

**MOTHER FEELS BEST: MOBILIZING NEGATIVE MATERNAL AFFECT AS  
POSTFEMINIST CRITIQUE IN CONTEMPORARY HORROR CINEMA**

by

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Hon. B.A., Trinity College at the University of Toronto (St. George), 2015

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES  
(Film Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
(Vancouver)

August 2017

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## Abstract

A small child is getting ready for school. His mother dresses him, pulling his jacket over his shoulders. He tries to hug her, emitting a satisfied sigh; she pushes him away. “Don’t do that!” she cries.

This sequence occurs at the beginning of Jennifer Kent’s horror film, *The Babadook* (2014), a film that perfectly embodies contemporary horror’s capacity to critique postfeminist mothering through its use of affect and the Final Mom figure. Although the horror genre’s conventional representations of motherhood portray the institution as monstrous and abject, as in *Carrie* (1976) and *The Brood* (1979), a recent spate of horror films has demonstrated a more nuanced approach to mothering. Drawing from Carol Clover’s seminal Final Girl figure, this thesis locates a powerful and critically productive figure in these films: the Final Mom. This figure, though dissatisfied with mothering and domestic life, must defend her family against a threatening force, often with no help from others. These figures exist in a postfeminist world where New Momist parenting is expected and celebrated. This form of parenting demands that all mothers fulfill a contradiction: give yourself over completely to mothering (sacrificing one’s individual identity), while remaining sexually attractive and achieving success at work. This thesis explores how the horror genre’s new Final Mom figure critiques postfeminist mothering’s impossible expectations through mobilizing negative maternal affects. Employing a tripartite model of affect theory, in which affect is seen to travel between narratives, character bodies, and film form itself, this thesis argues that Final Mom horror films use negative maternal affects to critique and denaturalize postfeminist mothering structures. Irritation occupies a critical role in *The Babadook*, while envy will be discussed in relation to *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011).

These under-discussed, unpleasant affects will provide in-depth cultural critiques of contemporary mothering's unfulfillable expectations, proving their politically productive potentials. What's more, unpleasant affects like irritation and envy are emphasized as natural components of mothering, rather than shameful. This thesis exposes the Final Mom's potential to celebrate mothering's "bad" feelings, to accept these affects as natural to all mothering experiences.

## Lay Summary

While maternal figures in classic horror films are usually represented as monstrous and abject, contemporary horror cinema has demonstrated a move towards more nuanced representations of motherhood. These representations all feature a figure defined here as the Final Mom. This figure must work through her dissatisfactions towards motherhood while defending her family (particularly her children) from some threatening force (a monster, demon, etc.). In defending her children, the Final Mom must struggle with negative affective experiences surrounding her identity as mother. This thesis will examine these negative affects (namely irritation and envy) as they function in Final Mom films like *The Babadook* (2014) and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) to argue for the Final Mom's ability to critique postfeminist mothering's demand that women should accept mothering unquestioningly. Through the course of this thesis, negative affects will be celebrated as a natural and critically productive element of contemporary mothering.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Amanda Greer.

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## Acknowledgements

Throughout my Master's degree, I've been lucky enough to have a strong, caring support system around me, without which this thesis would not have been possible.

I'd first like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Lisa Coulthard, who guided me in this process and allowed me to pursue a topic I feel genuinely passionate about. You've shown me what rigorous, exciting academic work looks like, and for that I am truly grateful.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Drs. Christine Evans and Brian McIlroy. Thank you, Dr. Evans, for supporting this thesis from the proposal stage to the final draft; this thesis would not be what it is today without your insightful comments and constructive feedback. Thanks, too, for being so hilarious and making this process seem less soul-crushing. Thank you to Dr. McIlroy for your guidance and careful reading, along with your kind words.

Thank you to Morgan Harper, Hilary Ball, Becky Gold, Mathieu Aubin, Xine Yao, Lauren Gillies, Kiran Sunar, and Kristi Carey for helping me work through ideas, and (more importantly) for listening to me complain/vent/cry/stress semi-regularly. Thanks, too, to the entire Green College community for creating a space of learning and knowledge-sharing.

To my awesome cohort: Matthew Gartner, Zoe Laks, and Morgan Harper. You three are all brilliant. Thank you for sharing your graduate experiences with me, and for creating such a supportive and nurturing environment.

Thank you, too, to Chelsea Birks, who provided indispensable feedback on my proposal and helped tone down my overambitious undergrad tendencies so this thesis didn't end up being 400 pages long. This goes for Dr. Christine Evans as well. You are both incredibly supportive scholars who never made this lowly M.A. student feel like her ideas weren't sophisticated or complex enough.

To my siblings, Bethany and Ian: I know you probably won't read this, but thanks for putting up with me when I worked through most family visits and vacations...and when I consistently melodramatize many aspects of my life. You'll just *never understand the blood, sweat, and tears it took to produce this*. (Love you two).

Finally, I want to thank my parents, Shelly and Steve. You've supported me through various late-in-adolescence career changes, from classical singer to doctor to psychologist to academic. I know you don't always understand what it is I do here, but you support me nonetheless. For that, I am truly grateful. Much love.

## **Dedication**

To my partner, colleague, and best friend. I love you and I like you.

## Introduction

### All Grown Up: Final Girls and Final Moms

As Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala's 2014 horror feature *Goodnight Mommy* opens, viewers are greeted by a familiar image: the famous (and exemplarily collegial) von Trapp family singing a lullaby during a television taping. The children stare unemotionally into space as they repeat the soporifically melodic phrases of "Lullaby and Goodnight." Gradually, the children are swept into shadow, while the spotlight falls on Maria, the nurturing maternal figure *par excellence*, as she turns to the camera: "Gute nacht," she says, a small, placid smile on her lips. Focusing on this image of a pristine maternal figure – one whose capacity to mother has reached mythical proportions – foregrounds the mother figure in Franz and Fiala's film, while gesturing to a wider emergence of maternal figures in contemporary horror cinema.

Through its narrative twists and turns, *Goodnight Mommy* embodies a shift away from traditional representations of femaleness and motherhood in the horror genre, towards a more nuanced and critical approach. The film's first forty minutes seem clichéd to a point past predictability—to a point of indifference. The film centres on young twin boys (Elias and Lukas Schwarz) who spend their days playing around their cavernous modern home, located in the middle of Austria's picturesque countryside. Their mother (Susanne Wuest), a beautiful TV personality, returns home after a plastic surgery operation, her face obscured by bandages. Upon her return, the boys begin to suspect that there might have been more to that surgery than a simple face lift. Photographs and narrative cues suggest that their mother had been a perfect image of nurturing maternalism before the surgery; now, however, she seems irritable, agitated, and impatient under her bandages. She yells at the boys, almost becomes physically violent, and seems to have taken on subtly supernatural connections (a suspicion reinforced after the boys

witness her munching on a cockroach while taking a nap). After a short while, the boys begin to suspect that this bandaged monster is not their mother, but some evil *doppelganger*.

The evil mother figure, as it functions thus far in *Goodnight Mommy*, is an unsurprising, almost trite character archetype. Traditionally, the horror genre has been pervaded by such monstrous images of maternity, from *Carrie's* (1976) Margaret White and her perverse vilification of female sexuality, to Nola of *The Brood* (1979) and her creation of monstrous (and uncomfortably Aryan) children from a pulsating, pus-filled sac on her abdomen. These films happily regurgitate Psychoanalysis Lite: the mother is the root of all evils, perversions, and murderous inclinations. *Goodnight Mommy* seems to belong to this horror genre camp. There's something *wrong* with Mommy.

A sharp, 180-degree turn halfway through the film, however, counters this reading, and exposes a larger trend in the horror genre. As the film progresses, the viewer's subjective attachment shifts from the twins to the mother; it is then that the viewer becomes aware of the mother's fear. She is terrified of her sons. Suddenly, the mother's history is perspectively rearranged: she did not get plastic surgery out of vanity, but due to the pressures of the ageist entertainment industry in which she works. She is a single, working mother whose partner left her for her best friend, leaving her to care for twin boys (one of whom battles with mental health issues). The film positions this tragic, anxious mother figure against a postfeminist backdrop in which women (particularly mothers) are expected to achieve success in all realms of their lives, from the workplace to the home to the bedroom. As motherhood theorists Douglas and Michaels have lamented, this postfeminist milieu and movement "means that you can now go outside the home even in jobs previously restricted to men, go to graduate school, pump iron, and pump your own gas, as long as you remain fashion conscious, slim, nurturing, deferential to men, and

become a doting, selfless mother” (25). Such a contradictory list (no one can fulfill all these categories) sets women up for failure—the postfeminist ideal is unattainable. Yet, it is precisely this ideal that *Goodnight Mommy*’s Mommy struggles towards. She works to provide for her two sons without help from a partner, struggles to maintain a culturally acceptable level of physical beauty, and tries desperately to love her children. She is the tragic postfeminist mother. As the viewer is cued to react with empathy to this maternal figure, the twins become more and more sadistic, tying their mother to her bed, gluing her lips and eyes shut, and slowly torturing her—all while convinced that their mother is *not* their mother. Here, the film shifts from Maria von Trapp’s gently controlling “*Gute nacht*,” to the twins’ disruptive agency, their titular command of “Goodnight, Mommy.” Power moves from mother to children. From this point in the film, the traditional evil mother figure is deconstructed and recombined with a Final Girl-like figure, someone who must fight against an evil force for the reclamation of her independence. In this respect, *Goodnight Mommy* combines a postfeminist backdrop with the subversion of genre tropes (by rejecting the evil mom archetype) and a Final Girl narrative to produce a horror genre figure that has become prevalent (though under-discussed) in horror films of the last 15 years: the Final Mom.

This Final Mom figure is, undoubtedly, indebted to the Final Girl and the theoretical/critical discourse surrounding her. Since the 1970s, the Final Girl figure has served as a focal point of discussions about gender’s function in the horror genre. This focus is entirely unsurprising, considering how obsessed the genre has been with inflicting sexual(ized) violence on young female bodies. The horror genre – particularly the slasher subgenre – revels in putting its teenaged heroines through extreme acts of violence and torture. Audiences continue, year after year, to watch *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*’s Sally (1974) narrowly escape from

Leatherface's titular tool, or *Halloween's* Laurie (1978) attempt to shakily disarm the sadistic Michael Myers with a knitting needle. The continuing attraction of these violent scenes does, indeed, pose questions—it is no wonder the terrorization of the female character has proven so discursively fruitful. Though the *Final Mom* subverts and challenges these representations of the female body, she is, as previously stated, indebted to canonical theories of gender and sexuality in the horror film. Most particularly, the *Final Mom* expands on Carol Clover's theories in her wryly titled book, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, and Linda Williams's ambivalent take on the horror genre in her essay, "Film Bodies."

Though published and celebrated as overtly feminist texts, these canonical examinations of gender's function within the horror film do, in their very act of celebrating the genre, point to a need to construct a new tradition of horror film analysis—gaps remain that must be filled, and *can* be filled by the *Final Mom*. Reading Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* and Linda Williams's "Film Bodies" – two works that have attained that elusive ability to bridge academia and popular culture – these gaps only gape more widely. Indeed, though these two texts are widely republished and considered cornerstones of both feminist and horror film theory, Clover and Williams both construct their arguments from the nebulousness of masculine fantasy, ignoring the possibility of an active female spectator. In their discussions, phallogentrism remains immanent to the horror film; it is something the horror film can work around to facilitate some sort of feminist reading, rather than something the genre can do without.

This is not to say that these theories are not important in tracing the function and manipulation of gender in the horror film. Indeed, Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* remains a hugely important (and even radical) text in its argument against the genre as purely misogynistic. Sadomasochistic voyeurism is not, Clover proclaims, the primary mode of

identification in the horror genre. “Nor do I believe that real-life women and feminist politics have been entirely well served by the astonishingly insistent claim that horror’s satisfactions begin and end in sadism” (19), she argues. Contrary to the horror genre’s many detractors (such as Morris Dickstein’s condemnation of horror in “The Aesthetics of Fright”), Clover’s work achieves nuance and adopts an analytical gaze sensitive to the complexities of the horror genre’s treatment of gender. Rather than simply vilify it as sadistic and dismiss it as low culture, Clover proposes that the genre is, in fact, much more progressive than it might at first appear. Looking at the rise of the slasher subgenre – a body of films most known, as discussed above, for its terrorization of female characters – Clover spots the appearance of a new type of woman, a stronger woman she terms the Final Girl. She describes this Final Girl as a female victim-hero who transitions from terrified target of physical and sexual violence to conquering hero when she turns a weapon on her aggressor. Clover describes this moment of female-driven violence in masculine terms, writing that, by adopting the knife and plunging it into the horror film’s monster, the Final Girl “has not just manned herself; she specifically unmans an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with” (49). Indeed, Clover sees the progressiveness of the horror film in its masculinization of the female victim-hero, and in its feminization of the monster. When the Final Girl finally defeats the monster, there is an inversion of gender roles; the Final Girl becomes masculine, while the monster adopts the vulnerably penetrative quality of a female body. Clover celebrates this gender-swapping by tracing its effects on the genre’s spectators. The Final Girl’s masculinization, she writes, encourages male viewers to identify with *both* the monster and the female victim-hero, leading to a radical act of bisexual identification (5). For Clover, then, the horror film’s male spectator cannot possibly adopt a purely sadomasochistic voyeuristic gaze, since he is encouraged to root for the Final Girl; the

female victim-hero's emasculation of the monster saves the horror film from being exiled to the realm of snuff and smut.

Linda Williams's "Film Bodies," like Clover's work, encourages this nuanced approach to the horror film though is, perhaps, a tad more reserved in its celebration of the genre. In her essay, Williams equates the horror film, the melodrama, and pornography, labelling the three categories as "genres of excess," or body genres (3). This unifying feature of excess is derived, she argues, from forcing vocalizations from on-screen female bodies—through spectacularizing the victimization, penetration, and destruction of the female body (4). Of the three seemingly disparate genres, Williams writes, "The body spectacle is featured most sensationally in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama's portrayal of weeping" (4). In all three, the female body "in the grips of an out-of-control ecstasy" forms the basis of the films' spectacles (4). This out-of-control ecstasy is definitively excessive; the female body is forced to emit sounds of pleasure (in pornography), screams of terror (in horror), and uncontrollable sobs (in melodramas). These non-consensual vocalizations evince, for Williams, a masculinized desire to control the female body (and its destruction). Though, of course, we can see already that Williams's text is not nearly as celebratory as Clover's, she does acknowledge the progressive potential of the slasher sub-genre. Citing Clover directly, Williams nods her approval at the Final Girl's vacillating triumph, or her "oscillation between powerlessness and power" (8). Ultimately, however, the pleasure of the horror film lies, for Williams, in the masculine and male spectator; a female spectator finding pleasure in the horror film simply isn't done. In another essay, aptly titled, "When the woman looks," Williams argues paradoxically that women simply cannot look at the horror film's array of violent images. There is a turning-away-ness immanent to the female spectator—the essay's

title, then, is an impossibility. Women cannot “look” at the horror film. “There are excellent reasons for this refusal of the woman to look,” Williams goes on, “not the least of which is that she is often asked to bear witness to her own powerlessness in the face of rape, mutilation, and murder” (61). Though, of course, these images are difficult to watch, Williams – rather crucially – ignores the possibility of a female spectator finding pleasure or catharsis from a horror film and, inversely, of a male spectator finding himself turning away from these images. What’s more, she ignores the genre’s ability to elicit horror from images that do not depict rape or other sexual violations of the female body. In short, Williams assumes a masculine pleasure in female victimization and, as a result, injects her discourse with the turning-away-ness she essentializes within the horror film’s female spectator—Williams herself turns away from the genre’s non-masculine potential.

