

William Wyler's Uncanny Creation:

The Fantôme Fatale in *The Letter*.

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Wyler and the Fantôme Fatale: An Introduction

In his 1919 essay on "The Uncanny" in the literature, Freud declares that "the story-teller has a *peculiarly* directive power over us; by means of the moods he can put us into, he is able to guide the current of our emotions."¹ Though here Freud refers specifically to literary artists, his statement nonetheless applies to the talents of film directors – those story-tellers whose powers over narrative, frame, and the emotions each presents and evokes denote a fluency in the language of cinema. Indeed, just as a writer may guide his/her reader's sensibilities to what Freud defines as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" in the realm of the uncanny, so too is a director capable of creating an uncanny filmic universe that "arouses dread and horror...[and] excites fear" in the viewer.²

In considering the story-tellers of the classic era of Hollywood cinema, William Wyler emerges as just such a director: a filmmaker who not only demonstrates an affinity for the concept of the uncanny in a film like *The Letter* (1940), but who does so by, as his champion André Bazin states, "try[ing] to find aesthetic equivalents for psychological...truth in the *mise-en-scène*."³ This study, then, will approach *The Letter* as an emblematic work evidencing Wyler's interest in conveying the "psychological truth" of his heroine, Leslie Crosbie (played by Bette Davis) and will use Freud's essay on the uncanny as a theoretical context for exploring the (sur)reality determined by the force of her character. With this film, Wyler approaches the desire of his female protagonist as a power transforming the diegetic

world of the film from one of straightforward dramatic conflict to an unsettling realm; a space ruled not by the grotesque “monstrous-feminine”⁴ of horror films or an earthly *femme fatale*, but by an otherworldly figure that this article will conceptualize as a *fantôme fatale*.

Michael A. Anderegg, in his study on Wyler, maintains that the director “has always favored strong, clever, independent, and even willful women,” an inclination demonstrated in films like *Jezebel* (1938), *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), and *The Heiress* (1949).⁵ Yet in *The Letter*, Wyler surpasses even his predilection for such “strong women” by creating a new style of female psychological portraiture that focuses not on the corporeal character but on the ethereal spirit or *fantôme* contained therein. In this way, he offers an exploration of woman as a catalyst inspiring a troubled union between the supernatural and natural dimensions, and infusing the physical diegetic world with the eerily transcendent power of her desire – by turns romantic, obsessive, and vengeful. Using the camera and *mise-en-scène* as a kind of narrative voice articulating the emotional states of the film’s heroine, Wyler transforms what Bazin terms the “ideal coordinates of [his frame’s] dramatic geometry” into a lived fantasy produced by the *fantôme fatale*’s supernatural psyche.⁶

Certainly Hollywood cinema has a great tradition of fatal women, the most extreme generic example of which is what Barbara Creed terms the *femme castratrice* of horror movies, in which woman represents a “female monster...shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject.”⁷ Referencing films like *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), Creed remarks that “the presence of the monstrous-feminine in the popular horror film speaks...more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity” – a distinction that recalls the male-as-subject and female-as-object dichotomy so prevalent in *film noir*. Indeed, having been made in 1940, *The Letter* belongs to that period of Hollywood history associated with *film noir*, a movement defined by films like Billy Wilder’s

Double Indemnity (1944), Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947), and Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), and characterized by what Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton term "moral ambivalence, criminal violence, and contradictory complexity of...situations."⁸ Integral to these narratives is the figure of the *femme fatale*, a force of femininity Janey Place describes as "the dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction."⁹ The *film noir* woman is traditionally read in terms of her significance to the (anti)hero of the film, an approach upon which the narrative structures of these works, with their reliance on male voice-over narration and flashbacks, all but insist.

