become veritable tools wholly subordinated to the house's transformation into home. *War of the Roses* demonstrates this subordination by negating it: the couple's mutually assured decline into individuality is carried out through a too-lively choreographed ballet of pranks and pratfalls. In the 1989 film adaptation Kathleen Turner lithely embodies Barbara Rose, a former gymnast who provokes laughter by being too flexible and too nimble, too adaptive to Michael Douglas's bumbling, sweaty onslaughts and the crumbling structure of their once-fixed house.

The pragmatic threats posed to inhabitants by the fixer upper parallel the supernatural threats posed by tragic styles of housing, but in the fixer upper the interruption of lively individuality is an ideological corrective rather than a tragic expression of oppressive social relations. In Eric Hodgins' *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1946) and the multiple adaptations it inspired—including the 1948 film of the same name, *The Money Pit* (1986), and *Are We Done Yet?* (2007)—the characters begin their stories hilariously animated while fixing up or constructing their homes. In these comedies the fixer upper interrupts and threatens the liveliness of individuals when structural integrity fails, electricity shorts, and interfaces with municipal services break down. These stories end with the smooth operation of family units, individuality properly subordinated to domestic dwelling. Satirical fixer upper comedies, on the other hand, like Tim Burton's 1988 film *Beetlejuice* and the television series *Arrested Development* (2003 – 2014) create characters who aspire to automaticity but who ultimately fail to achieve it, and in failing become arrested in states of inappropriately lively individuality. Fixer uppers show domestication to be a process that makes Americans human by

suppressing lively individuality and remodeling people into mechanical supports for an ideological system.⁸

Despite the ordinary and even expected horrors and failures of the American dream, the promises of home ownership have continued to sustain powerful sentimental attachments in popular culture—as the Rosemary’s Baby chapter demonstrates, it is the achievement, not failure, of the American Dream that is horrifying.⁹ By beginning with the fixed-up house and ending with an unstable fixer-upper, *War of the Roses* shows structural instability to be not a flaw but a feature of domesticating housing. Hence, Adler’s narrative literalizes the imperative of sustained work in the ideology of domestication: without the constant loving labor of the married unit, the house returns to its natural ruin. The fixer-upper is a historical inheritance in a state of neediness, a state that affirms the house’s ongoing need for love and hard work. The fixer-upper becomes a home by wanting and needing human love, and it is through responding to that need that individuals

⁸ In his book about the dramatic and global economic crash of 2007, Thomas Sowell argues that the crash was a result of a world-wide speculation on the “securities” of the American housing market, and he accounts for the boom and bust through tracing overlapping systems from banks and government agencies to local construction and service industries. These systems all consciously worked to swell the market of prospective home buyers under the ideological imperative that individual home ownership is a universal good that will, in essence, fix Americans. Sowell, Thomas, *The Housing Boom and Bust* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010).

⁹ Richard Portan writes of the “near orgy of invective among leading social critics during the 1950s” that paints the American Dream as a “nightmare,” in Portan, Richard. “American Dreams, Suburban Nightmares,” *Cinéaste* 20, no. 1 (1993): 12 – 15. Midcentury critics like David Riesman argued that suburban living mired suburbanites in the sad smallness of private, individual problems, a critique that neglected the specific social ideologies embedded within private housing itself, which is not exclusive to suburban environments, as my chapter on *Rosemary’s Baby* illustrates by looking at a narrative in which a family pursues private housing in an urban context. See David Riesman, “The Suburban Sadness,” in *The Suburban Community*, William Dobriner, ed. (New York: Putnam’s, 1958). Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen battled these “virulent denouncements” which they argued “were based on class and ethnicity as well as sex” by looking at “the rich and stormy history” of social change in the suburbs which is occluded by negative invectives. Baxandall, Rosalyn and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000).

domesticate themselves into homogenized, intimate spheres.¹⁰ The fixer-upper subordinates human individuality to the ever-expanding needs of material housing, a relationship that challenges not only conventional understandings of gendered power relations but that also challenges familiar understandings of housing as an expression of the character of human owners.