In their very attempts to dissociate the horror film genre from the grips of hypermasculinity, these two classics of horror film theory problematically reaffirm horror cinema’s masculinist construction. Both theorists masculinize the genre’s machinery. Clover’s work, though the more optimistic of the two, attributes the progressive tendencies of the genre (such as the Final Girl) to changes in male identification and female characterization. In other words, for Clover, the slasher subgenre’s progressiveness stems not from an increase in female-driven spectatorship or the celebration of traditionally feminine characteristics, but from a masculine audience’s identification with a masculinized female character. Indeed, Clover even goes so far as to describe the Final Girl as adopting masculine traits, such as an investigative gaze (48), failing to properly critique the notion of a “masculine trait” more generally, or the bizarre naturalization of the investigative gaze as masculine. The bisexual act of identification privileged as the horror film’s most progressive quality is, then, still rooted in masculinity.

Rather than *bisexual* – with an equal connection to and movement between masculine and feminine characteristics – this act of identification might be better described as an axis of masculine fantasy with elements of femininity moving asymptotally towards this axis, but never coming close enough to touch it. Clover, then, neglects the horror film’s potential for a solely or majority-female identification—an identification that finds its roots outside of masculine fantasy. Williams, too, takes the stance that the horror film is produced to fulfill masculine fantasies, going so far as to offer as irrefutable fact the inability of the female spectator to even look at the horror film. Both theorists neglect a female audience, problematically adopting a gender binary in which female spectators cannot exchange looks with the horror film, while male spectators are actively engaged with the genre’s images. Their definitions of the genre, then, are still based primarily on the assumption that masculinity is the driving force of the horror film—all characters, narratives, and on-screen identifications stem from masculine desire.

To rectify this neglect of female spectatorship, this thesis will take female perception and identification into account, exploring horror films outside of masculine construction through an examination of motherhood—through the Final Mom figure. Many of Clover and Williams’s problems might have arisen due to the horror genre’s primary focus on teenaged heroines throughout its history; however, since the early 2000s, a spate of horror films has appeared featuring older, maternal figures who, in many ways, update or even replace the figure of the Final Girl. Films such as *The Babadook* (2014), *The Others* (2001), *The Orphanage* (2007), *Dark Water* (2002), and *Under the Shadow* (2016) all follow a similar formula, gesturing to a new movement within the horror genre itself. All these films, stretched geographically from Australia to Jordan to Spain, depict maternal characters whose families come under threat by an insidious force (often hauntings or demonic children). Evoking the tradition of the female gothic, no one

believes the mothers' claims that these threats exist, leaving them to protect themselves – and their children – on their own. The maternal figure is the last one left fighting—a Final Mom, as it were. This figure must battle against monstrous creatures which, quite overtly, stand in for her own anxieties regarding motherhood. However, unlike the traditional slasher films' masculinized modes of identification, in these Final Mom films we are encouraged to identify solely with the maternal figure, opening the genre to the possibility of a purely feminized experience of identification. The Final Moms of horror represent the genre's more sensitive, critical attention to both gender and motherhood; these female figures provide us with the opportunity to break with the tradition of horror film theory. From this breakage, we are offered the potential to build a new tradition of horror theory—one in which the female spectator, rather than being treated as an impossible creature, is both acknowledged and privileged.

To re-position motherhood within horror film theory, this critique of the Final Girl figure and masculine fantasy is not enough; a break with abjection is also needed. The first chapter of this thesis, "From Abjection to Affect," will review motherhood's frequent connection to abjection in works such as Julia Kristeva's "Powers of Horror" essay and Barbara Creed's seminal text, *The Monstrous-Feminine*. Through this review, "From Abjection to Affect" will argue that these readings (though critical of motherhood's status as abject and monstrous) still reinforce these traditional notions. They also restrain readings of motherhood to the maternal body and, importantly, the maternal body's material leakages (menstruation, lactation, etc.). As such, these readings neglect the mother figure's own subjectivity and experiences, reducing her to a leaking body that inspires dread and disgust—a representation common to popular horror cinema. To break with abjection, this chapter proposes a move towards affect, a study of maternal bodies' felt reactions and their physical manifestations in horror cinema. This chapter

argues that, through turning to affect, the horror film's maternal bodies are re-imbued with subjectivity and (contrary to those believers in affects as passive phenomena) agency. As an alternative to abjection, my first chapter will turn to three recent works of affect theory (Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), and Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects* (2014)) to create a hybrid model of affect in which these felt intensities travel between character bodies, narratives, and film form and style itself. This model, once established, will serve as the theoretical structure for the remaining two chapters, both of which are case studies of recent Final Mom films.

Chapter two, "Irritated Mothers Irritating Motherhood" will focus on the seemingly minor affect of irritation in Jennifer Kent's 2014 film, *The Babadook*. Commonly discussed in terms of grief and depression, this chapter argues for the film's primary use of irritation to perform a critique of postfeminist mothering and New Momism. Using this thesis's theoretical model of affect, the chapter traces irritation's movements between the film's narrative, its characters' bodies, and film form itself. Irritation is everywhere: in explicit moments of outburst from the film's Final Mom figure, Amelia (Essie Davis), towards other mothers; in Amelia's pulsing and pathological toothache; and in the Babadook monster's own irritation of film form through its infiltration of other media forms (namely televised silent films) and disruption of light's flow as the source of film's visibility. These instances provide incisive critiques of contemporary mothering's anxiety-producing pressures—irritation cannot be underestimated.

This thesis's third and final chapter, "Cinema's Evil Eye: Envy and the Gaze," explores envy's function as a critical tool in Lynne Ramsay's film, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), a film replete with anxieties concerning appropriate or good-enough mothering. "Cinema's Evil Eye" first traces the gaze's importance in theories of envy, particularly clinical psychoanalysis's

conception of penis envy and feminist psychoanalysis's critique and extension of this model. In such models, envy is established when the envier gazes upon the object it wants and does not have—when it sees another possessing and (more importantly) enjoying this object. Not only is envy's relationship to the gaze explicated here, but through considerations of clinical and theoretical psychoanalysis, envy's cultural gendering throughout history is also examined. Envy has often been considered a feminized affect, and hence petty and unworthy of proper attention. After establishing the relationship between envy, the gaze, and gender, "Cinema's Evil Eye" will explore the gaze's similar (and medium-specific) function within cinema. Building from Laura Mulvey's seminal work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," this chapter will demonstrate how the gaze functions formally in cinema as an embodiment of envy, and how this form of envy can function as politically critical. Lastly, by attaching this discussion of envy as specific to cinema's gaze-making, this chapter will argue that envy functions in *Kevin* to produce a nuanced critique of postfeminist mothering; this is seen most particularly through the film's inward-looking moments of self-envy, and through its depiction of child-mother envy through the child's sadistic, envious gaze.

Chapters two and three both focus on affects unanimously considered toxic and negative. Very few people would actively seek out moments of irritation or envy. Irritation is, as chapter two will discuss, definitively arranged around a movement *away* from the subject's irritant. Additionally, both irritation and envy have been considered frivolous affects, often associated with more shameful moments of compromised morality. Very few people will admit to being irritated by objects that shouldn't provoke such a reaction (children, for instance, as a discussion of *The Babadook* will emphasize); fewer still will admit to feeling envious of their friends or loved ones. However, as this thesis will demonstrate, the very frivolity of these affects – their

immediate suppression as negative or toxic – makes them crucial objects of discussion. By writing them off as poisonous affects preventing their subjects from reaching states of moral goodness, discourse has ignored their politically productive potentials. Through exploring how these two negative affects critique postfeminist mothering in contemporary horror cinema, this thesis exposes and argues for negative affects’ potential for liberating, self-reflexive experiences. Irritation and envy do not simply reaffirm women’s assumed “cattiness,” or transform maternal figures into cold, non-nurturing, “bad” moms; rather, these negative affects allow maternal and feminine figures to access their unhappiness, and to widen a space for explorations of ambivalence. Irritation, envy, and other so-called “toxic” affects, allow both characters and viewers a chance to engage with motherhood as a conflicted, affectively overwhelming institution. These affects dissolve the “good/bad” mother binary, question motherhood’s traditional conception as abject and monstrous, and call for more nuanced representations of motherhood on-screen.

*Goodnight Mommy*’s shift from a classic “evil mom” narrative to a critique of contemporary mothering’s expectations demonstrates that this call is being answered—by the Final Mom. Through her negative affective experiences, the Final Mom is finally permitted to explore the nuances and ambivalences surrounding motherhood. She both loves and fears her children, feels overwhelmed and unfulfilled by domestic duties, and struggles to carve out an individual identity from within motherhood’s demands for self-actualization. The mother in horror cinema is no longer simply an object of disgust. Re-imbued with an agency of feeling, the Final Mom can mobilize her affective experiences to explore and liberate herself (even temporarily) from motherhood’s claustrophobic pressures. *Goodnight Mommy* embodies the genre’s movement towards the Final Mom. Through convincing its viewers of the mother’s guilt

before subverting these assumptions, the film exposes the audience's expectations concerning mothers in the horror genre: mothers are bad. In subverting these expectations, *Goodnight Mommy* becomes an outward-looking text, one that excitedly points to the Final Mom's potential for critical engagement with motherhood. Following *Goodnight Mommy*'s pointed finger, this thesis will locate and explicate the Final Mom's cultural and aesthetic currency, celebrating her negative affects as modes of resistance against unfeeling cultural institutions. Through her very acts of unhappiness, the Final Mom has become one of the most important voices in popular media—a voice of dissatisfaction and anger, fear and sadness. It is time that we listened.

## Chapter 1: From Abjection to Affect: Re-Theorizing the Horror Film's

### Maternal Figures

#### 1.1 Abjecting the Monstrous Maternal

“No...I disgust you. You're sickened by me. You *hate* me,” Nola (Samantha Eggar) tells her husband, Frank (Art Hindle), in David Cronenberg's 1979 splatter-fest, *The Brood*. For those who have not seen the film, Nola might seem like someone in need of a self-esteem boost. For *The Brood*'s viewers, however, her sickening and disgusting qualities are indisputable. Just before delivering this revelatory statement, Nola lifts up her angelically white dress to reveal a pulsating, cancerous sac attached to her abdomen. Digging into the sac and releasing a torrent of blood and viscera, Nola removes an object and bites away at a porous surface covering this object—a placenta-like surface. After biting through this sickening material, Nola licks the object, cleaning it like a feral cat, until the object is revealed to be a baby-like thing. In short, Nola is monstrous.

With representations like this circulating through the horror genre, it is no wonder that horror's maternal figures have been theorized as abject. Conventionally, the horror film genre has revelled in monstifying mothers, dating back to *Psycho* (1960), in which, though absent, the maternal figure is positioned as the root of her murderous son's perversions. The connection here is somewhat obvious: pregnancy and childbirth are, in part, horrific through their pushing of bodily boundaries, their leakages and ruptures. The anxieties and fears surrounding these two natural processes are, quite literally, rendered monstrous in films like *The Brood*. Maternal figures in horror, like Nola, are often attached to images of birthing viscera, menstrual blood, and other sorts of sticky signs of reproduction. It seems natural, then, that maternalism in horror

cinema has been viewed through the lens of abjection. Though often critical of maternity's vilification in the horror film, this discourse of abjection has ignored more potentially positive readings of the maternal body in horror cinema. The rise of the Final Mom in horror offers a new maternal archetype for the genre, one that doesn't paint maternity as the root of all evil, but that constitutes a complex and dynamic model of mothering. These Final Mom films offer a turn towards affective experience, towards a rich subjectivity that brings the mother's perspective out of her body; through her negative affects, these mothers become more than their abjection. In short, the Final Mom films of contemporary horror offer a chance to break with horror film theory's abjection obsession that so often orbits the maternal body, as in Julia Kristeva's famous work, *The Powers of Horror*.

Though Kristeva names and explicates a number of abject objects in her text – including the corpse and excrement – the maternal body's status as both an abject object and a *producer* of abject objects doubles its abjection, bringing it to the fore of Kristeva's arguments. This seems to make perfectly logical sense; Kristeva defines the abject as that which crosses boundaries of the body, separating “us” from “them,” but, by crossing these boundaries in the first place, also emphasizes the immanent permeability of these boundaries—the abject *is* us. The maternal body's boundaries are frequently transgressed through menstrual blood, the placenta and, of course, the child. Kristeva posits that a fear of the maternal arises from this extreme abjection. For instance, she privileges menstrual blood as an abject object through its emphasis on sexual difference by signifying a woman's reproductive capacity, her maternity (71). She goes on to differentiate between paternal and maternal law, writing that the maternal authority is “the trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body” (72). In other words, the maternal authority is meant to rectify the abjection essential to the maternal body; the maternal body both

makes a mess and cleans it up. The maternal authority polices bodily boundaries. The maternal authority is not a comforting one, according to Kristeva, but a terrifying one existing outside time, history, and space—it is a natural and universal fear. “Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power,” she writes (77). It is because of this fear that bodily boundaries are policed. We fear the mother, our mothers, the archaic mother, and so seek to separate ourselves from her, to reify the boundary between “us” and “her” (80). Of course, Kristeva’s text is a feminist one, and mobilizes the psychoanalytical anxiety surrounding sexual difference (once again rooted in phallogentrism) to critique this masculine fear of the mother. However, in focusing on the connection between abjection and motherhood so strongly, Kristeva’s theory does not see beyond the body. This over-emphasis on motherhood as a site of abjection has narrowed the focus of many horror film theorists writing on the maternal figures of the genre, including Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine*.

In *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Creed draws heavily from Kristeva’s theories of the abject to argue that the horror film continues a pan-global history of abjecting motherhood and the reproductive female body from dominant culture. All societies have figures of monstrous femininity lurking in their mythologies, she emphasizes (67). From this claim, she traces what she sees as a natural connection between the monstrous-feminine (and monstrous-maternal) and the horror film; or, rather, she uses the horror film as a lens through which to examine the relationship between bodily wastes (the abject), physical states, and the monstrous-feminine (68). She begins to identify moments of abjection in horror cinema that relate to the female body, eventually categorizing these moments into three primary groups, one of which is the “construction of [the] maternal figure as abject” (72). This, Creed argues, is not just a trend in horror cinema, but a major narrative device, an essential component of the genre. Films like

*Carrie* and *The Birds* (1963), in their one-sided vilification of motherhood can, she writes, be viewed as evidence of the monstrous-maternal's pervasion of horror cinema. Explicating the archetype's function within the genre, Creed posits that these narratives force the films' protagonists (and, through identification, the viewer) to confront the abject in the form of the monstrous-maternal. This confrontation leads not to reconciliation, but works "to eject the abject and re-draw the boundaries between the human and the non-human" (75). Indeed, many horror films position their maternal characters as these boundary-affirming sites of abjection and monstrosity. Nola from David Cronenberg's *The Brood* positively pulsates with monstrosity, birthing a horde of evil children from a gooey sac growing off the side of her body; *Carrie*'s Margaret is horrific in her own condemnation of menstrual blood and sexuality, in her perverse abjection of motherhood while being a mother herself. It is tempting, then, to view the horror film's maternal figures through this Kristevan lens of abjection, as Creed so famously does. However, this approach of abjection problematically ignores more productive readings of maternity within the genre. In other words, theories of abjection pay attention only to the spectators' and characters' desires to abject the mother from the self—these theories pay little regard to the mother's own desires. Through its emphasis on the body, abjection facilitates (and indeed encourages) a cold, almost voyeuristic dissection of the maternal body. Bodily fluids and birthing imagery are discussed with an aura of detached disgust—as things that are happening to that object over there, away from me. As a result, these theories of the abject ignore and neglect the maternal perspective. Again, though both Creed and Kristeva are critiquing the monstrosification of motherhood, they do so by constructing a discourse of the Other's body, eradicating the Mother's voice. Just as I proposed a break with the over-masculinization of horror film theory, here I propose a break with abjection's disgusted air. The Final Moms of

horror provide a new body of films that encourage this break; though still replete with abject imagery (it is horror cinema, after all), this new spate of Final Mom horror re-imbues the maternal figure with a voice of her own, offering her a space to reflect on and critique her role as mother and, by extension, the institution of motherhood itself. The Final Mom is offered space to experience and reflect on her affective intensities. She vacillates between anger, hatred, ambivalence, envy, disgust, love, sadness, grief—a spectrum of affects that confuse and torment, though they ultimately provide rich material for critical engagement. This thesis will take as its critical material the Final Moms' affects, their embodied responses to motherhood. It is crucial to construct a new theoretical discourse that looks beyond the maternal body and abjection, analyzing the mother's own perspective as portrayed through her thoughts and, importantly, her affects.