Though contemporary to *film noir*, Wyler's film and its heroine belong not to the more carnal femininity represented by the filmic *femme fatale*, but instead find their foundation in the Romantic literary traditions that first conceived of the notion of the fatal woman. In her study *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon*, Virginia M. Allen credits the works of poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats as making manifest what she terms "the Romantic love affair with Death." Inspired by Goethe's *Faust*, Shelley paid homage to the concept of the deadly woman in his 1819 poem to Medusa; and in that same year, Keats gave further shape to the idea of the *femme fatale* in his poem *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, in which a supernaturally beautiful enchantress seduces a knight and causes him to, as Allen states, "wander...forever outside time, warmth, light."¹⁰

Lacking the grotesqueness of the monstrous-feminine and the overt sexuality of the *film noir* fatal woman, the Romantic-era *femme fatale* and her otherworldly attraction represent the predecessor to Wyler's sometimes menacingly ethereal *fantôme fatale*. This literary connection seems especially appropriate in considering that *The Letter* is an adaptation of a 1927 play by W. Somerset Maugham, tracing the effects of Leslie's murderous crime of passion against her married lover. In order to best analyze the "qualities of feeling," to use Freud's words, evoked by the unsettling diegetic realm over

which Leslie reigns, this essay will utilize terms from the vocabulary of the uncanny – most specifically, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*.¹¹ In the introduction to his essay, Freud comments upon the relationship between *heimlich*, meaning familiar and homely, and *unheimlich*, or uncanny and frightening. After an extensive listing of various definitions for the words, Freud concludes that *heimlich*

belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight.

He remarks further that “*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*.”¹²

The film itself reflects this continuum between the homely and the uncanny in its fluid transitioning between more realist aesthetics and expressionistic moments of surreality. Certainly this stylistic versatility stands in contrast to the traditional conception of Wyler as a director who, as Bazin comments, sought a “transparency of style”– an artistic decision leading to the current, dismissive perception amongst film critics and historians that the director, as Andrew Sarris states, offers “less than meets the eye.”¹³ Sarris’s disdain for Wyler becomes even more apparent in his brief critique of the director’s work, in which the former remarks, “It would seem that Wyler’s admirers have long mistaken a lack of feeling for emotional restraint.”¹⁴

In *The Letter*, however, Wyler aligns the design of the film and the psyche of the *fantôme fatale* in order to suffuse the frame with a sinister sense of passion. With Wyler’s privileging of her perspective in the construction of the film, Leslie presents a complicating counterpoint to the classic Hollywood woman theorized by traditional feminist critics like Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane. Arguing that the patriarchal vision of filmmaking relegates the woman to merely an onscreen-object of male

scopophilic desires, Mulvey writes in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” that “cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire.”¹⁵ Yet rather than creating a world in which the woman exists only as an object of male fantasy, Wyler infuses this classic studio-era film with a decidedly unconventional attention to female subjectivity. That is, he approaches woman as a figure of *supernatural* agency, altering the parameters of diegetic reality in the crafting of the space of her fantasy. In more specific psychoanalytic terms, Leslie’s overwhelming psychical reality subverts, in the words of J. LaPlanche and J.-B. Pontalis, the “conditions imposed by the outside world” and its governing reality principle.¹⁶

In this way, Wyler’s characterization of the *fantôme fatale* and her otherworldly power entails a filmic construction of what J. LaPlanche and J.-B. Pontalis refer to as the fantastic “*mise-en-scène* of desire.” The theorists define fantasies as “scripts...of organised scenes that are capable of dramatisation – usually in a visual form” and go on to remark that “the subject has his own part to play [in the sequence]...in which permutations of roles and attributions are possible.”¹⁷ In creating a dimension by and for the strength of her desires, certainly Leslie resides in – and, moreover, guides others to inhabit – such a fantasy realm, in which she plays dual roles as corporeal character and phantom designer of the unfolding *mise-en-scène*. With her power to influence the physicality of the film through her access to the metaphysical, the *fantôme fatale* of *The Letter* introduces the filmic world to, in Freud’s terms, the uncanny “feeling...in relation to...spirits and ghosts.”¹⁸

Repression and Revelation in *The Letter*

- I. **Howard: I’ve been trying to understand you.**
 Leslie: Why? Because I’m so...evil?

Though Leslie Crosbie cunningly conceals her madness from those around her, her troubled psyche nonetheless reveals itself through a camera often possessed by her supernatural force. A desire dark in its obsessive lust and murderous determination conjures the *fantôme* within Leslie, awakening a sinister sense of surreality and magic through which she manipulates and seduces the camera. The opening of the film, an extended tracking shot that Barbara Bowman describes as “unusually animated,” introduces the *unheimlich* sensibilities that come to dominate the diegetic world.¹⁹ Following an image of a full moon, the shot begins by focusing on the steady drip of sap from a rubber tree, a movement complemented by the languid rhythms of the musical score. Vertical and horizontal pans proceed to take in the lush tropical plantation, and as the plantation house itself comes into sight in long shot, the sound of gunshots breaks through the music. A man, who is soon revealed to be Hammond, Leslie’s lover, then staggers onto the porch as a woman follows and shoots him in the back. Moments later, there is a cut to a medium long-shot of Leslie pursuing the man as he falls down the stairs. After she fires the last shot, she stands motionless, staring at her victim as the camera pans forward steadily and purposefully for a close-up of her shadowed, expressionless face.