Frank Lloyd Wright best summarized the coercive relation of inhabitants to housing when he claimed that the “new American concept of architecture has style as the expression of character. No longer is form a question of ‘styles.’ Essential Style it has, and is of the nature of all building whatsoever, provided only that style be naturally achieved *from the nature of the building problem itself* and found within the very means for and by which the building stands built. The result: style is character.” In other words, the “individuality” being “expressed” by housing ought to be universalized, interchangeable, and mass-producible—the house itself, then, is the entity tasked with priceless and irreplaceable expressive individuality while the inhabitants ought to remodel themselves according to vertically prescribed functions.¹¹ The work of the fixer upper shifts critical emphasis away from better or worse styles of housing and community and onto the underlying ideological processes that fashion, and ultimately subordinate, American characters after their houses.¹²

¹⁰ “Intimate spheres” refers to Peter Sloterdijk’s use of the soap bubble to capture the phenomenology of interpersonal intimacies. Where Sloterdijk’s emphasis is on the formation of temporary and transitional intimacies, my interest lies in the attempt to induce intimacy through material, enduring forms. See Sloterdijk, Peter, *Spheres: Microspherology* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2011).

¹¹ Wright, Frank Lloyd, *The Living City*, (New York: New American Library, 1970), 97.

¹² Though anti-suburban fiction might seem a more straightforward approach to critiquing the ideology of domestication, critical novels like John Keats’s *Crack in the Picture Window* bemoaned the mass-produced *style* of housing as “the obliteration of the individualistic house and self-sufficient neighborhood,” as though individualistic houses would create individuals and save Americans from becoming “mass-produced human beings.” Keats, John, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1957), 61.

The comedic fixer upper domesticates consumer desires, the tragic fixer upper utterly fails to domesticate, the satiric fixer upper demystifies the ideological tenets behind domestication, and finally the tragicomic fixer-upper negotiates between the domesticating and demystifying functions of the floorplan. In both novel and film of the tragicomedy *War of the Roses*, Jonathan Rose's lawyer draws dividing lines through the blueprints of the Rose's house to restructure and hence domesticate the increasingly explosive flows of their competing desires. Barbara Rose's lawyer refers to this style of property division as "cut[ting] into the carcass" of their primary asset, an indivisible object that both partners refuse to cede.¹³ Jonathan's lawyer cites as precedent for his floorplan division the (actual) Washington D. C. marital policy §16-904: "parties who have pursued separate lives, sharing neither bed nor board, shall be deemed to have lived separate and apart from one another even though: (1) they reside under the same roof." This code was written to accommodate the limited resources available to poor couples seeking divorce while unable to afford separate residences. After showing Jonathan the remodeled floorplan, the lawyer warns Jonathan against self-centered behaviors like dating, drinking, and drugs while in the shared house, but this individualistic advice fails to account for the animating proximity entailed in this attempt to domesticate Barbara's and Jonathan's desires. The blueprint in *War of the Roses* demystifies the underlying assumption that domestication "under the same roof" unifies the members of a household together by showing that the couple's pursuit of "separate and apart" lives brings them into closer and more intimate contact with one another than ever before.

One of the ironies of the floorplan legal loophole in *War of the Roses* is that their divorce entangles them more intimately than their marriage ever had, a fact Jonathan recognizes by

¹³ Adler, loc. 928.

bemoaning that “the one woman I thought I knew, I didn't know at all [. . .] how little I understood her, of what she was feeling and thinking all those years.”¹⁴ The separation in the blueprint means that Jonathan’s lawyer is able to temporarily contain the couple’s conflicting desires within the constraints of legal restrictions; but the division heightens the stakes of their interactions and catalyzes an unprecedented intimacy in their knowledge of each other as they weaponize house and domestic and professional pursuits against one another. Far from domesticating the desires of the couple, containing them within a divided floorplan animates the series of pratfalls and chain reactions that ultimately destroy the container from the inside out. The perspective afforded by attending to this tragicomedy shows that domestication can actually induce the wild proliferation of consumer desire beyond the very structures meant to contain and tame them. In this tragicomedy, then, material housing undermines the very containment domestication promises. The house in *War of the Roses* is literally torn apart by competing claims of individual expression from *both* husband and wife, and the claims are both passionate and compelling due to the fact that each contributed their all to fixing up the house in the first place. This undermining role of housing, however, ultimately affirms the ideology of domestication by making the wholeness of the structure dependent on the unity of the couple and suppressed individuality of the couple’s components.