## **2.2 Affected Mothering**

In privileging abjection as the primary lens through which to view the horror film's maternal figures, theorists have discursively dissected this figure into her abject components. She becomes her body; she is a vessel of blood and birthing viscera that cannot self-express, but requires theorists to take on her voice for themselves. Though, of course, many of these theorists, including Creed, employ this technique to critique the maternal figure's vilification in these cinematic texts, they still achieve this critique through a voyeuristic analysis of the maternal body—they find critical productivity at the expense of the mother's voice. These popular theories, in short, obfuscate the maternal perspective. It is my intention to locate and explore the New Moms of horror for their ability to self-express. For this reason, I will be leaving abjection

behind to squirm and squelch, turning instead to the more transcendently corporeal realm of affect.

The horror film has become a privileged object in the turn to affect theory, or a turn towards mobilizing structures of feeling as political forces in an effort to correct structuralism's over-privileging of the text at the expense of subjective experience (Hemmings 548). Well-known works on affect include Simon O'Sullivan's *The Aesthetics of Affect*, Brian Massumi's *The Autonomy of Affect*, and Elspeth Probyn's *Blush: Faces of Shame*, all of which attempt to counter structuralism by valorizing subjective experiences of affect. As Clare Hemmings writes in her essay on this theoretical turn, "[t]heorists of affect argue that constructivist models leave out the residue or excess that is not socially produced, and that constitutes the very fabric of our being" (548). Affect theory seeks to re-imbue film and media theory with the visceral, with the corporeal, with the spectatorial. While structuralism focuses on close reading and textual analysis, affect theory focuses on the experience of being infected with affect, paying close attention to the construction and mobilization of feeling as fluid and always in-progress. In film and media theory, specifically, this turn towards affect has resulted in the privileging of individual spectator-theorist experiences. Within the realm of affect theory, film theorists exteriorize their interiorities, presenting their emotional reactions to a film as evidence of a film's cultural currency. This has led to several assumptions regarding the relationship between cinema and affect, as summarized here by Eugenie Brinkema:

The affective turn in film and media studies has produced repeated versions of the reification of the passions: films *produce* something in the audience, or, sometimes, in the theorist, or, sometimes in the theorist all alone. It is often *her* felt stirrings, *his* intense disgust that comprises the specific affective case study. These accounts [...] insist on the directional property theory of affect: that it is intentional, that it is effective. Affect is taken as always being, in the end, *for us* (31).

The *for-usness* emphasized here places spectators in a position of privilege, as the intended consumers of a film's cleverly crafted affects.

Film theorists turning towards affect, then, must navigate the tension between their position as subjectively affected viewers of a film, and as critically-minded theorists—a struggle sensitively explored in Tim Groves's "Cinema/Affect/Writing." "How can I write about sadness, about my cinematic griefs?" Groves begins. "How can the painful experiences of intense melancholy felt by specific individuals during cinema be analysed as part of a critical discourse?" (par. 1). In his essay, Groves moves his readers through his struggle to write about the film, *Fearless* (1993), a film that moved him to a place of physical and psychological melancholia. After many attempts, Groves concludes that he cannot write about *Fearless*, "because I was simply too close to it." The spatial closeness evoked in Groves's phrase gestures to the discursive formation of intimacy evoked in many subjective writings on the affective experience of film. In film theory's writings on affect, theorists tend to privilege certain films not because of content, narrative, or characters (though these are, of course, connected), but because of their own individualized responses to the film. A film is important because it affects. A film is important because it affects *us*.

As a result of this movement's emphasis on individual spectator experience, affect theory has proven incredibly useful as a way to evaluate the political potential of cinema, as many writings on the horror film indicate. Indeed, affect forms a centre from which strands of critical discourse flow, such as feminism, queer theory, and cognitivism. (Hemmings 549). These branches all focus on critiquing ontological systems neglectful of marginalized and/or minority groups, groups that have been told their anger and frustrations are not valid; by privileging and

foregrounding these emotional responses to inequalities, affect theory constructs a space for a productive critique of dominant modes of thinking. For instance, as Hemmings notes, critical race theorists such as Spivak have found that “affect plays a role in both cementing sexed and raced relations of domination, and in providing the local investments necessary to counter those relations” (549). Though, of course, this emphasis on individual experience has been criticized for lacking political weight, affect can be theorized through communities, as we will see in Sarah Ahmed’s work. Affect does not simply remain within a single body, but moves between groups of bodies. Pain, for instance, can be felt by an entire group of people, unifying them and inciting them to heal that pain—inciting them to action.

The connection between affect and the horror genre is a natural one—the genre’s very name suggests a provocation of affect from the spectator. The horror genre, by definition, horrifies. Its tautology is an affected one: the horror film is a horror film because it is a “horror” film. Saturated with affect, the horror genre has proven fecund ground for connections between the genre film, affect, and critical discourses of feminism, race, and class. Linda Williams’s seminal essay on the horror film, for instance, takes her own affective response to the genre (and her son’s), as raw data for an analysis of the genre’s “excess”—an excess of sex, violence, bodies, and, of course, affect (3). Though Williams does not refer directly to affect as an object as such, affects such as disgust haunt her essay, weaving in and out of her discourse on the horror film, and providing a basis for her critical argument. The horror film and affect, then, are intimately connected within the film texts themselves, in the relationship between spectator and film, and in the discourse surrounding the genre. However, most of the discourse surrounding the horror film’s entanglement with affect relies heavily on the assumption of the genre’s *intention* to affect, its overt and conscious desire to elicit an emotional response from its audience. My

discussion of the mobilization of affect by maternal bodies in the contemporary horror film will, instead, examine these films' formally embedded and contagious affects, affects that are contained within the text itself and *read* by spectators, rather than *felt*. Instead of privileging the spectator as a consumer of the horror film's ready-made and always-intended emotional triggers, I will explore how affect shapes bodies within the film texts themselves, and, most importantly, how these affects productively critique (or, perhaps, simply reaffirm) models of postfeminist mothering so toxic to the contemporary maternal experience.

Before I begin to outline the working model of cinematic affect I will be employing in order to perform this analysis, perhaps a brief interlude to address the definition of "affect" and its differentiation from the more colloquial "emotion" is in order. The boundaries between the two are often contested. As Kristyn Gorton writes of feminist affect theorists, "Some argue that emotion refers to a sociological expression of feelings whereas affect is more firmly rooted in biology and in our physical response to feelings; others attempt to differentiate on the basis that emotion requires a subject while affect does not; and some ignore these distinctions altogether" (334). Each theorist invoked in this thesis employs a slightly different definition of affect. For our purposes, however, emotion is defined as a response contained *within* the individual body; an individual subject feels emotions of anger, love, hate, etc. Affect, on the other hand, is something that can be viewed and shared collectively, and examined materially. Whereas emotion is found within bodies, affect is found between bodies, "in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves" (Seigworth and Gregg 1). In short, affects are always caught in transition, always on the point of contact, but never resting. This in-between-ness of

affect, then, might be considered the first of affect's primary attributes. The second is its very materiality, its ability to forcefully encounter bodies, to shape them. It is affect's materiality and movement that allow us to study it; affect can be objectified, analyzed, and traced. My own model of affect will examine how affect moves within and between maternal bodies and objects/other bodies/film form in contemporary horror cinema. To develop this working model, I will turn to and combine three contemporary works of and on affect: Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects*, and Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed relies heavily on affect's definitive in-between-ness to argue for the sociality of emotion. Ahmed privileges emotion over affect (as evidenced by her work's title), but these discussions of emotions always – with no exceptions – funnel into an analysis of affect's material power and political weight. Taking a Marxist-influenced approach, Ahmed offers “an analysis of affective economies, where feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation” (8). Through this circulation of affects as commodities with some exchange value, Ahmed argues, affects and emotions can be viewed as tandem socializing forces, shaping sociocultural hierarchies. By transforming affect into capital, Ahmed emphasizes affect's materiality and argues for its cultural status as an exchangeable, transferable good.

My model of affect will draw two primary notions from Ahmed's theory: the “stickiness” of affect, and affect as a material, socializing force (91). The first (affect as sticky) allows for and, indeed, causes the second (affect as socializing), since “things become sticky as an effect of encountering other sticky things” (91). If we take affects to be sticky, then, we can follow their sticky traces, their affected fingerprints, across objects, bodies, spaces, and times. We can read

how this stickiness has shaped social structures and hierarchies – how affect has socialized and been socialized. As Ahmed writes, “what sticks ‘shows us’ where the object has travelled through what it has gathered onto its surface, gatherings that become a part of the object” (91). We can play forensic detective, tracing collectively experienced affects back to the smoking gun of fear, pain, and disgust.

Ahmed illustrates the power of affect’s stickiness, its power as a socializing force, in her discussion of the nasty affect of disgust. Since disgust exists through exclusion (I want to distance myself from that which is disgusting/disgusts me), it has shaped social hierarchies. Disgust, for Ahmed, is community-building; it “generates a community of those who are bound together through the shared condemnation of a disgusting object or event” (94). Those objects and bodies infected by disgust, stuck to disgust, are excluded from the community of the non-disgusting. These objects are not immanently disgusting, but become disgusting through their contact with other objects viewed as disgusting. Disgust sticks to them. “[A]n object becomes disgusting,” Ahmed concludes, “through its contact with other objects that have already, as it were, been designated as disgusting before the encounter has taken place” (87). We can see, here, how disgust works to shape social hierarchies through excluding those bodies infected with disgust or other negative affects. “It is not difficult,” she writes, “to see how emotions are bound up with the securing of social hierarchy: emotions become attributes of bodies as a way of transforming what is ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ into bodily traits” (4). Things that elicit negative responses (hatred, fear, disgust) are seen as negative objects, leading to their exclusion from “higher” society and the reification of boundaries between “us” and “them,” my body’s surface and that frightening/disgusting/painful object.

Ahmed's model of affect, then, is an ectoplasmic one: affects leak out of the body in sticky strands, connecting themselves to other bodies and objects to form a linking chain of affect. This chain, however, still ensures that each individual body retains its individuality. These individual bodies are infected with the emotion virus, caught from members of the same social group (either contemporaries or ancestors), and pulling them into a group feeling that shapes social and cultural borders as well as bodily surfaces and boundaries (10). Ahmed's model, however, over-privileges this subjective experience of emotion and affect. Affect can (and should) be examined not only as a collective, immediate experience rooted in the subject's body, but also as an object that can be perceived and interpreted without being physiologically felt.

This is most evident in affect's relationship to art and form (which Ahmed's work doesn't address), a topic brilliantly explored in Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects*.

Brinkema's approach is one of radical formalism. In short, she reads film form for affect, and affects as having forms. Rather than seeing affect as rooted in the living, corporeal spectator's experience, Brinkema examines affect for its constitution through lines, shapes, colours, and light. She explores light as a form of grief in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997); she sees disgust in the changing, rotting colour palettes of Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1989); she spots anxiety in a shark's disruption of horizontal linearity in *Open Water* (2003). She is openly critical of the affective turn's over-privileging of the spectator's emotional response to a stimulus (including film) and affect theorists' frequent treatment of these responses as raw data, their faith that emotion equals truth. This approach, she writes, "tells us far more about being affected than about affects" (32). Her primary approach, then, is one of regicide: she aims to "dethrone the subject" (36), to move affect theory away from

spectator studies and into the realm of textual analysis and close readings. This approach is, in a way, a reversal of Ahmed's in its intent to dis-embodiment affect.

Though this thesis will not employ formalism as radically as Brinkema, I will draw from her evaluation of affect as having form in and of itself—affect as having ontological roots in form. Of course, the primary argument against Brinkema's theory, especially when placed directly against Ahmed's, is the de-politicization of affect through its disembodiment. By shifting focus away from the individual spectator's affective experience as a specifically situated subject, this theory risks losing its political potential. However, Brinkema addresses this, counter-arguing that, "to assert that treating affect as a form ignores the body is to refuse to question what forms and bodies might mean to each other, what form might cause us to rethink about bodies, that form might deform matter or our theory of skin in productive ways—or whether, indeed, the body itself is a kind of form" (40). Thinking the body as form, or rather, treating the body as an element of film form that is engaged with other formal techniques like cinematography is, indeed, what this thesis will attempt. Form as affect shapes bodies; bodies as formalized affects shape film form in return. This circular movement of affects, this reciprocal infection, forms a model of affect that offers a compromise of corporeality to Brinkema's radically disembodied affects.

Such a compromise is necessary, since Brinkema's theory is, perhaps, not as radical in application as it is in speculation. Brinkema cannot ever fully separate affect-as-form from affect-as-characterization; she cannot completely avoid linking affect in film as the exteriorization of interior thoughts. For instance, after a brilliant evaluation of grief as a heaviness of form that presses down on its formal elements and subjects, (73), she examines how this heavy grief functions in Haneke's *Funny Games*. Brinkema performs a close reading of one

moment in particular from the film—a 10-minute-long moment, constructed as a tableau, depicting two parents in shock after the brutal shooting of their son by two home invaders. In her analysis, Brinkema finds grief’s heaviness of form pressing down on the parents’ bodies, and on film form itself. The analysis is expertly constructed, deftly examining how cinematic tableaux and photography become privileged mediums for grief/grieving mediums through their stillness and their gesturing to an inevitable death that has already happened through the photographic capturing of figures from the past (108). However, Brinkema cannot resist the temptation to delve into character. Writing of the scene’s maternal figure, she comments parenthetically: “the mother (and is she still one? It is what she was—)” (103). Here, the mother is not merely examined for form’s sake, but is (albeit briefly) looked at for the narrative placement of her character. Just after this acknowledgement of the problematics of maternal identity, Brinkema describes the mother and father’s bodies being pressed down by grief as they struggle to free themselves from their bonds after their captors (the home invaders) leave: “It takes almost a minute for the forms to become fully upright—and they never quite reach that posture, falling, massively, onto each other, the husband to the right collapsed entirely on his wife’s bent back, the composite form an assemblage of weights and heavinesses. Grief is a technique of the arrangement of this burden” (104). Though Brinkema has succeeded, here, in exterminating the spectator (it is not *our* grief coursing through the film’s veins), the film’s grief is still attributed to the parents as characters. They are grieving their son. Does this not suggest that the formal grief Brinkema locates and theorizes within this scene is, in some way, connected to their own subjective emotional responses, their interior experiences made exterior? It seems that, if affect is not *anchored* in character here, it does *move between* character and form, formalizing a

character's interior states. Brinkema's program, then, does away with affect theory's spectator-driven intentionality, but cannot completely escape narrative or character.