In juxtaposing the tracking shot with this close-up, Wyler definitively identifies the restless movement of the camera with Leslie herself. Indeed, her image serves as a kind of anchoring counterpoint to the opening camerawork that seemed almost disorienting in its animation, its stealthy motion paralleling Leslie’s own relentless pursuit of her prey. In its otherworldly exoticism, the space Leslie occupies in the tracking shot recalls Freud’s definition in “The Uncanny” of an “animistic conception of the universe,” one “characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings...[and] by the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic.”²⁰ Certainly this shot serves to establish not only the setting of the film but also the uncanny “omnipotence

of thoughts” that enables Leslie to draw the camera towards her for the close-up.

While the workers on the plantation panic immediately after Hammond’s murder, Leslie remains impassive as she gazes at his body. Framed in a medium shot from the back, Leslie stands in the darkness over Hammond, the concentration of her cold stare broken only by the appearance of moonlight flooding the frame. After looking up as if to, as Charles Affron describes it, “challenge...[the] moon” with her “murderess’s eyes,” Leslie turns back to Hammond’s body – this time, with her eerily distinct shadow falling over him.²¹ Freud comments upon the “uncanny effect of silence, darkness, and solitude”; yet in this shot, Wyler creates an illuminated space of stillness all the more chilling in its insistence on uncovering Leslie’s crime and the steely brutality that literally casts its shadow over her victim.²²

The expressionistic quality of this shot recalls Gilles Deleuze’s description in *Cinema I: The Movement Image* of that aesthetic as “operat[ing] with darkness and light...the two powers couple together gripping like wrestlers.” In this image, however, the light itself represents not a “luminous principle” struggling with the darkness, but rather a cold, revelatory expression of Leslie’s potential for evil.²³ Instead of “gripping like wrestlers,” here the darkness and light fit together like puzzle pieces, creating a comprehensive picture of Leslie’s *fatale* self. Truly, Wyler’s composition of this shot offers a defining image of his heroine: though in body Leslie stands to the right of the frame as a figure looming above Hammond, it is her shadow near the center of the frame that serves as the focal point attracting the eye of the spectator. In this way, Wyler insists that the audience read Leslie not simply as a woman but as an incarnation of malevolent desires. As Freud states, “we can...speak of a living person as uncanny...[and] we must feel that his intentions to harm us are going to be carried out with the help of special powers” – and in imbuing her with this

otherworldly force, Wyler establishes Leslie's identity not as a *femme fatale*, but a *fantôme fatale*.²⁴

In her analysis of the figure of the fatal woman in classic cinema, Mary Ann Doane comments upon "the disparity between seeming and being, the deception, instability, and unpredictability associated with the woman."²⁵ Certainly Leslie stands as a woman whose determination to conceal the *fantôme* within renders her especially destructive to the men in her life; as Sharon Kern states, Leslie's life itself represents "a bravura performance."²⁶ Yet the incriminating words (proving that she and Hammond were lovers) of the titular letter itself, like the moonlight that illuminates Leslie's identity as a *fantôme*, reveal the menacing sensuality that lies beneath her guise of grace and charm. In the scene in which Howard, Leslie's lawyer, learns of the letter's existence, Wyler emphasizes its significance through a tracking shot that pans from a close medium shot of Howard to a close-up of the letter itself, holding this image for an extended moment – thus granting the object the same visual consideration traditionally associated with a close-up of an animate being. Indeed, as the following scenes make clear, the letter represents an entity in itself, one brought to life by the passion of Leslie's words contained therein. In keeping with the animistic universe "peopled with the spirits of human beings," the letter signifies a living extension of Leslie's hidden nature.²⁷

Leslie's reaction to the discovery of the letter further underscores its power. As she and Howard stand in a medium shot, he offers Leslie the letter – only to have her back away from it in a panic, fleeing from its presence by moving out of the frame. The camera pans to the left to follow Leslie's retreat, with Howard reading the damning contents off-screen: "I absolutely must see you. I am desperate, and if you don't come I won't answer for the consequences." Like an incantation, these words awaken in Leslie the madness she had concealed since the murder, her facial expression and body language mirroring that of the opening sequence. If, as Freud

maintains in his essay “Repression,” “the essence of repression lies simply in the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness,” then the letter offers evidence not only of Leslie’s hidden affair but also of an aspect of her psyche she has repressed in her efforts to appear the consummate society wife.²⁸ Refusing to read the letter, Leslie attempts to physically distance herself from the obsessive passion and sensuality her words reveal.