That the primary object under reconstruction in ideological domestication is human inhabitants is expressed vividly in the epigraph that began this chapter, the catchphrase of the recent reality show *Fixer Upper* which challenges consumers to have the “guts” to “take on a fixer upper.” The show updates the logic of marketing as capturing consumer love by extending the fixer upper’s claim to the very imaginations of potential buyers. Since the work of remodeling the house in this

¹⁴ Adler, loc. 1479.

show is now performed by the professional carpenter and decorator power couple Chip and Joanna Gaines instead of by the homebuyers, they reveal the transformation by first covering the newly remodeled structure with a giant image of the old façade, as though revealing a makeover participant before and after plastic surgery and wardrobe update (see figure 51). In a show that takes over the labor of transformation, the picture house captures the love of consumers by reframing given material structures as mere surfaces that must be imaginatively stripped away to reveal a market-defined ideal; it is this imaginative work that will distinguish the consumer as having achieved the “guts” of someone like Joanna Gaines—someone with marketable taste. Each episode concludes with Chip Gaines revealing the new market value of the fixed-up home and the homebuyer’s assertion that their love for their new home means they will never sell. Fixer-upper narratives do not oppose the private or domestic to the commercial but rather frame domestication itself as the process by which the private sphere takes on exchange value. It is the private consumer, in other



Figure 51. “Are you ready to see your fixer upper?” *Fixer Upper*, 1, ep. 1, 2013

words, who must imaginatively remodel their dreams of domesticity to fit within a particular, supposedly universally desirable market.

The subordination of consumer desire to the material needs of existing markets and housing industries uses slapstick as social corrective in the contemporary adaptation of Mr. Blandings *Are We Done Yet?* (2007). The opening sequence of the film features an animated Ice Cube working on various structural elements—including the film’s credit sequence—over a background of shifting blueprint images (see figure four). While performing this work, Ice Cube is electrocuted, hit on the head by elements of the credits, and blurred out of focus when parts of the blueprint are brought into focus. The sequence vividly dramatizes the blueprint as the mediator between individual and home, and the slapstick corrects the inappropriate body by provoking laughter at the animated body’s failure to function as a mechanical tool. In working on the blueprint or plan, the consumer does not create or express so much as redirect their expectations and recommit their bodies to the project of domestication. The inadequate support of structure is, in the fixer-upper comedy, a precondition for the loving work and ongoing commitment that will convert individuals into one homogenous family unit.

The flattened image of the fixer upper lays bare the ideological aim of homogenization and de-individuation. In a satiric representation of this ideological aim, the television series *Arrested Development* (2003 – 2014) repeatedly represents housing as its own flattened image of itself, as though bringing the simulacra to life in order to expose its failures. In the series opening, Michael and his son George Michael come down from their sleeping hideout in the model home's attic to meet in the kitchen for breakfast, which consists of tiny boxes of cereal they have secreted away in a hollow, plastic roast chicken displayed on the kitchen table. The simulacrum in this series does not expose the commodity as merely empty, but depicts it as hollow housing meant to contain and

reconstruct consumer desires into picture-perfect ads. Yet in this satiric representation of advertising imagery *Arrested Development* shows that appearances need not spell successful domestication.

Though Michael and George Michael begin the series attempting to preserve the house's showcase beautiful appearance by hiding the signs of their liveliness inside plastic representations and behind attic walls, the series follows the ways in which that liveliness repeatedly overflows its would-be containers.¹⁵ While Michael Bluth desperately tries to keep his family together through fixing up his father's bankrupt mini-mansion business, he comes up with a scheme to construct an empty facade of a house to show investors that the business can still build.¹⁶ When the house collapses in front of prospective investors, the fallen walls disclose an interior utterly devoid of a floorplan: instead,

¹⁵ Eventually Michael and George Michael move into the house proper and it is the Bluth family patriarch, George, who moves into the attic to hide from authorities. The patriarch in the attic descends into quirky madness while hiding in the attic—he holds tea parties with dolls, dresses up in maternity clothes, and in season two occasionally howls out of boredom.