Brinkema's work could be viewed as directly opposing Ahmed's; in *The Forms of the Affects*, Brinkema takes an approach of radical formalism, rejecting Ahmed's conception of affect as corporeally rooted and shared between subjects. Brinkema and Ahmed appear to exist on opposite sides of affect theory's vast territory. In many ways, they do directly contrast each other: Ahmed looks at affect as a socializing force directly embedded in culture, while Brinkema examines affect as a material object of its own form. However, Ahmed's corporeality of affect and Brinkema's radical formalism, when placed into conversation with each other, dialectically produce an approach to affect essential to this thesis. Using their works, this thesis will examine the visualization of affect as a contagious, fluid object that infects the bodies of on-screen characters in cinema while spreading into form itself. However, neither theorist provides an explanation for affects that remain free-floating, unanchored to bodies, characters, or spectators. Ahmed is solely concerned with causal affects, produced by bodies in reaction to an event (e.g. disgust being produced by something culturally established as disgusting); Brinkema looks at affects as rooted in forms and in characters' bodies. For a discussion of free-floating affects that are perhaps not felt by characters *or* spectators, but are nevertheless essential to a text's construction, we turn to Sianne Ngai's concept of "tone" in *Ugly Feelings*.

Ngai's work examines and explicates the political ambiguity of her titular affects, those "ugly feelings"—feelings, she argues, that have been too-often ignored in affect theory for their directionless orientations and ambiguous intentions. Ngai explores a wide range of texts, from Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* to Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* to Hollywood's psychological thriller, *Single White Female* (1992), and their engagement with the "ugly

feelings” of animatedness, envy, anxiety, and disgust, among others. Her work argues that these affects are “politically ambiguous [...] explicitly *amoral* and *noncathartic*, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic of purifying release” (6). Unlike a widely-theorized affect like fear or hatred, these affects do not have obvious objects; a subject always knows what frightens them, but cannot often identify the object that arouses in them feelings of envy or anxiety. Without a clear-cut object, these affects often lead to “similarly ambivalent situations of suspended agency” (1). How can a subject act on a feeling if there is no object to act on? Here lies the groundwork for Ngai’s text: the suspension of agency is what renders these affects politically ambiguous and worthy of discussion.

My working model of affect will draw from several of Ngai’s essential arguments, the first of which being the political potential of affects themselves. The politically ambiguous nature of these “ugly feelings,” their suspension of agency rather than their incitement to action, demonstrates their own “critical productivity” (3), or, their ability to diagnose political situations of inequality and social injustice. While Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* deals solely with widely-theorized emotions that can be easily identified, explicated, and attached to an object (e.g. collective fear as a felt response to 9/11), Ngai’s approach offers a window into the potential of less overtly political affects, some of which (like envy) I will be addressing later in this thesis. She calls these phenomena of feeling, “affective ideologies,” gesturing to the potential of affect to embody social, political, and cultural structuring of gendered, sexist, and racist institutions. For instance, in her chapter on envy, Ngai traces how this affect has been historically gendered and feminized, as well as classed and proletarianized (21). This gendering and classing of envy has belittled the affect, transforming it into nothing more than a petty

response to what is objectively perceived as an illusory inequality. In short, the cultural framing of this ugly feeling has stripped it of its political weight, has suspended its agency.

The second element of *Ugly Feelings* that informs my own working model of affect is its attention to art's hard-to-define political relationship with affect, embodied by its free-floating "tone." The suspended agency Ngai cites as the unifying feature of these ugly feelings is, she believes, self-reflexively addressed in novels and films. Art is riddled with guilt over its political passivity, its suspended agency, its "growing awareness of its inability to significantly change that [empirical] society" of non-art, or reality (2). The essential consequence of this observation is a differentiation between affects as *represented* by art, and affects as *embodied* by art; affect can be felt by an artwork, rather than simply conveyed to a spectator. As a result, an important new affective/affected relationship emerges: spectators can be affected by a work, but can also observe affects crucial to the work's form, but unfelt by both spectators and characters. Affect isn't necessarily rooted in either a spectator's own experiences or a character's emotional responses—it can be an all-encompassing "tone."

Ngai privileges tone as the formal organizer of affects in works of art, namely literature and film. "By 'tone,'" she writes, "I mean a literary or cultural artifact's feeling tone: its global or organizing affect, its general disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world" (28). Tone is the reason a reader might describe a novel as "euphoric," or a viewer might describe a film as "melancholic" (28). Tone, she finds, can be circulated between characters in a text, and relayed to the spectator or reader, but isn't necessarily felt. Her emphasis on a circulation of tone as affect reveals similarities to Ahmed's text. In both theoretical works, the authors equate affect's transference between bodies with an exchange of currency or goods. For instance, while discussing Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*, Ngai writes that the novel's

primary affect – confidence – “explicitly links the question of how affect becomes transferred from one subject to another, and secured as a form of psychic property, to the question of monetary value’s highly conspicuous flights from the forms designed to contain it, simply in the process by which these forms change hands” (57). In Melville’s novel, confidence structures the text’s forms, moves characters, and shapes narrative. However, this confidence is never felt by the spectator—it is an “unfelt feeling” (70). Here, Ngai’s theory differs crucially from Ahmed. Whereas Ahmed acknowledges only felt feelings, feelings that their subjects can identify and use to inform their decisions, Ngai acknowledges a distance between perceiving affect and feeling affected, particularly in the perception and consumption of artworks. Rather than bringing them closer to the artwork by affecting them (through techniques of empathy), feeling can, in fact, provoke distance between artwork and perceiver. Crucial to this conclusion is the separation of affect from the body, of acknowledging its existence without being rooted in a particular subjective or physiological experience. Affect, as evidenced by Ngai’s rigorous analysis, can be studied as a material object that organizes texts, rather than simply a result of emotional engagement with the text itself.

This last conclusion positions Ngai’s argument as the bridge between Ahmed’s subject-centered approach to affect, and Brinkema’s radically formalist one. Though Ngai separates affect from the body in a way that extends (I hesitate to say “corrects”) Ahmed’s physiological orientation, she does, nonetheless, rely on the spectator to acknowledge and mobilize the critical productivity of these ugly feelings. Tone still envelops the spectator in a way that Brinkema’s radical formalism aims to eradicate. Though Ngai acknowledges the difficulty of fully separating affect from subject, while lamenting that affect theory’s spectator privileging “[seems] to undercut [affect’s] validity as an object of *materialist* inquiry” (24, emphasis original), Brinkema

critiques Ngai's failure to delve deeper into formalism. Brinkema finds that, in *Ugly Feelings*, "forms are attended to solely insofar as they explain the ugly feelings felt by a reader or spectator" (Brinkema 35). Though, of course, Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects* still doesn't quite separate affects from characters, but explores how affect shapes forms *and* characters in film, she is right in identifying the teleology of Ngai's argument. Ngai engages with form as a messenger of affect; the tone of a work is affect as form, but is still meant to *tell* something to the viewer. Hence, in *The Confidence-Man*, "confidence might be described as the 'tone' of capitalism itself," leading to a discussion of class, capitalism, economy, etc. (62). Whereas Brinkema completely de-privileges the subject in her formalism, Ngai de-privileges the subject's *affective response*.

To put it more simply, Ngai still engages with spectator response, but from the perspective of the spectator-as-active-reader, rather than the spectator-as-passive-feeler. Brinkema finds affect formalized in light and colour; Ngai, in citing tone as the primary embodiment of a text's affect, finds "that it remains loosely fastened to signifying practices even if it is not literally a sign itself" (46). In other words, for Ngai, you cannot locate tone in any signifying object. You cannot point to an artwork and declare, "*There is euphoria!*" or "*That must be melancholia!*" For Ngai, this tonal affect, or affected tone, is more free-floating, moving between characters, narrative, and diegetic spaces to inform spectators and viewers of the work's attitude and, most importantly, of the work's sociocultural and political aims.

My own working model of affect will combine these three seemingly conflicting approaches to affect to produce a theoretical system that observes affect's relationship to character bodies, formal elements, and the tonal qualities of a film's greater structure. Ahmed's approach will be incorporated for its attention to the movements and contagiousness of affects.

However, her over-privileging of the subject (and, indeed, of her own subjectivity and subjective experiences), and her neglect of affect's role in the representative arts will be rectified through Ngai and Brinkema's theories. Brinkema's formalism will counterbalance Ahmed's extreme subjectivity. Using Brinkema's theory, I will examine film form as ontologically affected; I will take affects as having forms for themselves, rather than for brief consumption by a spectator. Finally, Ngai's approach will be incorporated for her attention to the critical productivity of politically ambiguous affects within works of literature and film, as formalized through the works' tonal qualities. My resultant working model of affect theory posits that, within film, affects move between bodies, forms, and objects to both emphasize the naturalization of certain social structures and hierarchies, and to perform a politically productive critique of these very structures. In short, politically affective/affected forms inform and shape bodies, which continue to inform and shape form in a circularity with great critical potential. Looking at the contemporary horror film, I will examine how negative maternal affects (namely, envy and irritation) move between mother and child, mother and object, mother and film form, and film form and tone, in order to critique and/or reaffirm the institution of postfeminist mothering itself. Affect, here, will be taken as a dynamic object, an integral part of the maternal experience, and an ever-moving and ever-changing element of film form.

## Chapter 2: Irritated Mothers Irritating Motherhood: Irritation as Postfeminist Critique in *The Babadook* (2014)

### 2.1 The Irritation of Grief

A small child is getting ready for school. His mother dresses him, pulling his jacket over his shoulders. He tries to hug her, emitting a satisfied sigh; she pushes him away. “Don’t do that!” she cries.

This startling sequence occurs at the beginning of Jennifer Kent’s horror film, *The Babadook* (2014), a film that exposes contemporary horror’s capacity to critique and comment on mothering through its use of affect and the Final Mom figure. Though many would undoubtedly condemn the above sequence as a representation of neglectful (or even emotionally abusive) mothering, (what monstrous perversion of maternity would push away an affectionate child?) *The Babadook* allows for more nuance than that. Its maternal figure struggles to contain and control her affects, but it is this very struggle that generates a productive analysis and critique of motherhood, particularly postfeminist mothering.

*The Babadook* follows a mother and son, Amelia and Samuel, as they attempt to build a nurturing relationship following the death of Amelia’s husband, Oscar. As the six-year-old Samuel reminds everyone, from social workers to grocery store strangers, Oscar died in a car accident while driving Amelia to the hospital to give birth to Sam. Oscar’s death, then, is forever entwined with Sam’s life—a tension that Amelia constantly combats. Their fraught relationship is not helped by Samuel’s abnormal behaviour at school. Obsessed with fighting monsters, Samuel brings homemade weapons into the classroom, jeopardizing the other students’ safety. The duo’s relationship is further tested when Samuel discovers a mysterious storybook in his

room – the titular *Babadook* – which invites a horrifying, inky-black, two-dimensional monster into their lives. As Amelia becomes more and more consumed by this Babadook figure, her grip on reality loosens, and her anger and violence towards Samuel reaches dangerous new highs. Due to the connection between Oscar’s death and Samuel’s birth, most critics have discussed Kent’s film in terms of grief: Amelia struggles to love Sam because she cannot see through her own grief. Briana Rodriguez writes that Amelia’s despair over Oscar’s death has “burrowed deep inside her, festering into a quiet resentment toward the young Samuel and a debilitating avoidance of her grief that spirals into bouts of depression, insomnia, and rage” (62). Her inability to work through grief is, for Rodriguez, the source of the Babadook’s power. Jayesh Busgeet, in an article on the film’s dealings with psychiatry, writes that Amelia tests our sympathies, and “slowly begins to claw at our fear as an intense anger grows towards her son while being trapped in a maelstrom of grief and guilt” (par. 5).

It is tempting to follow this line of thought. Of course, Amelia fights her grief throughout the film; of course, Samuel is the victim of her frozen state of mourning. The film does appear aggrieved. It even makes use of a dull blue and grey colour palette that seems to mirror Amelia’s psychology, emanating sadness, depression, and grief. As Rodriguez argues, “Amelia’s mental state seeps into the entire world of the film. Painted in shades of blue and grey with dashes of faded pastels [...] her house feels stuck in a state of perpetual mourning” (62). The film literally has a case of the blues. Through this reading, *The Babadook* seems to be a parable of grief, with the titular monster embodying the monstrosity of mourning itself and Amelia and Sam as fairy tale-like figures that must break the Babadook’s spell of frozen grief. However, this superficial reading of the film and blind attachment to its state of grief ignores the text’s more productively critical power, which lies in its close examination of the tension inherent to postfeminist

mothering: the tension between a desire to fulfill the postfeminist success model of nurturing-mother-meets-career-driven-and-sexually-attractive woman, and the move to reject such a model.

This tension, in *The Babadook*, is embodied not by its dealings with grief, but through what we could term an epidermally disruptive affect of irritation. Irritation, here, pokes and prods at the film's character bodies, narrative, and form. This affect's critical power is generated from its dual (and conflicting) forms as both an excessive and inadequate response throughout the film. For instance, the scene discussed above positions Amelia's irritation towards her son's hug ("Don't do that!") as an excessive affective response. Once again, what kind of a mother would push away an openly affectionate six-year-old child? Here, as elsewhere throughout the film, Amelia cannot "properly" employ irritation, revealing her perceived failures as a mother. As Amelia becomes possessed by the Babadook monster and loses her grip on reality, her irritation towards Sam grows and grows until it boils over into an excessive response of violent language and action. The Babadook, through this reading, is less a monster of grief than a monster of irritation, lurking just beneath the skin, scratching and clawing until Amelia bursts. This growth of irritation does not just exist narratively; it is paralleled by a growing physical irritation in the form of Amelia's constant toothache, and through a formal irritation as the Babadook chafes against film form itself, irritating cinema's ontological roots. Namely, the Babadook irritates cinema's rootedness in light, its need for light to achieve visibility. Irritation is *The Babadook's* dominant affect of critical engagement. Through the film's narrative depictions of irritation as an inappropriate affective response to motherhood, its exploration of the physiological experience of irritation through Amelia's constant toothache, and its use of the Babadook monster as an irritation of film form, Amelia's inability to employ proper or adequate

affects is re-positioned as a productive critique of postfeminist mothering; this critique questions the naturalization of motherhood and postfeminism's impossible idealization of the institution.

### **3.2 Postfeminism, Final Moms, and New Momism**

Before moving into a discussion of *The Babadook*'s use of irritation to critique and evaluate contemporary motherhood, it is important to develop an image of what form of mothering, exactly, *The Babadook* aims to critique. Kent's film is an ideal Final Mom film: Amelia must protect Sam from a threat on her own, with no outside support. Amelia, like the other Final Moms of horror, did not just appear out of the blue like a maternal superhero; rather, she is part of the larger social, cultural, and political backdrop of postfeminism and one of its strongest and most gnarled branches, New Momism.