In the subsequent sequence, however, Leslie’s desperate desire to conceal the existence of the letter leads her to draw upon the otherworldly force of her *fatale* nature and convince Howard to buy the letter in order to keep it from the prosecution. Throughout the film, a heavily stylized *mise-en-scène* isolates Leslie as a threatening figure in the space of the frame, most markedly in the use of a lighting motif that creates bar-like shadows (from the window blinds of the interior sets) on or near Leslie’s body. Anderegg describes these as symbolic of both “where Leslie legally deserves to be (in prison)” and her confining life on the plantation;²⁹ and as Howard becomes more aware of the truth of Leslie’s crime and further seduced by her will, he finds himself subject to the same visual motifs that haunt his guilty client.

As Howard stands in the deep space of the frame surrounded by the shadows of the window blinds, he maintains that he will not compromise his professional integrity; yet the bars around him foretell his inevitable acquiescence to Leslie’s plan. Indeed, by the end of the scene he has agreed to buy the letter and has joined her frame, standing in the foreground as she sits in the background. The image of Howard’s shadow distinctly cast over Leslie’s own on the wall behind her signifies the awakening of the darker side of Howard’s nature – his submission to Leslie’s fantastic will.

Yet Leslie’s false confession scene following Hammond’s murder represents the *tour de force* of her fatal talents, her uncanny ability to seduce not only men but also diegetic reality itself to suit her desires. Several minutes after Hammond’s death, the narrative retreats from the outdoor

space of the plantation to the interior of the house, a site ostensibly more *heimlich* than the restless jungle. Leslie's powers over the camera and the characters, however, become all the more evident in this sequence, as she narrates the events of the evening to Howard; Robert, her husband; and a police detective. With great composure and grace, Leslie stands to reenact her version of the moments leading up to Hammond's murder – a tale of attempted rape and a subsequent act of self-defense – and is once again the center of attention and the frame itself, the attentive gazes of the three men focusing on her without wavering. As Anderegg remarks, Leslie's retelling "become[s] a play within a play," a performance opposing Mulvey's concept of the woman-as-object, or "silent image...tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."³⁰

Indeed, the force of Leslie's words also manipulates the camera itself. As she relates in voice-over how she found the gun, followed Hammond onto the veranda, and shot him as he fell down the stairs, the camera reenacts her movements, tracking through the empty space of these locales to retrace Leslie's pursuit. This tracking shot exemplifies Bowman's theory of Wyler's use of "absent presence," or the way in which he "defines the context of the space around a character's presence...So while the...character is actually absent later, his presence is still implied."³¹ Though Hammond is dead, the power of Leslie's narration nonetheless resurrects him to relive his final moments; and like a true *fantôme fatale*, in this shot the specter of Leslie herself walks with the ghost she created in a vacuum of empty space signifying the utter absence of real feeling behind Leslie's actions. What matters to the *fantôme fatale* is not returning to her lover, but rather imposing the fantastic re-enactment of her pursuit onto the diegetic reality.

According to Bazin, part of Wyler's talent as a director lies in his ability to "command...[the] mental vision" of the spectator; and certainly in this sequence Wyler insists that the audience literally share Leslie's vision of the diegesis.³² In this way, the scene represents a segment of first-person visual

text, with the end of the passage signified by a return to the present as a medium shot captures Leslie's hand – extended as though she were still holding the gun – at the left of the frame, as Robert and Howard sit forward in rapt attention. As Edward R. Branigan remarks, "The *subjective* or first-person narrator is that level of narration attributed to a particular origin within the narrative diegesis (character)" – yet Wyler's assigning of the role of narrator to Leslie signifies something other than a simple shift in perspective.³³ More precisely, it serves to reflect Leslie's confidence in her ability to seduce any entity, man or camera, to her will. Like the uncanny subject described by Freud, Leslie maintains a "narcissistic overvaluation of [her] own mental processes," a sense of power highlighted by Wyler's decision to allow her "mental vision" to command a sequence of the film.³⁴

II. Leslie: Then I heard about that native woman...At last I saw her with those hideous spangles, that chalky painted face, those eyes like a cobra's eyes.