¹⁶ Jenkins, Patty, "The One Where They Build a House," *Arrested Development*, November 14, 2004.



Figure 52. Buster and Buster in front of falling houses. *Arrested Development*. 2.2, 14 Nov. 2004, above. Reisner, Carl and Buster Keaton, Steamboat Bill, Jr., 1928, below



inside the empty cube is the Bluth's matriarch Lucille committing adultery with her husband's twin brother—even Lucille's wanton adultery maintains the appearance of a domesticated nuclear family. This satire not only shows the comedy of failed domestication but also exposes an essential inadequacy in the structures offered by commercial interests; even though the characters in the show actively pursue the ideological promises of housing, they remain practically undomesticatable—even their imitations of chicken *clucks* are wildly inaccurate approximations. Buster Bluth embodies this failed pursuit when he sees in the falling house an opportunity to injure himself and get out of his army conscription. A visual inversion of Buster Keaton's falling house, Buster Bluth intentionally pursues injury by the house, only to inadvertently escape. Where the comedy of Keaton's falling façade is that his character is oblivious to the danger while the director scrupulously choreographed escape through the window, the comedy of Buster Bluth's escape is that he faces the house, intentionally seeking an injury that will ground him at home but it is the unintended inadequacy of the hollow house that interrupts Buster's pursuit (see figure 52). The hollow inadequacy of façades in *Arrested Development* is part of the satirical demystification of the domesticating role of housing: hollow housing may enclose consumer desire, but enclosure does not guarantee domestication of those desires.

In *War of the Roses*, Jonathan's desire for his house and its furnishings exceeds "mere" materialism in that he considers them "more than just objects" but "dreams, as if you're stepping into another reality. You begin to wonder how many others slept in this bed, what they thought about, how they looked at life." Jonathan collects antique porcelain figurines, an act of consumption that intensifies and generates rather than domesticates consumer desire. The commodities Jonathan collects have material constraints—previous owners, age, former uses—but rather than restraining or containing Jonathan's desires, those unique material limits activate his imagination, grow his

desire. According to Jonathan, “Just thinking about them prolongs their life. Maybe life itself is a dream.”¹⁷ The family au pair (and briefly mistress of Jonathan), resists his fancy, reminding him that they are “only things.” His response is impassioned: “Things? You don't understand. It's my whole world. Why should I let her take my whole world with her? [. . .] ‘It can't be shared any longer. Not like this.’”¹⁸ The fixer-upper house has irreversibly claimed Jonathan's sustained attentiveness, as evidenced by the countless hours he has spent building furniture, maintaining the house's orchid greenroom, pursuing collectible ceramics, and in the garage polishing his stationary Ferrari. It is the success of this domestication that sets up the tragedy of the Rose's divorce, for the house and its things have claimed not merely Jonathan's work but his very imagination and love, and his attachment is irreversible in the face of an attempted separation from the human intimacy formed out of his selfless devotion to house and home.¹⁹

The Rose house's claim on Barbara's self is no less intense or sustained—she found and secured the fixer-upper in the early stage of her marriage to Jonathan, and Barbara learned new skills in order to fix the house into the home it became. Barbara consequently sees the house as the only possible support for life after intimacy with Jonathan—it is in and through her home that “she was Barbara, her identity clear, unmistakable, Mistress of herself.”²⁰ Her professional identity also depends on using the house to throw dinner parties for her catering aspirations. The successful

¹⁷ Adler, loc. 1617.

¹⁸ Ibid. 1485.

¹⁹ In the reality series “Fixer Upper,” the couple tasked with fixing up houses present options to prospective homeowners with repeated assurances that the consumer must have an “imagination” for the house to become all it can be. When buyers balk at the work needed to convert a house into a home, Chip and Joanna speak behind-the-scenes to viewers about the buyers' lack of imagination. The structural inadequacies of a fixer upper are not in the house itself but in the homeowners themselves.