Postfeminism, as its name suggests, is a movement categorically set against its antecedent, "feminism," referring broadly to the second-wave feminist movements of the 1960s and '70s. Postfeminism responds to what it sees as the anti-feminine direction of second-wave feminism. Rather than support second-wave feminism's privileging of careerism over domesticity, postfeminism declares that women can have it all: women can be maternal, career-oriented, sexually attractive, and thoroughly feminine all at once. Postfeminism, then, is defined in opposition to second-wave feminism, perpetuating an intergenerational conflict that constructs the language of past feminisms as "inevitably shrill, bellicose, and parsimonious" (Tasker and Negra 3). This intergenerational conflict will be taken up in greater detail in the next chapter's exploration of envy, but for now it is important to note that postfeminism is born from conflict; it thrives on contradictions disguised as freedom of choice.

Postfeminism simultaneously celebrates women's seemingly endless choices while implying that there is a "right" choice to make. As such, postfeminism is built around the illusion of choice, particularly in its emphasis on consumer products. Postfeminism argues that the key to womanly success is accumulating the "right" products—the right clothes, the right makeup, the right baby toys, the right food. As such, postfeminism "works to commodify feminism via the figure of the woman as empowered consumer" (Tasker and Negra 2). Women simply need to have the right things. Of course, a contradiction already arises between postfeminism's fantasy that every woman can access these products, and the reality of economic inequality. Affluence is a tenet of postfeminism, "a precondition for this version of modern feminine subjectivity" and "a fact that reveals [...] the contradictions of postfeminism" (Thoma 411). Postfeminism is, then, to no great surprise, primarily embodied by white, middle-class women (Tasker and Negra 2).

Postfeminism's emphasis on freedom of choice extends into the romantic and sexual realms of female experience, an emphasis that, rather than liberate women, has produced a neoconservative movement towards increased domesticity. Once again, postfeminism thrives on contradiction, this time between the neoconservative values of the nuclear, monogamous, heterosexual family, and the image of the sexually liberated woman (McRobbie 28). As Angela McRobbie writes, "The new young women are confident enough to declare their anxieties about possible failure in regard to finding a husband, they avoid any aggressive or overtly traditional men, and they brazenly enjoy their sexuality without fear of the sexual double standard [...] Being without a husband does not mean they will go without men" (38). However, as postfeminist cultural objects like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) demonstrate, even though these purportedly independent women achieve success in friendship and career, they ultimately continue to feel anxiety at the thought of singleness and spinsterhood

(McRobbie 45). As with postfeminism's emphasis on consumerism, its dealings with sexuality also celebrate the freedom of choice while insidiously naturalizing a "right" choice: the choice to settle down and begin a family. As Genz and Brabon note, within postfeminism "The domestic sphere is rebranded as a domain of female autonomy and independence, far removed from its previous connotations of toil and confinement" (52). The domestic sphere, then, has become the ideal destination for postfeminism; though postfeminist women should explore their sexualities and enjoy themselves, they are always moving towards the construction of a domestic space and a nuclear family. This, to no surprise, has direct connections to motherhood, as embodied by postfeminism's anxiety-ridden sub-category of New Momism.

The pressures of motherhood have, of course, been critiqued for decades, well before the dawn of postfeminist discourse. One of the most famous examples of motherhood critique is Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*. Published in 1976, Rich's text is notable for its rejection of biological essentialism. She argues that a nurturing maternity is not instinctual, but learned (12). "Institutionalized motherhood," she writes, "demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (42). Motherhood, for Rich, is not a natural state of feminine being, but an identity that is artificially constructed and forced upon women. Rich's text, for this project, is most interesting for her acknowledgement of conflicting feelings surrounding motherhood—a conflict of feeling that isn't socially acceptable. Mothers, Rich argues, are "flooded with feelings of both love and violence" towards their children (37). As we will see in *The Babadook's* use of irritation, this ambivalent attitude towards children can have critically productive ends.

Forty years after the publication of *Of Woman Born*, Rich's concerns surrounding motherhood are continually echoed in critiques of New Momism, the postfeminist model of

mothering. Through its naturalization of the domestic space, postfeminism has re-elevated the idea of nurturing, self-actualized, and self-sacrificing motherhood. In their book, *The Mommy Myth*, Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels take New Momism to task for its impossible expectations of contemporary mothers. As with all branches of postfeminism, New Momism is plagued by and built on contradiction: “The ‘new momism,’” Douglas and Michaels write, “is a set of ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach” (4-5). Like the broader cultural realm of postfeminism, New Momism suggests that women can have it all: the husband, the baby, the job, the house. However, having it all is, unsurprisingly, pervaded by anxiety. Explicating the link between postfeminism and New Momism, Douglas and Michaels comment that “postfeminism means that you can now work outside the home even in jobs previously restricted to men, go to graduate school, pump iron, and pump your own gas, as long as you remain fashion conscious, slim, nurturing, deferential to men, and become a dotting, selfless mother” (25). In other words, postfeminism and New Momism mean that women must attempt to attain impossibly high standards, creating a life-space of anxiety and guilt. These New Mom figures are pulled “between two rather powerful and contradictory cultural riptides: Be more dotting and self-sacrificing at home than Bambi’s mother, yet more achievement-oriented at work than Madeleine Albright” (Douglas and Michaels 11). Postfeminism and New Momism, then, are constructed on an impossibility disguised as a natural identity to be celebrated: achieve perfection by fulfilling what is seen as a woman’s biological destiny, without questioning the artificial naturalness of this destiny or revealing any of the anxieties surrounding such an impossible task. These expectations are precisely what the Final Moms of horror work against.

Final Moms protect their loved ones from harm against all odds; however, they do not do so unquestioningly. Final Moms are plagued by doubts, by the “feelings of both love and violence” Rich so eloquently describes in *Of Woman Born* (37). These maternal figures undoubtedly care for their children, but struggle to navigate and preserve a self-identity amidst the pressures of motherhood. The recent Iranian production, *Under the Shadow* (2016), for instance, foregrounds a mother-daughter relationship fraught by envy and resentment. Set during post-revolutionary Iran in the 1980s, the film follows a young mother, Shideh (Narges Rashidi), who attempts to return to medical school following the 1979 revolution, but is barred from her studies because of past involvement with leftist groups. Shideh’s husband, Iraj (Bobby Naderi), however, is a practicing doctor; every day, Shideh must watch as he leaves to fulfill the career she dreams of. Instead of practicing medicine, Shideh cares for her young daughter, Dorsa (Avin Manshadi), towards whom she demonstrates both unconditional love and extreme exasperation. Their apartment becomes haunted by a mysterious spirit that exacerbates the tension between Shideh and Dorsa. Shideh explodes at Dorsa over small things (Dorsa obsessing over finding a lost doll) in a manner similar to Amelia’s seemingly excessive irritation towards Samuel. Shideh, like Amelia, struggles to navigate the multiple realms of womanhood, failing to adhere to the postfeminist model of New Momism. Similarly, the French New Extremism film, *Inside* (2007), follows a mother at odds with motherhood. Sarah (Alysson Paradis) is due to give birth in 24 hours, but appears disaffected by her impending adoption of a maternal identity, a disaffection explained by a past trauma: Sarah, like Amelia, lost her husband in a car accident. Left to parent alone, Sarah loses any enthusiasm she might have had for motherhood. This lack of maternal affection is tested, however, when Sarah is stalked throughout her home by a sadistic stranger (Beatrice Dalle), who is determined to cut Sarah’s baby out of her body and steal it for herself.

Like Amelia, Sarah must protect her child (in this case an unborn child) from the violent machinations of an external threat. Though these three films are from disparate cultures, they all negotiate the tensions and contradictions of postfeminism through the figure of the Final Mom.

*The Babadook* is undoubtedly set within a postfeminist and New Momist milieu. Amelia constantly feels as if she's failing in her role as mother by being unable to show affection towards her son, something that's pointed out to her explicitly by her own sister, Claire (Hayley McElhinney). This failure to perform maternity is compounded by Amelia's failure in the workplace (she works a monotonous, low-paying job as a caretaker at a seniors' home), her failure as a romantically viable woman (she drives away a co-worker who takes an interest in her by exploding at Sam in front of him), and her failure as a sexually liberated being (Sam interrupts her one attempt at self-pleasure through masturbation). Postfeminism works on the promise of "having it all"; Amelia can succeed at nothing. Enter irritation: Amelia's frequent bursts of irritation towards Samuel, though superficially inappropriate and exemplary of "bad" mothering, are, in reality, affective experiences that construct a space for ambivalent motherhood. Irritation allows for and produces a critique of the impossible-to-attain models of postfeminism and New Momism. This seemingly minor affect in comparison to grief is, contradictorily, the predominant and most critically powerful affect of Kent's film. Its narrative manifestation is paralleled by a physiological irritation (Amelia's bothersome toothache) and formal irritation (the *Babadook's* irritation of film form through a prevention of light-travel which, ultimately, refuses the film's ability to become visible). This triumvirate of irritation moves towards an explosive conclusion that culminates in Amelia's ability to accept motherhood as a conflicted and conflicting institution—a hugely progressive movement towards a discussion of motherhood beyond New Momist terms.

### 2.3 Irritation and the Power of Impropriety

Though irritation is a socioculturally critical affect, it has been under-theorized in the realm of affect theory. This might be due in part to its seeming superficiality—irritation, for most, runs only skin-deep. However, it is irritation’s very relationship to the skin, to the surface, and to the superficial that provides it with the critical potential at work in *The Babadook*. Irritation involves both the body and the mind, traveling between and shaping each other. The skin might be irritated by a displeasing run-in with a source of friction; the mind might find itself irritated by the grating quality of a nearby person’s voice. Thus, irritation does not merely rest on the epidermis and vaguely annoy—it finds roots in the mind’s core, evincing an ability to run deeper than skin-deep. The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definitions of irritation illustrate and emphasize the affect’s dual nature. The primary definition offered describes irritation as “the action of stirring up or provoking to activity; incitement,” an “incitement” clarified in the *OED*’s second definition of irritation as the “excitement of anger or impatience; exasperation, provocation, vexation, annoyance” (1, 2). These first two definitions primarily concern the affect’s relationship to the mind; however, it is an affect that provokes its subject to excitement, exposing a bodily response that springs the corpus into action. The physiological nature of irritation and its ability to push the body into action comes to the fore in the *OED*’s third definition, which proclaims “irritation” to be the “[e]xcitement of a bodily part or organ to excessive sensitiveness or morbid action.” Here, then, we have an affect that will not stay put. Irritation does not rest, but moves constantly between body and mind—it is both epidermal and cerebral. As such, irritation fulfills this thesis’s working model of affect theory, as it exemplifies affect’s ability to move not just within filmic narratives, but also between character bodies and film form itself. Irritation,

too, troubles the Spinozan claim that an affective experience is a passive one. Rather, irritation provokes its host to activity. Victims of irritation, physically and/or psychologically bothered, attempt to find and eradicate the source of irritation. This seems obvious enough. If someone's voice grates on us, we remove ourselves from the sound of that voice. Such a strategy is complicated, however, when the irritant is widely accepted as an object of love—namely, a child.

In *The Babadook*, the viewer is privy to Amelia's struggle with an intense irritation directed at her own son and at the institution of postfeminist motherhood more broadly, an irritation manifested physiologically in the form of a stubborn toothache and manifested formally in the figure of a monster. Amelia's irritation arrives in bursts (as in her response to Sam's attempts at physical affection), but cannot be pacified. Her sister, Claire, admits, "I can't stand being around your son," before accusing Amelia that, "You can't stand being around him, either." Amelia cannot stand being around Samuel, but she cannot remove herself from the irritant or remove the irritant from her surroundings—she and Samuel are bound to bump and scrape against each other in a continual irritation with no escape. Amelia's irritation towards Samuel becomes worse and worse as the film goes on, particularly once she is possessed by the Babadook and begins to lose her ability to sort through reality and fantasy (or, rather, nightmare). Her growth in irritation culminates in a horrific moment when, in the thrall of the Babadook's powers, Amelia screams at Samuel that she sometimes thinks about smashing his head against a brick wall, and confesses, "You don't know how many times I wish it had been you and not him [Oscar] that died." This linear increase in narrative irritation is paralleled by her increasing toothache and by the Babadook's intensifying irritation of film form through its disruption of visibility and light.

Before moving into this analysis of the film, however, it is important to emphasize another of irritation's most crucial and critically productive elements, as identified and explicated by Sianne Ngai. Analyzing irritation's function in Nella Larsen's Harlem Renaissance novella, *Quicksand*, which follows the life of a mixed-race woman named Helga in the 1930s as she navigates her racial, social, and sexual identities, Ngai argues that irritation functions as a critique of the (in)appropriateness of certain feelings. Helga, in Larsen's novella, reacts with excessive irritation towards innocuous objects (teacups, for instance), but appears to respond inadequately in moments of overt racism, which – socially – call for affects more powerful than irritation, such as anger or disgust (182). As Ngai writes, "Helga's irritation is *both* an excess and a deficiency of anger" (182); irritation, in *Quicksand's* racially charged milieu, is an inappropriate affect. Rather than condemn Larsen for failing to employ affect "properly," Ngai comments on the ways in which readers perceive Helga's responses to be inadequate in the first place—when is irritation appropriate, and when is it excessive or inadequate? Ngai's primary explanation for irritation's ambiguously defined moments of propriety is the affect's lack of a clear object. Irritation, for Ngai, is less an affect than a mood. Helga, like many others, cannot properly source her irritation; in an act of meta-response, she is even irritated by this lack of an object of irritation. As a result, irritation bursts through at seemingly inappropriate moments. Though Ngai's definition of irritation is valid (everyone has found themselves inexplicably irritated at times), I do believe that irritation can be a consciously experienced affect with a clear object. For every experience of irritation there is a corresponding irritant, however unconscious one may be of its source. This unconscious irritant, then, has the potential to be uncovered (like many hidden objects of our unconscious); irritation is not always dismissively inexplicable. In

Amelia's case, the irritant/object of her affective response is her son, along with her job, her boss, and her unfulfilling life in general, in all its monochromatic blueness.

Ngai's linking of inappropriateness and irritation is crucial to *The Babadook*'s critical work; the inappropriateness of irritation is the film's prevalent ordering force. Amelia is governed by irritation, but must hold this irritation in to avoid being perceived as a "bad" mother. No one must know that she "can't stand" being around her son, as her sister sees. As a result, when Amelia's irritation bursts out of her shell of impassiveness, it takes on the sheen of impropriety, a social *faux pas*. This is most evident during the scene of Sam's cousin, Ruby's, birthday party. Amelia sits with all the other children's mothers in her sister's kitchen, Sam clinging to her neck and refusing to be removed. She attempts to push him away, encouraging him to go play, but he whines in response. After finally forcing Sam off her lap and chivvying him out of the room, attributing his behaviour to tiredness, Amelia attempts to ingratiate herself with the other mothers. These other women are clear embodiments of the illusion of postfeminist success. Their perfectly coiffed hair contrasts Amelia's messy, flyaway bun; their tailored black and grey suits and dresses make Amelia's loose-fitting, pale pink blouse look especially drab. Aesthetically, Amelia does not fit into this crowd. Already she has failed to meet the New Momist ideal of remaining "fashion conscious" and sexually attractive throughout motherhood (Douglas and Michaels 25). This difference is compounded by the scene's formal structure, which continually isolates Amelia from the other women. Claire and her guests are positioned symmetrically, two of them sitting at either end of the frame, three of them standing. They're shot from a slightly low angle, giving them the imposing feeling of a coven. Amelia, on the other hand, is always framed alone, centered, looking isolated and small.