Though Leslie seeks to conceal the truth of her malevolent nature beneath a graceful and refined surface, another woman in *The Letter* refuses to dissemble: Hammond's widow, a Malayan woman whom Leslie describes as "horrible...all covered with gold chains and bracelets and spangles, with a face like a mask." For Leslie, a society woman who attempts to repress her lustful desires, Mrs. Hammond (who remains nameless throughout the film) and her wanton persona represent a frightening incarnation of the darker desires that lie beneath Leslie's placid exterior – recalling the "monstrous feminine" figure theorized by Barbara Creed.

According to Freud, manifestations of a repressed instinct "are bound...to terrify [the subject] by the way in which they reflect an extraordinary and dangerous strength of instinct."³⁵ Certainly Leslie's intense antipathy towards Mrs. Hammond bespeaks a variation on this

revulsion, a kind of horror at the revelation of the sexually-charged instinct consistently concealed within her nature – the same uncanny disquiet that often accompanies the recognition of one's double, "a thing of terror" embodying "the same...character-traits or vicissitudes" of a subject's self.³⁶ Wyler depicts the tension within this uncanny affinity in the climactic scene in which Leslie purchases the letter from Mrs. Hammond. Both Leslie and Howard meet her in a shop filled with bizarre *objets d'art*, two of which capture Leslie's attention: a pair of daggers, shot in a close-up that recalls the earlier image of the letter and foreshadows the ensuing confrontation between Leslie and Mrs. Hammond, another deadly set of doubles.

Wyler constructs the moments leading up to this encounter with a sense of restlessness similar to that of the opening sequence, fragmenting the space of the room with medium shots of wind chimes moving in the breeze and a man smoking an opium pipe as he observes Leslie and Howard. The rather swift and disorienting rhythm of these shots, underscored by the eerie sound of the chimes, creates a sense of uneasy anticipation for the arrival of Mrs. Hammond, who finally appears from behind swaying beaded curtains. The steady, purposeful movement of the camera as it tracks forward from the back of the room to frame Mrs. Hammond indicates that her presence exerts a magnetism matching, if not surpassing, Leslie's own. Indeed, the camera deliberately tracks past Leslie to capture an image of Hammond's widow, leaving the former a mere witness to a greater force of fatal femininity.

In a subsequent shot, Wyler employs a deep-space aesthetic to present Leslie and Mrs. Hammond as they face each other across the expanse of the room, the latter in the background staring at Leslie, who returns her gaze from the foreground with her back to the camera. Michael Klein and Gillian Parker, in their study of film adaptations of literary works, note that in the deep-space shots "both background...and foreground may constitute distinct discourses"; yet the depth-of-field in this shot serves not to

necessarily distinguish the women from each other, but rather to emphasize their uneasy union.³⁷ To paraphrase Bazin, this deep-focus image evidences that Leslie and Mrs. Hammond “exist on the same plane.”³⁸ Though separated by the space of the room and the frame itself, both women find themselves nonetheless bound together, their shared gaze reflecting a shared mental vision.

Like the uncanny individual described by Freud, and certainly like Leslie herself, Mrs. Hammond seems imbued with special powers – even Leslie obeys Mrs. Hammond’s command to approach her, and the camera follows the former until it entraps the two women in a close medium shot that creates a claustrophobic sense of proximity. Dressed entirely in white and wearing a lace shawl, Leslie finds herself in reluctant subordination to Mrs. Hammond, a threatening figure robed in a dark dress standing above Leslie with a look of contempt. Earlier in the scene, Mrs. Hammond had insisted that Leslie remove the shawl from her head, thus stripping Leslie of a veil that, in Doane’s terms, “conceal[s]...[and] hide[s] a secret”;³⁹ and in this way, Hammond’s widow demands that the murderess reveal herself as such, no longer concealing the secret of her true nature. The two women now seem to embody the darkness and light that figured so strikingly in the defining image of Leslie in the beginning of the film, with, once again, the entities not “grappling like wrestlers” but acknowledging each other as complementary forces. As Leslie shares Mrs. Hammond’s frame, the latter forces her to recognize that in facing the wife of the man she killed, Leslie is also facing her other self: the fantôme made flesh.