²⁰ Alder, loc. 2730.

domestication of the Rose couple is precisely what spells out Jonathan and Barbara's doom. In the comedic genre, the ability of the house to claim unalienated labor—labor performed automatically and with love—initially transformed it into a home, but the reintroduction of individual selves to the floorplan threatens the literal foundations of the domesticated family. Intended to contain one family and maintained by the unceasing work of “housekeeping,” the Roses' fixer upper has irreversibly restructured their desires and identities to fit the house, and Adler's narrative suggests that neither can live beyond the literal structure of those walls²¹. The fixer-upper's claim on the consumer's love may, in the affirmative comedic representation, redirect and domesticate consumer desire, but as illustrated by the satiric and tragic fixer-uppers, the very project of domestication can also be depicted in a manner that undermines its promises of proper containment.

The promise of containment is thematized in the setting of *War of the Roses*, which is a wealthy D.C. suburb in which “everyone was protected by a big house, walled in” and “the buzz of the air conditioners of the occupied houses nearby assured privacy from eavesdropping [. . .] Every house was a private armored ship.”²² Jonathan Rose conceives of this sheltering function of housing in terms of traditional gender roles: a man who collects ceramic figurines and nurtures orchids in his private greenhouse opines to his mistress that “Nobody wants to be dependent anymore [. . .] Whatever happened to man the hunter, man the protector?” [. . .] “Some people just don't accept the idea of males being lord and master anymore.”²³ Jonathan's comedic mistake in need of correction is to forget that the “lord and master” of contemporary domestication is, as I argued in

²¹ Historian Susan Strasser's study of American housework argues that industrialization did not lessen domestic chores but rather contributed to the conversion of domestic work from task to ongoing occupation. See Strasser, Susan, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

²² Adler, loc. 2764.

²³ Adler, loc. 1417.

the above section, the house itself, and by habitually clinging to so-called traditional gender roles in the face of a new ideological system, Jonathan is hilariously interrupted and derailed from his assumptions by Barbara's too-lively, too-independent movements. Though ideological domestication requires the subordination and remodeling of consumers, the comedic fixer upper has ways of showing how individuals and their desires tend to exceed containment. That porosity is, in the comedy, a condition in need of a social corrective; it is the hilarious presence of the outside that affirms the ideology of privacy.

In one sense this dissertation has been an attempt to trace through fiction the emotional value of domestic housing in contemporary America, and *Arrested Development* satirizes housing's ideological conflation of emotional with exchange value.²⁴ That value in housing is as ideological and metaphorical as it is financial and material was spectacularly demonstrated in the collapse of the 2007 housing market.²⁵ In 2005 American home ownership reached peak levels, even though between 2000 and 2005 the median sales price housing prices had also boomed by 1/3, with much sharper rises in regional areas like New York, Los Angeles, and Miami.²⁶ The economic values of housing, as Lee Anne Fennell has argued at length, transgress interior and exterior, public and private, and local and global binaries.²⁷ Like the houses in the first chapter, the value of a house exceeds its material dimensions. The individual love placed in home raises the cost of material

²⁴ Thomas Sowell notes the role of emotional "value" of a home in inflating the exchange values of American houses, though he emphasizes the ultimate sway of local building regulations on larger scale patterns in housing values. More restrictive land use regulations lead to more expensive housing, though these regulations themselves are often founded on emotional appeals to "protecting" the interests of home owners. Sowell, Thomas. "The Economics of the Housing Boom," in *The Housing Boom and Bust* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010), 1 – 29.

²⁵Sowell, 2010.

²⁶ Ibid. 1.

²⁷ Fennell, Lee Anne, *The Unbounded Home: Property Values beyond Property Lines* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

housing, and the rising cost of material housing increases the emotional value of home.²⁸ Privacy gets its value insofar as it is embedded in desirable larger social networks.²⁹ The corrective gesture sought out by the comedic fixer upper is to provoke laughter at the revelation of closeness to and dependence on other people, a hilarious state of affairs that reaffirms the ideological function of housing as fortress against human society.

Aspirational Automaticity

The fixer upper derives its comedy from the ideology of domestication, which demands that human inhabitants remodel themselves into mechanical parts of a domestic system.³⁰ Automaticity, or the mechanistic and inattentive inhabitation of a world, is for Henri Bergson the beginning rather than end of comedy, and the philosopher argues that automaticity is a state that solicits laughter, or “a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events.”³¹ The ideological imperative of the fixer upper comedy inverts Bergson’s formula, makes liveliness itself the object of correction and automaticity the goal, and this inversion gives the comedy of the fixer upper its peculiar relationship to tragedy; the fixer upper succeeds at the expense of individual liveliness.