Soon, Amelia's other postfeminist and New Momist failures are exposed, including her lackluster career. When the other women attempt to relate to her, asking what she does for work, one woman remarks that she heard Amelia used to be a writer. The other women appear interested, asking what she's written. Amelia brushes them off, explaining that she'd just done "a few magazine pieces" and "some kids' stuff." The other women become awkward, and don't ask Amelia any more questions about her past as a writer; her failure is too awkward for discussion. Most noticeably, Amelia's job as a caregiver goes undiscussed, framed as unimportant. Though this is an admirable profession, it is a job that allows only for her frazzled and messy appearance, her palpable tiredness. Next to the perfectly curated appearances of these New Moms *par excellence*, Amelia could not appear more out of place, emphasizing an insurmountable divide between Amelia and the postfeminist ideal. Her lack of success hangs, invisible, over the scene. This lack of success extends into Amelia's performance of maternity throughout the scene. After Sam resists going to play with the other children, Claire and her guests exchange a knowing look. Claire even rolls her eyes. Sam is disobedient, clingy, and whiny—a maladjusted child, which is framed as Amelia's responsibility through the partygoers' knowing looks. Thus, Amelia has failed three of the primary tenets of postfeminism and New Momism: physical attractiveness, career success, and maternal instinct.

Throughout this scene, Amelia's irritation grows from a simmer to a boil, eventually erupting in a hugely awkward (but satisfying, from the viewers' perspective) moment of social impropriety. Her irritation is exacerbated most noticeably by one woman's comment to Amelia that she does volunteer work "with some disadvantaged women," some of whom, like Amelia, have lost their husbands, and "find it very hard." What is purportedly meant as an attempt at empathy comes across as patronizing pity—something that Amelia doesn't ignore. After an

awkward pause, Claire asks the same woman how her husband's work is going. The woman cheerfully laments that her husband works so much she feels she's with her children 24/7 now—she never even has time to go to the gym. During this banal conversation, the camera slowly and painfully tracks into Amelia's face, which has hardened into reproach. Suddenly, she snaps: "That's a real tragedy," she comments, her voice deep, steady, and pointed. "Not even having time to go to the gym anymore—how do you cope? You must have so much to talk about with those poor, disadvantaged women."

Irritation incites Amelia to action, manifesting itself in her explosive outburst. The impropriety of her speech is emphasized here, as Claire and her guests begin to exchange awkward looks, unsure of how to respond. Though, of course, what the woman said was offensive, it was expressed within the structure of social etiquette, an insult hidden behind a mask of politeness. Amelia destroys this mask using her irritation. Though the film positions its viewers to sympathize with Amelia, framing the other women (literally) as imposing, unfeeling, and tactless, the blatant social impropriety of Amelia's outburst gestures to the restrictions of postfeminist culture. Having been pitied for losing her husband, judged for her disobedient son, dismissed for her lack of a successful career, and visually marginalized through framing and costuming, Amelia's irritation reaches a breaking point, shooting up through her skin and forcing the scene to a screeching halt. A logically motivated outburst, it is still framed as inappropriate and awkward; irritation, in this scene, functions both as a critique of postfeminist models of success and a critique of postfeminist culture's refusal to evaluate these models. Amelia's irritation points to postfeminism and New Momism's lack of self-reflexivity, its prevention of a space for critical discourse. The very unacceptability of her irritation gestures to the discursive restrictions of postfeminist culture. Though she can be called "disadvantaged" and openly pitied,

she is not socially permitted to display any irritation in response. As such, her mobilization of irritation transgresses the divide between Amelia's postfeminist and New Momist failure and the other women's perceived successes. Amelia is not a pinnacle of postfeminism, but she is not "disadvantaged"; her irritation shatters the illusion of postfeminist success as an attainable commodity. It adds nuance to the mix, complicating the "good" mother/ "bad" mother binary and the valorization of New Momism. As in the earlier scene of the rejected hug, irritation, here, introduces maternal ambivalence into the conversation, those conflicting "feelings of both love and violence" transferred from mothers to their children (Rich 37). Amelia's irritation demonstrates both her dissatisfaction with her life, and her refusal to be judged. Though she cannot banter about being with her son 24/7 with a smile on her face, she is by no means a "bad" mother; irritation, here, is a product of the tension between love and violence. This superficially superficial affect, then, constructs a space for refutation and critique—a space that continues into the characters' and the film's physiologies and forms.

## 2.4 Iterations of Irritation

*The Babadook's* physiology is riddled with irritation, the most obvious of which is embodied by Amelia's experience of possession—the Babadook *literally* gets under her skin. As Amelia falls farther and farther away from the film's established reality, the Babadook's physiological effects become more and more pronounced in facial twitches, itches and, most prominently, in the form of a stubborn toothache. These physiological irritations work to embody Amelia's irritation towards motherhood. It is tempting to view these irritants as direct consequences of the Babadook's presence, or its possession of Amelia's body. The film finds one of its most charged moments in Amelia's Babadook-fueled speech to Sam in which she

screams that she sometimes wants to smash his head against a brick wall. It is easy to simply write off this speech as reflective of the Babadook's powers, and Amelia's irritation as generated by the Babadook's insidious presence under her skin. The film, however, is plagued by physical irritation well before the Babadook's dark arrival. An early sequence, for instance, shows Sam sleeping next to Amelia, having moved to her bed after suffering a nightmare. The film cuts quickly between shots of Sam sleepily grabbing Amelia's hair, scraping his feet against her legs, and making soft noises that sound booming in the quiet bedroom. Amelia lies there, unable to sleep amidst these restless movements—irritants emphasized through the film's quick editing. Amelia's body is prevented from sleeping due to her irritation and yet, because Sam is her son, she cannot be incited to action as irritation would like, but must lie there, motionless. This, again, occurs before either of them has ever heard of the Babadook, suggesting that the Babadook should be read less as an external force that *causes* Amelia's intense irritation towards Samuel, but rather a reflection of Amelia's pre-existing irritation towards her son and postfeminist mothering more widely.

The most prominent and critically engaged physiological irritation in *The Babadook* (which also, importantly, arrives before the monster's first appearance) is Amelia's constant toothache. Throughout the film, Amelia suffers from an unexplained ache in her jaw. It is never narratively acknowledged – the characters never discuss it or draw attention to it – but Amelia refers to it through action, through grimacing before clutching her jaw and meditatively massaging it. As the film progresses, so does this ache. Just before Amelia's charged speech to Samuel ("Sometimes I just want to smash your head against a brick wall!"), Amelia pulls out one of her teeth, yelling all the while but doing so determinedly and steadfastly; this major irritant is finally eradicated. Since this climactic moment of self-directed dental torture does occur while

Amelia is caught in the throes of the Babadook's power, it is tempting to view her toothache as yet another of her possession's uncomfortable side effects. However, there are seven "jaw ache moments" in the film, the first three of which occur before the Babadook's arrival, suggesting the presence of an irritation pre-Babadook, which once again suggests that the Babadook's existence is less the *cause* of Amelia's outbursts, and more of a *facilitator* of a long-suppressed irritation. The Babadook merely exposes Amelia's raw mental state; through analyzing this recurring motif of toothache, it becomes evident that Amelia's irritation runs much deeper than a two-dimensional storybook drawing of a monster. Rather, Amelia's irritation helps construct a critique of her relationship with mothering.

Teeth have long been an object of fascination in literature, philosophy, and, of course, psychoanalysis, which often equates teeth with castration anxieties.<sup>1</sup> The interest for *The Babadook* in teeth, however, lies not in teeth themselves, but in the *ache* they can produce—in their potential for pain. The toothache is a mentally debilitating physiological manifestation of irritation. Those who have suffered through it curse it for its violent ability to bind the mind and shut off creative or engaged thought. Of course, this is difficult to imagine for the beneficiaries of modern dentistry. We must turn, then, to writers who were not so lucky. As Shakespeare writes in *Much Ado About Nothing*, "There was never yet Philosopher/That could endure the tooth-ake patiently" (v.i.36). When in the toothache's grasp, it is possible only to think of the toothache. The ache's ability to impose blinders on its victim's worldview has led to a connection between toothache and neurotic obsession which is, speaking more broadly, an intertwining of psychological and physiological irritation.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see Donal Capps and Nathan Carlin's article, "Sublimation and Symbolization: The Case of Dental Anxiety and the Symbolic Meaning of Teeth" (2011), in which dental anxiety is related to anticipatory anxiety.

This intertwining is discussed most humorously in a 1909 article by Bobib, titled “Philosophy and the Toothache.” Bobib takes up the idea that pain is simply psychological and can be combated using the mantra of “mind over matter.” Using the toothache as a metonymic representation of all pain, Bobib writes that philosophers have often argued for the mind’s power to overcome pain. “Henceforth, we are to be our own dentists, but instead of uprooting teeth we are to uproot ideas” (444), he summarizes. Through this sentence, Bobib equates the pulling of teeth (necessitated by the irritating toothache) with the yanking of painful ideas from the mind. Psychological and physiological irritation remain wed, constantly causing, reflecting, and exacerbating each other. Like Amelia, Bobib himself suffers from a severe ache in the jaw. Like Amelia, he’s kept awake at nights because of it. He attempts to overcome this pain using “mind over matter” as motivation, but finds he can focus on nothing but his painful, prodding toothache, brought to new levels of intensity through his lack of sleep. As a result, he becomes suspicious of curing pain through the mind. “My reasons,” he defends, “are that for five long nights have I lain awake trying to persuade myself that toothache was but a phantom of the mind, and day has as often returned only to find my mind still unconvinced” (445). The pain does not lessen with time, and so his mind cannot grasp its erasure. Bobib goes so far as to say, “If you would punish me give me anything but toothache in the night-time” (446). The pain of the toothache removes Bobib’s ability to construct, shape, or determine his own reality. Though he tries and wishes to view his pain as purely psychological, the physical nature of this pain subsumes these attempts to construct logical structures: “the hypothesis broke down hopelessly before my aching tooth” (446). There is no rationale, here, that can help Bobib. Only the irrationality brought about by an irritation of the jaw can provide any sense of truth—irritation becomes the only reality.

Amelia, too, becomes a restricted victim of her physical and psychological pain, as manifested by her toothache. Her toothache parallels her decreasing ability to grasp the film's early reality and her descent into the Babadook's reality, a reality of darkness and shifting images and instability (though we will come to these points later). The toothache keeps her up at night, pulling her away from sleep (as Samuel does in the early medley of irritating images), worsening until she eventually pulls out the frustrating and throbbing tooth. Once again, this toothache finds its origins not in the Babadook, but in some unseen occurrence existing beyond the spectator's knowledge of filmic events, before this monster creeps onto our screens. This indicates that Amelia's irritation is long-existent, and is perhaps embodied by the Babadook, but not caused by the Babadook; it indicates that Amelia's irritation towards Samuel can be viewed as a neurotic obsession. In Roger Schmidt's essay on the literary history of teeth, he identifies the toothache's primary function as an object of obsession. In the throes of a toothache, "one's pain seems much larger than oneself," inciting a constant tonguing of the sore area and an inability to think on anything else (38-9). The toothache is not just a pain, but the cause of a repetitive, anxious motion indicating an obsessive tendency, a neurosis. Amelia's toothache is the manifestation of a self-reflexive obsession with her own irritation—her irritation towards Samuel, in particular. Amelia's sore tooth stands in for her life's irritants. It is analogous with Sam. It is significant, then, that Amelia forcibly extracts her sore tooth – this constant irritant – towards the film's climactic moments, just before she tells Sam she wishes he'd died instead of Oscar and becomes physically violent towards him. The tooth irritant is finally removed, pushing her towards a removal of the larger irritant which, horrifically, is her own son. However, this toothache/tooth-extraction can be read much more positively through the lens of counter-irritation. This concept, an outdated medical philosophy, stipulates that by irritating previously

irritated skin (through burning, for example), this skin is prompted to heal itself and remove dead cells (French 359). In other words, irritation is removed through further irritation. Amelia's irritation spreads outwards from her tooth to her son. She removes her tooth, annihilating that irritant, before turning to Sam, the real irritant. This tooth-pulling can, then, be seen as a mode of counter-irritation, prompting that devastating speech. In order for Amelia to accept her irritation with Sam as a natural part of motherhood, she must venture into the realm of honest and hurtful anger; irritation must push her over the edge, must become irritated itself, before she can start to heal.

As a mode of irritation and counter-irritation, Amelia's toothache is deeply connected to her dissatisfaction with postfeminist motherhood. The toothache irritates just as the "poor, disadvantaged women" comment does at Ruby's birthday party. With the toothache, as at the birthday party, irritation controls Amelia's reality and shapes her actions. It also provides her with the ability to critique her status as mother and her dissatisfaction with the institution of motherhood. The toothache drives her towards a confrontation with Sam; the mothers' comments regarding Amelia's job and widowhood drive her towards a confrontation with the impossible expectations of postfeminist motherhood. Thus, the movement from suppressed dissatisfaction to active display of irritation resembles a movement from a static position of complacency to an active motion of critical response. Amelia's toothache exposes her ambivalent feelings towards Sam, her feelings of both love and hate. Irritation, in short, forms Amelia's critique of motherhood, while simultaneously pushing her towards a conclusion of compromise, in which irritation doesn't disappear, but becomes a part of everyday mothering.

## 2.5 The Babadook's Irritation of Film Form

*The Babadook's* use of narrative and physiological, embodied irritation is further paralleled by a formal irritation, creating a triumvirate structure of irritation and irritants, all rubbing each other raw. As explored in the previous section, when the Babadook possesses Amelia, it literally gets under her skin; formally, the Babadook gets under the film's skin, irritating its illusion and construction of reality. The Babadook monster irritates the film's very form, disrupting it more and more as it parallels Amelia's growing inability to grasp reality. However, it is not Reality she cannot grasp (as the film does not try to pretend that there is a purely objective Reality waiting to be captured or discovered), but the film's constructed reality. In short, the Babadook shatters the illusory coherence of its diegetic world. The monster does this in two primary ways: by disrupting the ontological foundation of cinema as a constructed illusion of a three-dimensional world captured through light, and by its disruption of other forms of media, particularly the televised Méliès films Amelia watches during her frequent and debilitating bouts of insomnia.

As a two-dimensional figure with the look and feel of a hand-drawn, inky existence, the Babadook disrupts the cinematic illusion of depth. Indeed, cinematic illusion relies on coherence and depth, the ability to convince audiences that the world it offers is multi-dimensional and not just a superficial flickering of static images. The audience (without being passive or dull or stupid) *want* to become absorbed into the story world. For this to occur, the cinema must successfully craft an illusion of depth. The Babadook infiltrates film form itself through its status as both a filmic element (it exists for and in the film) and non-filmic figure (it is, itself, a storybook drawing and not "cinematic" per se). The monster makes its first appearance when Sam finds a mysterious, red-covered storybook on his bookshelf entitled (unsurprisingly), *The*

*Babadook*. The figure presented in the thick, ruffle-edged pages of the book is tall, thin, and completely flat, made up of the blackness of a dark void. Its shoulders hunch and its arms hang disjointedly at its sides—it is one straight plane from its top hat to the bottom of its trench coat. The one piece of whiteness that glares out from the figure’s mind-numbing blackness is its snarling grin.