III. Leslie: There’s no excuse for me. I don’t deserve to live.

Just as the union of darkness and light creates a sense of energy within the frame, the tension between what is concealed and revealed in Leslie’s character inspires the force of magnetism that enables her to seduce the

camera at will. Indeed, once her husband's discovery of the letter provokes Leslie to admit that she had an affair with Hammond and killed him when he married, the camerawork sunders its alliance with her psyche. In fully disclosing her fatal identity, Leslie cedes control of the uncanny universe she conjured and becomes instead vulnerable to it. Leslie's loss of power evidences itself immediately following her confession to Robert. The ensuing sequence opens with a tracking shot that surreptitiously captures the exterior of Howard's house (where Leslie is residing), almost prowling around the gardens whose eerie shadows contrast the gaiety of the party seen through a window. This disquieting motion of the camera, making manifest the sense of the *unheimlich* that haunts the inhabitants of the home-space, foreshadows the tragedy that will befall the film's troubled heroine.

Whereas the opening scene presented Leslie as the force behind the camerawork, in this sequence she is utterly oblivious to the design of the frame in which she finds herself. Immediately following the ominous tracking shot is a medium shot of Leslie sitting before her dressing table, preparing for the party given in her honor. As she glances down from the mirror before her, it reflects a figure looking in from the window. Moments later, Leslie goes to the veranda and discovers one of the daggers from the curio shop placed at her door, an emblem of both her murderous past and the uncanny rapport she shares with Mrs. Hammond.

Though the man in the mirror appears only momentarily, his image inspires a quality of unease – not only at the man's almost supernatural appearance and disappearance, but also at the fact that the spectator, once merely a witness to the workings of Leslie's mental vision, now finds him/herself in a position of knowledge more privileged than that of the woman who had heretofore manipulated the diegetic world. In this way, Wyler's camera articulates the imminence of Leslie's downfall before the narrative itself even alludes to it. According to Stephen Heath, "it is narrative significance that at any moment sets the space of the frame to be

followed and ‘read’ ”;⁴⁰ yet in *The Letter*, Wyler inverts this concept and instead uses the space of the frame to set forth the narrative significance of the moment.

Wyler further depicts Leslie’s complete and helpless descent into madness through a series of shots of her as she works on her lace, an activity that once signified her sense of discipline and control over life. In this scene, however, the lace-making stands as a mockery of Leslie’s former authority. In the first medium shot of the sequence, a distressed Leslie seats herself to begin the work in an effort to compose herself after the party; there is then another medium shot, this one from a low angle that creates an almost distorted space in which Leslie appears trapped. Finally, there is a cut to a close medium shot eye-level to Leslie that captures her hopeless attempts to concentrate on her work and her growing anxiety, the tension of the moment highlighted by the off-kilter tones of the music score. Like the series of disorienting images that preceded Mrs. Hammond’s appearance, these shots disrupt the filmic universe while signaling its devolution into a distinctly uncanny dimension. Even more significantly, the presentation of the shots clearly emphasizes the diminishment of Leslie’s powers – for just as she cannot concentrate on the lace-making, she cannot hold the focus of the camera for an extended shot. Once in command of the mental vision of the film, Leslie can now only submit to the workings of a camera that captures the unravelling of her sanity.

The final moments of the film present an almost abstract universe that favors imagery as a means of narrating the remainder of Leslie’s story, and this approach emphasizes Leslie’s loss of control over the “carefully graded magical powers” that now revolt against her, rendering her subject to the animistic forces she inspired with her troubled desires. After she has sacrificed any chance of future happiness with Robert by confessing, “With all my heart, I still love the man I killed,” Leslie pauses on the threshold between her bedroom and the garden. Suspended for a moment between the

heimlich home-space she violated and the *unheimlich* garden of secrets and hidden presences, Leslie then ventures into the garden. With a sense of fatalism, she enters a now-sinister and enchanted place seeming to lay in wait for the woman whose malevolence inspired its creation.