²⁸ Thomas Sowell argues that housing prices, while varying dramatically from region to region, are also directly inflected by the loves and hopes of consumers. Sowell, Thomas, 2010, 1 – 28.

²⁹ The leading couple of the reality series *Fixer Upper* notes during the intro to each show that the “trick” to finding a worthwhile fixer upper is to find “the worst house on the best street.”

³⁰ Charlotte Perkins Gilman claimed that the home as a deeply emotional and sentimental concept is rooted in its function as “the shelter of the family, of the group organized for purposes of reproduction. In this sense a beehive is as much a home as any human dwelling place—even more, perhaps.” She argues that mother is the “heart” of this system not because of her emotional core but because of her reproductive function. What has changed from this early twentieth century conception of the home as a system is that the product of the contemporary home is not reproduction of individual humans, but is the remodeling of the family itself. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, *Home, Its Work and Influence* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2013 [1903]).

³¹Bergson, loc. 695.

A trope that is symptomatic of the fixer upper's inversion of comedic automaticity is the wild, desperate laughter of the characters themselves—laughs that are screams and screams that are laughs. In *War of the Roses*, Barbara and Jonathan both repeatedly laugh at inappropriate times, but it is his scream that verges on laughter when a migraine makes him hallucinate that the house has become a pulpy, moving monster: “It did not sound like his voice at all—a shrill cackle, like a rooster being strangled at sunrise . . . *My mind*, a faint trickle of logic told him. *My mind*.”³² Jonathan’s “mind” breaks down as he breaks his house down—as with the characters in my first chapter, his character forms in his ongoing active engagements with his housing, and his scream-laugh indexes activity that exceeds his individual will. In the film adaptation when Michael Douglas pushes Kathleen Turner down the stairs, she cartwheels gracefully to the landing; when he shoves her into furniture, she lithely lands into and elastically rises from the splits. The more of an individual Turner’s Barbara becomes, the more flexible her movements, the sweatier her exertions, the more destructive her sabotage—laughter provoked by Barbara’s antics corrects her too-individual, too-elastic inhabitation of her family home. Tom Hanks embodies uncontrolled laughter verging on a scream in *The Money Pit*, where his laugh at the bathtub crashing through the second to the first floors begins in spontaneous mirth and builds to an existential bray (see figure 11). The scene is a stark departure in tone from the rest of the slapstick film, and Anna’s (Shelley Long) expression of

³² Adler, loc. 254

confused discomfort further amplifies the ambivalence of the fixer upper's inversion of comedic automaticity. Of the existential scream Peter Schwenger writes that it is an "unconscious reflex" that comprises an attempt to escape entrapment within individual identity.³³ Schwenger's account of the scream intersects with Bergson's understanding of laughter in that each social gesture is defined as an attempt at individual correction: for Bergson laughter corrects absentmindedness, a mechanistic lack of individuality, and for Schwenger the scream corrects what amounts to *too much* individuality. When Jonathan's scream verges on hysterical laughter and Hanks's reflexive laugh stretches into a desperate scream, it is as though both characters engage in an irresistible, uncontrolled spastic cry for relation, an attempt to startle others into halting the corrective of their own automatic laugh response to the house's antics (see figure 53).

In *War of the Roses*, the inappropriate presence of individualized inhabitants transforms the house into a self-enclosed system of violent destruction: automation intervenes when individuals



Figure 53. Screaming with laughter. Richard Benjamin, *The Money Pit* (1986).