Already, with the Babadook contained to the storybook’s pages, this non-filmic element is positioned as a threat. The monster’s real threat, however, lies in its ability to creep under the film’s very skin. As a two-dimensional figure, it does not belong in the seeming three-dimensionality of the cinematic world—and yet, it manages to lurk under and travel through the film’s artificial depth, revealing the film to be only ever surface. 49 minutes into the film, the Babadook is shown to have escaped the confines of its two-dimensional prison, coming to inhabit *The Babadook*’s three-dimensional filmic world. This is, of course, the scene in which Amelia becomes possessed by the Babadook; as it moves under her skin, it moves under the film’s. Trying to get some sleep in her bed with Samuel dozing next to her, Amelia becomes bothered by a strange scuttling noise. She hides under the covers, but then hears a raspy voice, growing in volume: “Babadook...dooooook....DOOOOOOOK!” She peeks out from under her comforter and sees an inky-black creature scuttling across her ceiling. Its features are indiscernible, as it blends into the shadows of her bedroom. However, we do catch a glimpse of its startling inky-black face, with its gaping white eyes and mouth. Suddenly, this two-dimensional figure flies from the ceiling into Amelia’s open mouth in a movement that forces the storybook world of the Babadook into the anthropocentric world of the film. Throughout all of this, the monster still retains the appearance of a two-dimensional, hand-drawn image. As such, it becomes an outlier of the cinematic world, while exposing the artifice of cinema’s three-

dimensionality as merely a convincing play of flatnesses. It provokes in the film a sense of irritation, paralleled by Amelia's own feelings of irritation, as its mere presence of lack-of-depth continually gestures to the film's artifice. In short, the Babadook's non-filmic ontology irritates the cinematic illusion of depth. What's more, the Babadook first possesses Amelia (gets under her skin) when she sleeps next to Sam, her original nighttime irritant. The Babadook's disruption of film form and irritation of Amelia's body can be read as a parallel of how Sam irritates Amelia's body. The Babadook's formal components, then, in addition to making Sam a primary irritant, aid the film in critiquing motherhood.

The monster's irritation of film form is most prevalent, however, in its disruption of film's visual bedrock, its ontological roots, its challenging of the eye's ability to see. The cinema relies on light for its legibility. Without light, the image cannot be captured, and without light it cannot be read. Light is an essential cinematic ingredient. As Bazin writes, "The photograph proceeds by means of the lens to the taking of a veritable luminous impression of light—to a mold. As such it carries with it more than mere resemblance, namely a kind of identity" (96). Of course, Bazin's equation of light with authenticity and proof of a photographed object's existence has been hotly debated. However, Bazin here should not be read as simplistically labelling photography a rote reproducer of the real. Rather, this "identity" produced through photography is more of a spiritual identity, a capturing of an object's essence through the camera lens. Additionally, his linking of light to photography's ontological foundations is a crucial conception of medium specificity, and an important lens for analyses of moving images. This chapter's discussion of *The Babadook* is heavily indebted to Bazin's configurations of cinema and photography's relationship to light. The photograph is, indeed, the capturing of an object as an image through the reflection of light off that very object and into the camera's lens. No light,

no image, no representation. Roland Barthes, too, has famously emphasized light's necessity for the cinematic medium. Barthes's conception of photography and film, like Bazin's, also relies on indexicality through light. In his poetic work, *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes that, "A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed" (81). Here, Barthes emphasizes the materiality and physicality of light. Through his figurative language, light becomes a tangible substance that shapes the image into being. It also, noticeably, has a skin for Barthes. Light is embodied and embodying. Since it has an epidermis, a physicality, and a surface, it can be physically irritated, which is exactly the Babadook's aim.

The Babadook monster troubles this luminated ontology of cinema so privileged by Barthes and Bazin—it irritates film form through its rejection of light and, by extension, its refusal to allow for clear vision and its denial of the human look. When Amelia is possessed by the Babadook, the lights in her bedroom flicker and go out, already signalling a disruption of film form through the presence of the monster. Without light, the existence of the image is compromised. The Babadook monster itself is deep black, rejecting all light and, therefore, all depth or ability to see *into* its form. Its very presence challenges the constructed straightforwardness of imagistic legibility. In a sequence at the film's climax, after Amelia has dispelled the Babadook from her body (through vomiting), the Babadook injects the diegetic world with an inability to see through preventing light's moving. This obfuscating act gestures to the impossibility of ever fully understanding or knowing perceived bounded spaces. Amelia and Sam stand in Amelia's bedroom. Amelia screams at the Babadook to leave her and her son alone. The Babadook hides at the other end of the bedroom. All that can be heard is its indistinct grumbling and growling. Due to its presence, the side of the room where it assumedly crouches

is covered in dark shadow. This is not, however, a shadowy space that is simply a bit darker than other visible spaces. This space is shadowed so much that its component shadows blend together to form an impossibly dense field of blackness into which one can stare forever and glean nothing—it is both infinitely deep and frustratingly shallow. The Babadook's presence halves the room so that a clear black line extends from one side to the next. Amelia and Sam do not dare cross this line. They cannot risk venturing into the unknown blackness of the Babadook's world. This blackness frustrates the filmic space. The viewer, like Amelia and Sam, cannot see into this black void. What's more, this void-like space confuses the pre-existing, established diegetic space. Viewers have been exposed to this bedroom space multiple times. They are aware that there is a wall just where the Babadook is assumed to be lurking. However, the Babadook's creation of blackness through its rejection of light (or absorption of light) removes the room's boundaries—the wall falls away, because it is no longer visible. The blackness seems to extend forever, gesturing to the infinitude of filmic worlds beyond the viewers' comprehension. In other words, the Babadook's rejection of and/or absorption of light to create its field of blackness shakes cinema's very ontological roots—light cannot provide visibility here. As with the Babadook's two-dimensionality, its manipulation of light here exposes cinema's artifice, reverting its constructed three-dimensionality into its reality of superficial hues. By manipulating and challenging the ontological belief in cinema's existence through its photographically indexical relationship with light, *The Babadook* allows for film form's very core to become irritated which parallels the irritation felt by Amelia throughout the film's narrative and her physiological experiences. The Babadook monster, as an embodiment of Amelia's dissatisfaction with motherhood and irritation towards Samuel, demonstrates how deeply this critique of motherhood through affect can go—right to the medium's roots.

Finally, *The Babadook*'s form becomes irritated through the monster's infiltration of other media, particularly the old Georges Méliès films Amelia finds herself watching dispassionately in the early hours of the morning when her insomnia prevents her from resting. The Babadook enters these films, disrupting these assumedly contained narrative spaces. Méliès films are known for their fantasy quality, their manipulation of reality. Jump cuts and editing create clever tricks, like sudden costume changes, or the disappearance of a magician's assistant—hence the nickname for Méliès films, “trick films.” Just as Méliès manipulates reality through film form to actualize his “tricks,” the Babadook monster manipulates film form to cause Amelia to question her own reality. In other words, the Babadook's irritation of film form contributes to Amelia's feelings of irritation throughout the film, culminating in her violent behaviour towards Samuel. Formal irritation, then, is inextricably bound up in narrative and physiological irritations.

During one extreme bout of insomnia, Amelia watches a Méliès film, *The Magic Book* (1901). On the screen, in black and white, the primary filmic figure opens a larger-than-life book, “Le Livre Magique,” only to reveal: the Babadook. There he stands, in this film where he doesn't belong, just as he somehow exists in Amelia and Sam's world. The film goes on. Amidst images of men somehow removing their heads, and bodies becoming dismembered through fantastical animations exists the Babadook monster. At one point, as a group of women dances around a bonfire, the Babadook pops onto the screen in a puff of smoke. The Babadook is a trick-image, and yet entirely real. This monster irritates the container of Méliès's film world—it dissolves borders, it gets under the skin of *The Magic Book*. The Babadook's irritation of film form reflects Amelia's own irritation with motherhood and her son. While the monster's disruption of light questions film's constructed transparency, the Babadook's infiltration of other

visual media challenges cinema's perceived boundaries, particularly between fiction and the real. The monster's transmedia travels parallel Amelia's weakening grasp on "reality," equating fiction and reality as equally moving, horrifying, and "real. Indeed, as the film goes on, Amelia's own persona is injected into other media forms, complicating the distinction between fiction and "reality." One sleepless night, Amelia watches television and sees a news report about a woman who murdered her son. The television shows an innocuous-looking house with a window at its front—suddenly, in the window, Amelia's face appears, leering out at the viewer with cold eyes. Amelia has somehow seen herself (or projected herself) into this other medium, this other visual world. The context of the news report (infanticide) strengthens the parallel of the Babadook's irritation of film form and Amelia's own dissatisfaction with motherhood. The Babadook manipulates film form to place itself within other media; it can also manipulate film form to alter Amelia's perception of reality. In other words, the Babadook shapes filmic reality through its disruption and irritation of film form. This disruption of reality causes Amelia's own loss of a rooting in reality, propelling her towards her violent eruption at Sam. Irritation, once again, governs and organizes the critical potential of Kent's film. Without this formal irritation, Amelia's perception of reality would not be thrown into question. As it stands, her reality is shaken through the Babadook's infiltration of various media and its ability to catapult Amelia into other visual fields. Through this destabilizing of reality, Amelia is permitted a critical engagement with motherhood. In other words, through irritation, which destabilizes both filmic and non-filmic realities, Amelia is able to productively critique motherhood and accept her conflicted feelings towards Samuel.

## 2.6 “You Can’t Get Rid of the Babadook”

Some viewers might find *The Babadook*’s ending regressive after all this talk about critical engagement and postfeminist discourse. On the surface, Kent’s film does end with a seemingly conservative air: the Babadook monster is kept at bay, hidden in Amelia and Sam’s basement and fed regularly, like an odd house pet. It might appear that the Babadook as a threat has been annihilated; in other words, Amelia’s dissatisfaction with motherhood has been glossed over, completely healed. The conflict is resolved. The film even leaves us with a scene of Samuel performing a magic trick to Amelia’s genuine delight, culminating in her cuddling with him on her lap—a far cry from the earlier scene in which she thrusts his affections away. However, it would be overly simplistic to read the film’s ending as contradictory of its previous critiques. Rather than following the Robin Wood dichotomy, in which he declares all horror films end with either the annihilation or assimilation of the threatening Other (199), *The Babadook* neither assimilates nor annihilates its threat. The monster is not destroyed (it does not die), and yet it is not brought into the light, into the world. Rather, it is kept in the dark basement, where it continues to block out all light, existing in a black void into which Amelia pushes plates of worms and dirt for its consumption. Through this refusal to cleanly and peacefully deal with its monster, the film allows for a more nuanced approach to its issues of motherhood and postfeminism. The Babadook remains alive, continuing to lurk just under the film (and Amelia’s) skin. Though its threatening qualities are inoculated (for the time being), it still embodies the *potential* to irritate, to throw all the film’s previous horrors back into action. As such, the potential for irritation to resurface is always present. Amelia’s dissatisfactions with motherhood, then, don’t just magically disappear, transforming her into a perfect model of New Momism; rather, she is able to heal enough to allow herself to feel affection for Sam, without disallowing

herself to feel irritation or unhappiness. As Sam wisely quotes from his storybook, “You can’t get rid of the Babadook.” Once again, the good mother/bad mother binary is complicated. Amelia isn’t a hero in this situation—she can keep the monster at bay for now, but cannot destroy it. *The Babadook*, then, allows for a nuanced, ambiguous, and rather ambivalent portrait of single motherhood to emerge. It is, through its ending, one of the most powerfully affective depictions of motherhood in recent popular culture.

As *The Babadook* demonstrates with a gentle force, irritation is not just a superficial affect of annoyance to be brushed aside and ignored. Rather, irritation embodies a strong potential for critical engagement. Through its interaction with both the body and the mind, and its movements between the two, irritation opens a space for critical discourse. When applied to motherhood, this discourse becomes integral to conversations of idealized motherhood, postfeminism, and New Momism. Amelia, plagued by irritation, is not a “bad” mother. Rather, she is a product and object of her social milieu, which is one that perpetuates idealistic and impossible models of motherhood. Amelia exists in an environment of irritation. The Babadook, as a monster, is not a simple horror creature, but an embodiment and reflection of Amelia’s irritation and, as a result, a symbol of a resistance to New Momism and the naturalization of motherhood more generally—an indispensable symbol of contrariness. There is more to Amelia’s refusal of Sam’s affections (“Don’t do that!”) than simply a portrait of a grieving mother struggling to cope with life’s tragedies and expectations. Contained in that “Don’t do that!” is the conflict between love and hate, affection and violence, that haunts motherhood. *The Babadook* not only confronts this conflict, but allows it to dialectically produce alternative portraits of motherhood—human portraits of ambiguity, imperfection, and, of course, irritation.

## Chapter 3: Cinema's Evil Eye: Envy, the Gaze, and Motherhood in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011)

### 2.7 Introduction

Of the lover's reaction to discovering that everyone around them has been placed into *casés*, or, rather, that everyone has a *casé* except the lover, Roland Barthes writes: "The amorous subject sees everyone around him as 'pigeonholed,' each appearing to be granted a little practical and affective system of contractual liaisons from which he feels himself to be excluded; this inspires him with an ambiguous sentiment of envy and mockery" (45). Though a discussion of envy is not Barthes's intended aim here (jealousy, on the other hand, proves integral to *A Lover's Discourse*), he nevertheless hits on envy's motivating force: it begins with a look. The amorous subject *sees* that everyone around them has something they do not. Such inequality is felt through the look. With the spectacle of an Other enjoying what the Self cannot, envy takes root and grows. To summarize, this green-hued affect is constituted by the seemingly innocuous gesture of the look. One sees an object they desire in another's possession, and subsequently falls into envy's embrace. Such an unflattering affect – no one looks good in this shade of green – is not proudly proclaimed, but shamefully suppressed and hidden away. The envious glance or look is insidious, quick, quiet, and always self-effacing.

Like envy, cinema is built on looks, gazes, and glances. As Laura Mulvey argues in "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema," "It is the place of the look that defines cinema, the possibility of saying it and exposing it" (17). It is unsurprising, then, that envy has found fecund ground for its own propagation in film. Cinema is an ideal medium for embodying envy, as it functions not just on the gaze alone, but on the gaze's transformations and transmutations

through both time and space. While paintings and photographs might capture envy in stasis, freezing the spiteful, envious glance in all its malicious intent, these artworks generally do not capture the transition from envy to shame that often occurs with any experience of the former. Francois Guillaume Menageot's 1806 painting, "Envy Plucking the Wings of Fame," for instance, depicts the anthropomorphized figures of Envy and Fame in a one-sided battle of the gaze. The two stand on a rock face while Envy, huddled on the ground, clutches at Fame's beautiful white wings, grabbing at her as she aims herself skyward. Menageot highlights Envy's desperate, manic gaze towards Fame as he clutches at her feathered beauty, while Fame stares unconcernedly out of the frame. In other words, Fame does not return Envy's gaze, but leaves him to fester in his own covetousness. Though a powerful (and allegorical) painting, Menageot's work cannot demonstrate the envious gaze's transformation over time and through different spaces. Envy, here, exists as it is in a single moment, a freeze-frame of sorts—trapped in a singular frozen body. Film, on the other hand, can trace envy's transformation into and from other affects, its shaping of subsequent and preceding feelings, particularly shame. Rather than paint envy as a purely desperate, negative affect, as in Menageot's painting, cinema portrays envy as nuanced, as existing along a spectrum of affects that all shape each other.