As Leslie walks around the garden searchingly, the camera lurks behind the foliage and frames her in long shot from a high angle. Though at first Leslie appears lost, the presence of the camera itself seems to attract her attention and, as Bowman notes, “draw [Leslie] forth” deeper into the garden as she turns to follow the path it creates as it tracks backwards.⁴¹ No longer empowered by a “narcissistic overvaluation of [her] own mental processes,” Leslie now acquiesces to the will of the camera she once dominated. The subsequent shot follows Leslie’s shadow as it moves wraith-like across the lawn, a surreal image that captures the final journey of the *fantôme fatale* – and leaves no doubt as to Leslie’s identity as such.

After Leslie walks through the garden gate, the camera reveals the force that has controlled its actions in the past few minutes. In a reference to the shot that introduced Leslie herself, the camera pulls back from Leslie and pans to the left, where it frames Mrs. Hammond and proceeds to track forward swiftly for a close-up that depicts Mrs. Hammond’s usurpation of Leslie’s rule over the camera. As Leslie faces her nemesis, the dark double of her nature, a faint expression of triumph crosses her features – until she is stabbed by Mrs. Hammond with the mysterious dagger. In these concluding moments of the film, the latter proves her power as the reigning fatal woman of *The Letter*.

Ultimately, *The Letter* offers no vision of romantic, albeit supernatural, redemption. Rather, the sinister, uncanny aura that opened the film gains strength until it permeates the entire filmic universe irrevocably. The refusal of the sinister forces behind this animistic universe to cede their control matches Leslie’s own refusal to relinquish the warped love she harbors for

the man she murdered, a determination that leads to her devolution into a prisoner of the uncanny dimension she conjured with her obsessive desires.

The After-Life of the Fantôme Fatale: Conclusion

In their definition of fantasy, LaPlanche and Pontalis declare that

The use of the term...cannot fail to evoke the distinction between imagination and reality...we are brought to define phantasy as a purely illusory production which cannot be sustained when it is confronted with a correct apprehension of reality.⁴²

Though here the theorists' "psycho-analytic axis of reference" requires the differentiation of fantasy and reality, cinema itself invites the interaction between these dual realms, and in this way represents what Jean-Louis Baudry in "The Apparatus" terms the "illusion [that] underlies our direct contact with reality."⁴³ Certainly the *mise-en-scène* of desire crafted by Wyler in *The Letter* presents a world in which diegetic reality and supernatural fantasy not only retain a tangential proximity, but intertwine through the workings of the *fantôme fatale* herself. Truly, the force of this entity recalls the "tangible allusion," or manifest link between "one human being and another human being or certain objects which form part of his universe" heralded by Alexandre Astruc in his 1948 article "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-stylo."⁴⁴ Although Wyler's *oeuvre* as a whole exhibits an intense interest in the relationships existing between the protagonists and their respective universes – as Anderegg remarks, "Wyler lays bare the conflicting emotional currents running beneath the ties of family, friendship, and sexual love" – in *The Letter* Wyler's *caméra-stylo* plumbs even greater depths and "clarif[ies] the relationship" between the physical world of the diegesis and the supernatural psyche of the *fantôme fatale*.⁴⁵ Indeed, Leslie herself is the "tangible allusion" uniting the real and the surreal, the *heimlich* and *unheimlich*; and as such, she represents a channel through which the

ethereality of desire may infuse and influence the material plane, thus demonstrating the strength of her “illusory production[s]” of fantasy.

Ultimately, then, it is the “determining gaze” of the *fantôme fatale* that, to recall the statement by Freud that began this article, “has a *peculiarly* directive power over us...guid[ing] the current of our emotions” towards the *unheimlich* world of her fantastic reality. Which introduces the question: how many other *fantômes fatales* exist in classic Hollywood cinema? Though this question cannot be answered in the space of an article, the concept of the *fantôme fatale* and her supernatural authorship nonetheless invites a search for other studio-era dramas that characterize the woman as a force uniting the real and the surreal to create the *mise-en-scène* of her desire.⁴⁶ For the *fantôme fatale* does not represent the nightmare of the *femme castratrice* or the carnality of the *femme fatale*; nor does she find herself defined by reductive male fantasies. In her autonomous desires and powers of transcendence, the *fantôme fatale* stands as an entity unto herself. She is the possessor of her own magic.