³³ Schwenger, Peter, "Phenomenology of the Scream," *Critical Inquiry* 40 no. 2: (Winter 2014), 383.

become too lively. In the novel, Jonathan sets the automated kitchen appliances to burst into electric mayhem nearly killing Barbara, and Barbara rigs the automatic garage door opener to utterly destroy Jonathan's prized Ferrari. Though Jonathan's intent is presumably to sabotage Barbara's debut catering dinner, his mediated violence is written directly onto Barbara's body in the novel. First he uses power tools to destroy the dining table, and "the injuring of the table seemed to transfer itself to her own flesh."³⁴ Then when Barbara presses on to begin preparing for her first business meal, "every electrical appliance in the kitchen seemed to be turning on in sequence." Barbara falls to the floor, and "as she rose, she toppled a knife box, spraying sharp knives all over her body, making cuts in her thighs."³⁵ While trying to wash her cuts, "she inadvertently pulled the arm of the faucet, scalding her hand. As it involuntarily shot away from the fiery liquid, her hand brushed the disposal switch, turning on the machine, moving deep in the bowels of the basin." This automated system is illustrative of the slapstick chain reactions that predominate in the fixer upper, a house with a structure so unstable that a minimal action will set off a chain reaction of destructive events. Yet Adler's presentation takes a satiric orientation to the comedic correction of Barbara's insolent liveliness by unmistakably recording the effects of the chain reaction on Barbara's flesh:

The sweat of fear poured down her back. The cacophony stabbed at her eardrums and the blood from her knife wounds began to soak through her trousers. Her scalded hand ached as she staggered madly across the kitchen, bumping into pots, pans, colanders, salad bowls, scattering canned goods and food, breaking plates. Her head banged into the copper pots hanging overhead. She felt herself falling from dizziness and inadvertently grabbed at the pots, bringing them down with her and giving herself a near concussion.

³⁴ Adler, loc. 2640.

³⁵ Ibid., loc. 2780.

This uncomfortably comedic scene parallels scenes of possession in haunted houses, where family members become possessed by their housing and are moved to abuse one another. Where the haunted house's liveliness mediated interpersonal violence, the comedic fixer upper mediates it by automating it: Jonathan's culpability in Barbara's abuse is mediated through the appliances that work on their own, but also through Barbara's own efforts to avoid the system, which are what amplify the system's destructive effects. Automated chain reactions in the fixer upper expose homeowners as inappropriately alienated, hilariously out of control of the domestic systems they *ought* to be embedded within.

The strangely ambivalent comedy of the fixer upper—one which enacts sometimes extraordinary violence on bodies in pursuit of domestic tranquility—demonstrates the work of ideology. Characters inhabiting fixer uppers are not mechanistically absentminded by default, nature, or essence but by training and practice. The mechanical does not dehumanize, but rather humanizes characters by reconstructing them. In comparison with the elaborate chain reactions that the couple navigates while repairing their fixer-upper, the labors of reproduction and maintenance appears easy—a privilege, even.³⁶ An automatic commitment to the house, their enthralled dependence on its structure and symbolism, their de-individualization, their artificial isolation are all features of American humanity. What in my other chapters was horrifying or tragic becomes in this genre the very precondition for happy resolution and full humanity. In the fixer upper, human bodies strive to

³⁶ Betty Friedan famously detailed the marketing of housework to housewives as a privilege and source of fulfilment, even while “each scientific advance that might have freed women from the drudgery of cooking, cleaning, and washing, thereby giving her more time for other purposes, instead imposed new drudgery, until housework not only expanded to fill the time available, but could hardly be done in the available time.” Friedan, Betty, “Housewifery Expands to Fill the Time Available,” in *The Feminine Mystique* (NY: W. W. Norton and Co, 1963), 261.

unite themselves with automated systems, and in failing, fall hilariously into embeddedness in the social web of domesticity.

Satirical responses to the automated requirements of ideological domestication provoke laughter to correct ideological assumptions rather than individual failures to adhere to them. *The Stepford Wives* depicts midcentury women as fixer-uppers; women individualized by political consciousness and activated by unprecedented access to education appear to their husbands as inadequate supports for dreams of domesticity. The women of Stepford were all initially professionals, accomplished activists, and lively participants in the external, public world, and their husbands seek to remodel them into automated support for domestic systems. The husbands hole themselves up in an old mansion where they come up with mysterious plans for fixing up their wives, tightening their waists, improving their cleaning functions, and emptying them of their outward-directed, individualized energies. Levin represents the “feminine mystique” not as a project of mistaken essentialism, but as a project of reconstruction. Fixing up housing means reconstructing human character according to the idealized images of ideologies, and through the work of fixing up reality, the consumer can experience national ideals as material realizations of their individual labor, thus making the American dream a primary locale for hinging between homogenized national identity and private individualism. Fiction is where Americans have worked out their ambivalence toward the structural failures of the American dream; fiction is where we have worked through the inconveniences of material reality and the embodied existence of other people.

Conclusion

To fail at domestication is to fail at becoming human, and to become mechanical is to successfully reconstruct unruly individuals into domesticated humanity. While there is much work on the *erasure* of affective labor in neoliberal markets, the fiction of fixer-uppers regularly and openly

displays that very labor—makes it a comedy.³⁷ The home as the product of unalienated labor makes the house the site of unending, unacknowledged labor, and the brokenness and abandoned state of the fixer upper is the condition of openness that claims the loves of individuals. It is thus that Americans can experience the object world as an image conquered, a symbol claimed and infused with meaning, a dream made material. The repeated fall of the house in American fiction is a symptom of the unstable foundation of this material dream; whether the structure is founded upon the coercive gender relations in Poe’s “Usher,” upon the vampiric influence of the past in Hawthorne’s decaying seven-gabled mansion; upon the suffocating raced and classed oppression within aspirational social intimacies in Levin’s faded and peeling Neo-Gothic apartment building;

³⁷ Federici, Silvia, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA : Brooklyn, NY : London: PM Press; Common Notions: Autonomedia; Turnaround [distributor], 2012).



Figure 54. The fall of the house of Bluth. *Arrested Development*, 2.2.

upon the bankrupt artificiality of human realness in Spielberg's shattered Blue Fairy statue; or upon the systematic reconstruction of individuals into mechanistic units through collapsing fixer uppers, fictional housing's instability suggests that material containers are more activating of social change than they are containing of stable identities or social aspirations. In the tragic genres represented in this dissertation, fictional characters attempt to force domestication by creating rigid material containment. In the fixer upper characters optimistically aspire to that very rigid containment; the fixer upper dissolves and threatens to engulf individuality, it isolates, it automates, yet in comedy these qualities move protagonists into self-help, they rearrange and reanimate characters into committed units. This genre thus records a transfer of ideological power from the institution of marriage to the infrastructure of housing, a transfer with consequences not only for individual women and children but for men as well. In the fixer upper the family inheres only through work on

housing, and when the house falls, as illustrated in *The War of the Roses* and *Arrested Development*, so too does the family as we know it (see figure 54).

The falling house is a structure that has been abandoned by its creators, and a structure in a state of motion and change. Nathaniel Hawthorne's character Holgrave asks us to abandon the overly determined structures of "dead men's houses" in favor of newly constructed bird's nests. Willa Cather asks us to throw the furniture out the window. Cheever and Keats ask us to move into houses with individual style. Audre Lorde asks us to "dismantle the master's house."³⁸ The present work adds the tool of critical attention animating processes at work in the relation of inanimate structure to character: it is in the inconvenient clashes of individual differences, the incompatibility of people to become tools, and the inharmonious desires of others that the potential resistance to ideological domestication lies. Housing has an uncanny tendency to reanimate the contained. This is to say that the worlds of fiction have something to teach real world actors about housing and its effects on the individuals it contains. What is a matter of course in real life—superimposing dehumanizing stereotypes on affective laborers and nonhuman actors in order to render them inert tools—is shown in fiction to have warping and animating effects. To house is to contain on a single scale, and fiction shows how housing is infinitely scalable—a series of pages might contain an entire universe, while that universe contains worlds and those worlds contain material structures which contain bodies, which contain character. To house a scale induces a temporary and changeable character, a bubble temporarily moved to life by the animating breath of whoever shapes and attends to the scale. As with the bubble, the resulting life is both temporary and independently lively. Housing the breath of life does not flatten *or* reproduce the original breather—rather it takes on a

³⁸ Lorde, Audre, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]). 110 – 114.

life of its own as it enraptures others, suspends their attention on its enclosed scale of creation. It is in fiction's difference from reality that we can gain new tools for dismantling or reconstructing the ideologies domesticating the surfaces of our social worlds.

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