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- ¹ Freud, Sigmund, "The 'Uncanny,'" in *Writings on Art and Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), 228.
- ² Freud, 195, 193.
- ³ André Bazin, "William Wyler, or the Jansenist of Directing," in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*. Bert Cardullo, ed.; Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo, trans. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 5-6.
- ⁴ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1
- ⁵ Michael A. Anderegg, *William Wyler* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), 165.
- ⁶ Bazin, "William Wyler," 4.
- ⁷ Creed, 1. Interestingly, Creed mentions Freud's uncanny in relation to her concept of the monstrous-feminine inasmuch as it "is relevant to the depiction of uterine imagery in the horror film" (53); she further notes that "all of these fears [discussed in his essay] are explored in the horror film" (53).
- ⁸ Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941-1953*. Trans. Paul Hammond (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2002), 13.
- ⁹ Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," in *Women in Film Noir*, E. Ann Kaplan, ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 47.
- ¹⁰ Virginia M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (Troy: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1983), 44-45.
- ¹¹ Freud, 193.
- ¹² Freud, 199, 201.
- ¹³ Bazin, 10; Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929 – 1968* (New York: EP Dutton, 1968), table of contents.
- ¹⁴ Sarris, 168. According to Sharon Kern, "Wyler often joked that Super-8 [home-movie photography] was only medium in which he was the *auteur* that the critics had always wanted him to be." (Sharon Kern, *William Wyler: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: GK Hall & Co., 1984), 45.)
- ¹⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings 5th Edition*, Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds. (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 843.
- ¹⁶ J. LaPlanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. (London: Karnac Books, 1973), 379.
- ¹⁷ LaPlanche and Pontalis, 318.
- ¹⁸ Freud, 218.
- ¹⁹ Barbara Bowman, *Master Space: Film Images of Capra, Lubitsch, Sternberg, and Wyler* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 113.
- ²⁰ Freud, 216. Comparing Wyler's film to Maugham's play, Anderegg notes that "perhaps because the psychological dimension of Maugham's tale is far broader than it is deep, Wyler concentrates his energies on providing a visual and aural atmosphere appropriately exotic and pointedly complementary to the moods and emotions of his characters." Anderegg, 96.
- ²¹ Charles Affron, *Star Acting: Gish, Garbo, Davis* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), 248.
- ²² Freud, 223.
- ²³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, trans. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986), 111.
- ²⁴ Freud, 219.
- ²⁵ Mary Ann Doane, "Veiling Over Desire: Close-ups of the Woman," in *FemmesFatales: Feminism, Film Theory, and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991), 46.
- ²⁶ Kern, 22.
- ²⁷ Freud, 216.
- ²⁸ Freud, "Repression," in *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Anchor Books, 1957), 89.
- ²⁹ Anderegg, 97.
- ³⁰ Anderegg, 100; Mulvey, 834.
- ³¹ Bowman, 118. The technique of absent presence recalls the camerawork in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, made the same year as *The Letter*. For example, the tracking shot in Maxim's confession scene gives animation to Rebecca's spectral form, making this the focus of the frame as the camera traces Rebecca's final moments. As Tania Modleski writes, "Not only is Rebecca's absence stressed, but we

are made to experience it as an active force.” (Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 53.)

³² Bazin, 22.

³³ Edward R. Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 43.

³⁴ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 216.

³⁵ Freud, “Repression,” 90.

³⁶ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 212, 210.

³⁷ Michael Klein and Gillian Parker, *The English Novel and the Movies* (New York: Ungar, 1981), 4.

³⁸ Bazin, 21.

³⁹ Doane, 48.

⁴⁰ Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981), 36.

⁴¹ Bowman, 118.

⁴² LaPlanche and Pontalis, 315. In their work, LaPlanche and Pontalis use the spelling *phantasy* to avoid the “connotations of whimsy, eccentricity, triviality” (314) associated with the French *fantaisie* or fantasy.

⁴³ LaPlanche and Pontalis, 315; Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality,” in *Film Theory and Criticism 5th Edition*, 763.

⁴⁴ Alexandre Astruc, “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: la camera-stylo,” in *The New Wave*, Peter Graham, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 20.

⁴⁵ Anderegg, 2.

⁴⁶ Such a study would find its foundation in Modleski’s *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, in which (through an analysis of the women in Hitchcock’s films) she explores the possibility that female desire had a place in historically male-dominated filmmaking. Beyond these questions of feminine agency, one of the broader concerns in my development of this concept is the consideration of fantasy as an embodied or “lived” experience – that is, the phenomenological implications of psychical reality.