Self-envy, a little theorized sub-category of the affect, is most intimately intertwined with other negative affects, particularly shame. Some theorists, such as Polledri, argue that envy exists only as a disguise for the "toxic shame" felt from coveting another's possessions (Polledri 88). Film, as it captures changes in bodies and spaces across time, is particularly adept at capturing the oscillations between envy and shame, the creation of this shame-envy spectrum. Self-envy, most particularly, strongly indicates film's ability to embody both envy and shame through its inward direction. Self-envy, or envy directed towards past and future selves, is a function of both

time and space (Sheppard 103). It moves towards an internal space within the self, and flows between temporalities in which multiple selves are hypothesized and envied at once. In these cases, characters direct their looks towards themselves (inwardly), and across time. Through flashbacks and visualized memories, cinema captures envy not just as an isolated affective incident, but as one powerful force born from and leading to other feelings, primarily shame. Self-envious subjects feel ashamed for failing to appreciate the present moment, and for idealizing an impossible future or long lost past, as we will see in *Kevin's Eva*. Through depicting self-envy, among other forms of this affect, cinema captures envy as an always-becoming phenomenon, rather than an affect that comes into existence and immediately succumbs to stasis.

Of course, there is no ignoring envy's gendered past. Envy has often been assigned to catty, petty women—it is almost always feminized. As Sianne Ngai laments, envy is perceived as an ignoble feeling through its class and gender associations, “which might explain why the envious subject is so frequently suspected of being hysterical” (129). As a hysterical and frivolous affect, envy is rarely taken seriously. Films that have foregrounded envy tend to pathologize it, turning it into a violent motivator for murderous characters, as in *Single White Female* (1992) and *Notes on a Scandal* (2006). Narratively, envy is always the villain.

However, as this chapter's discussion of Lynne Ramsay's 2011 film, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, will demonstrate, not only is cinema an ideal medium for embodying envy at its most basic formal level (the gaze), but the envious gaze can be mobilized to critique envy's gendered status and its frequent attachment to motherhood. In this *Final Mom* film,<sup>2</sup> Eva (Tilda

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<sup>2</sup> As elsewhere in this thesis, the *Final Mom* film is defined as a contemporary horror film featuring a maternal character who struggles to unquestioningly accept her role as mother. When

Swinton), struggles to cope in the years following her son's horrendous crime: murdering several of his classmates, along with his own father and sister. Throughout the film, Eva employs self-envy through frequent flashbacks, directing an envious gaze at her past naïve, childless selves in a critique of postfeminist mothering's unfulfillable expectations; these formal and narrative moments of self-envy are paralleled by Eva's son, Kevin's (Ezra Miller), destructively envious gaze, which manipulates and destroys postfeminism's attempts to naturalize self-actualized and unquestioning motherhood. In other words, Eva's self-envious gazes, and Kevin's destructive looks, combine to critique postfeminist motherhood and argue for a more ambivalent approach to the institution, while demonstrating that cinema, through its foundation on looking over time and between bodies, is an ideal medium for envy. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* recuperates envy's superficial toxicity, proving its productive potential through a multi-faceted analysis of motherhood.

Through tracing envy's position in clinical psychoanalysis as the bedrock of penis envy, and its more recuperated identity in feminist psychoanalysis, we will come to see envy as the multi-faceted affect it is—no longer simply negative, but bursting with positive potential. Linking this discussion to a formal and narrative analysis of the cinematic gaze in *Kevin*, envy's critically productive potential will be exposed; rather than unhealthy or toxic, envy and motherhood's relationship is necessary, and crucial for a nuanced understanding of contemporary mothering's affective experience.

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something threatens her family (a demon, killer, etc.), she must protect her loved ones, even against her own maternal misgivings. The last one standing, this maternal figure is the Final Mom.

## 2.8 A History of Envy

### 2.8.1 Clinical Psychoanalysis and Penis Envy

Envy is, at its most basic level, considered universal (Epstein 1-2) and “constitutional” (Schoeck 3). According to Schoeck, everyone envies (3). A simple, stripped-down definition of the affect supports this claim to universality. As Melanie Klein offers, “Envy is the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable—the envious impulse being to take it away or spoil it” (6). This does, indeed, sound like a fairly common experience. It is interesting, then, that an affect considered so toxic and destructive has often been feminized and attributed primarily to women. As Sianne Ngai, in her quote above, argues, patriarchal structures have reduced the feminine to the frivolous; envy, when feminized, becomes a petty, inconsequential affect. Given this tradition of feminization, it should come as no surprise that envy has also been focalized in and around maternal bodies—mothers in clinical psychoanalytical models are consistently objects and subjects of envy. However, as psychoanalytic feminists such as Joan Copjec have proven, there is a great deal of power in this seemingly reductive account of female desire and envy (though we will come to this later).

In popular discourse, this power is less obviously spotted, particularly in discussions of penis envy within clinical psychoanalysis. This well-known term is one subheading of envy that has made it into colloquial speech—along with its seemingly regressive gendered connotations. Penis envy is, of course, most well-known for its centrality in Freud’s writings, where “envy, in the form of penis envy, is portrayed as the cornerstone and prime move of woman’s development” (Burke xiii). His 1925 essay, “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes,” though “the first theoretical paper devoted explicitly to the general topic of women’s psychosexual development,” was also the first essay to position penis

envy as the crux of female psychology (Burke 6). For Freud, penis envy constructs gender, particularly the female gender. The process goes as follows: little girls notice their brother's or playmate's penises, "and at once recognize [the penis] as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time forward fall victim to envy for the penis" (Freud 22). One small, accidental glance, and the child becomes a not-boy forevermore, perpetually seeking to fill this lack of a penis. This lack causes an inferiority complex of sorts, since "After a woman has become aware of her wound to her narcissism, she develops, like a scar, a sense of inferiority" (Freud 23). Freud sees this inferiority complex as influencing not only the woman's sense of self, but her opinion of the entire female sex. The woman "begins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is lesser in so important a respect, and, at least in holding that opinion, insists on being like a man" (23). Woman-on-woman hate, then, appears natural and almost rational, justifying the popular belief that women are more prone to envy. According to this account, seeing their blank genitalia next to a fully-writ penis causes a lifetime of toxic envy for women, reducing them to catty monsters who turn on each other out of self-contempt. From this brief summary, it is difficult to discern where Freud's model might allow for a positive reading of feminine sexuality and envy; perhaps surprisingly, when Freud connects motherhood and envy in his theories of penis envy, he opens space for a nuanced, critical discussion of motherhood and femininity.

For Freud, penis envy shapes girls' maternal relationships, both with their own mothers and with their future children. Here lie some potential sources of power, aimed towards a nuanced critique of motherhood. In "Some Psychological Consequences," he argues that penis envy causes the girl-child to hate her mother for bringing her into the world without a penis; there is "a loosening of the girl's relation with her mother as a love-object" (Freud 23). This leads to the girl

renouncing the mother as a love-object, transforming her into an envied object, since the girl's love is now directed at her father, who is possessed and sexually satisfied by the mother (24). The girl aims to sublimate her penis envy by possessing her father's penis sexually, since she now knows that she can never have a penis of her own (24). This process becomes Oedipal in nature, and promotes the girl's sexual development. When this girl transforms into a woman, penis envy continues to trouble her. Freud also relates this perpetual troubling to motherhood. Women, he argues, can only resolve their penis envy through having a child of their own, which temporarily fills the lack left by the absent penis. For Freud, then, motherhood is both the root of hatred and envy, and the potential healer of these toxic affects. Though his theories are phallogocentric in nature, he describes motherhood's ambivalences, feelings that are often unaccepted in popular discourse. To read clinical psychoanalysis's conclusion that femininity and motherhood are controlled solely by toxic envy is wrongfully superficial; rather envy, here, is an exploration of motherhood's ambivalences and nuances, its simultaneously healing and harmful effects.

Elsewhere in clinical psychoanalysis's popular discourse, we see theorists extending and countering Freud's theories to widen this space for critical engagement. Karen Horney, for instance, attaches envy to male bodies in addition to female, formulating a theory of womb envy. Horney, working contemporaneously with (but against) Freud, argues that envy as a primal, maternal desire relates not only to women, but also to men: men envy women their ability to reproduce. Critiquing Freud, Horney laments that by focusing primarily on women's lack of a penis, Freud misses "the other great biological difference, namely, the different parts played by men and by women in the function of reproduction" (30). Any inferiority women may feel or men might project onto women is, for Horney, socially constructed (31). For Horney, women are

not innately inferior, but are in many ways physiologically superior to men in their ability to reproduce, which is “most clearly reflected in the unconscious of the male psyche in the boy’s intense envy of motherhood” (31). According to Horney, “the man’s incapacity for motherhood is probably felt simply as an inferiority and can develop its full driving power without inhibition” (33). Men, in other words, are pregnant with envy for the womb. The concept of womb envy has been carried forward by many contemporary theorists working in psychoanalytical theory. Some, such as Emma Bayne, have linked womb envy to culturally instituted femiphobia and misogyny, seeing male anxiety over the mysteries of the womb and the birthing process as having led to dominant culture’s phallocentrism (153). These theories, though correct in identifying an asymmetrically powerful society based on gender difference, misread Horney’s texts. They see her theory of womb envy as a justification to vilify men, rather than as a means of expanding on theories of male desire. What’s more, envy here is still taken as purely toxic and unproductive—those who envy are weaker and pettier. Envy’s critical potential is ignored. Horney’s theories are crucial in connecting motherhood and envy, and for placing maternal desire onto male bodies. Indeed, both Freud and Horney demonstrate that motherhood and envy, when intimately connected, can productively critique and explicate each other, creating room for discourse and debate.

Melanie Klein’s seminal work, *Envy and Gratitude*, has concentrated most strongly on this nuanced approach to clinical psychoanalysis and gendered envy, forming the basis of many later works of feminist psychoanalysis. She also attaches envy to the maternal body, arguing that, contrary to Freud’s belief, the penis is *not* the first object of envy, but rather the mother’s breast becomes the first target of the envious gaze and the first object of envy’s destructive desire (3). Klein’s model posits that the infant engages in a complex and conflicted relationship with the

mother's breast, which it sees as both gratifying and frustrating. Since the breast is perceived as withholding its milk, the infant turns the breast into a bad object. As Klein puts it, "the infant's feelings seem to be that when the breast deprives him, it becomes bad because it keeps the milk, love, and care associated with the good breast all to itself. He hates and envies what he feels to be the mean and grudging breast" (11). The breast is regained as a good object through breastfeeding, which the infant finds gratifying (10). Since the infant envies the breast, it begins to want to spoil the breast, or destroy it, since "it is characteristic of envy that it implies robbing the object of what it possesses, and spoiling it" (18). Here, Klein's theory highlights the ambivalence immanent to maternal bonds, the oscillation between positive and negative affect. Though envy is felt towards the breast, it is never felt in isolation, but always in relation to other affects—gratitude being Klein's primary focus. Once again, the maternal body is responsible for this negative affective experience; the mother's ability to give and take plants the seeds of envy from infancy.

However, Klein does highlight envy's critical potential by working against pre-established notions of the affect. Contrary to common assumptions, envy's destructive intentions are critically productive. Indeed, through destroying the breast, "the Kleinian infant ultimately seeks to transform [the object] by phantasmatically disfiguring or spoiling it, hence rendering it something no longer desirable, as well as something that can no longer be possessed" (162). Through this destructive act, envy highlights "a refusal to idealize quality X, even an ability to attack its potential for idealization by transforming X into something nonsingular and replicable, while at the same time enabling acknowledgement of its culturally imposed desirability" (161-2). In other words, objects are deemed worthy of envy through sociocultural and political structures. In neoliberal capitalism, wealth and individuality are envied, while communal living might be

viewed with disdain and unworthy of envy. Envy's act of destruction, then, both acknowledges that society has deemed the envied object worthy of adoration, and rejects this adoration; the envier refuses to allow others to enjoy the envied object, and so commits an act of rebellious spoiling. As a discussion of *Kevin* will demonstrate, envy's destruction is not purely apocalyptic, but can engender crucial critiques of various sociocultural structures, including motherhood.

Though Freud, Horney, and Klein all allow for an exploration of envy's ambivalence in their discussions of penis envy (and womb envy, in Horney's case), all three theorists remain married to ideas that impose restrictive narratives on female and maternal bodies. Biological determinism, for instance, haunts all three accounts; motherhood is an innate desire for all women, embedded in their biology. These theorists' language, too, maintains a phallogocentric structure, privileging masculinity as a starting point while ontologizing feminine language and vocabulary as the negative space of masculine thought. The phallus remains *the* organizing structure of sexuality, language, and society. This phallogocentric and biological determinist standpoint has been heavily critiqued in psychoanalytic theory, particularly feminist psychoanalytic theory, which proposes alternatives to Freud, Horney, and Klein's rigidly prescriptive formulations. A brief discussion of these alternative theorizations of femininity, envy, and motherhood will illuminate *Kevin* and its nuanced, incisive critique of postfeminist mothering through the envious gaze.

### **2.8.2 Something Other Than the Penis: Feminist Psychoanalysis**

The gaze functions prominently throughout clinical psychoanalysis's accounts of penis envy, particularly in Freud's writings; this gaze is usually held by a male observer, and is equated with power, both sexual and intellectual. Unsurprisingly, feminist psychoanalysts have countered such claims to a masculine power of vision by exposing this visual language as artificially constructed

and, resultantly, subject to deconstruction. French thinker Luce Irigaray is perhaps the most influential feminist psychoanalyst to deconstruct and critique penis envy and psychoanalysis's visual language. In her essay (whose title points to a lack of vision), "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry," Irigaray takes up Freud's account of penis envy, importantly describing it from the girl's perspective in a stream-of-consciousness manner that foregrounds the gaze's involvement:

He will be able to see that I don't have [a penis], will realize it in the twinkling of an eye. I shall not see if he has one. More than me? But he will inform me of it. Displaced castration? *The gaze is at stake from the outset*. Don't forget, in fact, what 'castration,' or the knowledge of castration, owes to the gaze, at least for Freud. The gaze has always been involved (76, emphasis original).

Two points are of crucial importance here. The first is Irigaray's emphasis on Freud's equation of knowledge with vision and vision with maleness. In this narration, the girl/subject is aware that she will be informed of her lack (of a penis) by the boy himself. It is the boy who is in total control of the visual display's knowledge production. Secondly, Irigaray emphasizes the girl's inability to adopt this gaze. She cannot see her own lack and so is prevented from obtaining knowledge and, by extension, power. Irigaray goes on to argue that this is indicative of the dominant society's phallocentrism, in which everything is defined by presence (the phallus), rather than absence (the lack of phallus, or vagina).

Vision, as Irigaray emphasizes, is of crucial importance to penis envy's development: "the gaze has always been involved" (76). The gaze's attribution to the boy, however, raises a contradiction: women are considered more envious than men, and yet are not allowed the gaze required to envy. In other words, Irigaray's account exposes an impossibility in Freud's formulation of penis envy. If women cannot *see* their own lack, but are only informed of it, how can they adopt the gaze so crucial to envy's development? Through exposing this impossibility

or paradox, Irigaray proves clinical psychoanalysis's inadequacy, particularly in describing women's psychosexual development. Crucially for this chapter, Irigaray's work can be examined through the lens of film theory, since the gaze in film is the locus of narrative power.

As Laura Mulvey has argued in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," film's use of the gaze reflects conceptions and fantasies of gender in dominant culture. By extension, film is crucial for discussions of envy. For Mulvey, Hollywood cinema places women in passive roles, while men revel in activeness (11). In cinema, the man acts as "the bearer of the look to the spectator," (12), allowing the spectator to identify with the male character who revels in the woman as spectacle. Women, then, taken on an exhibitionist role, embodying "to-be-looked-at-ness" (11). Once again, penis envy plays a large role in attributing power to the gaze. The passifying and spectacularization of women on-screen is, for Mulvey, a direct result of men's insecurities around their lack of penises. Mulvey argues that desire is born with language, which is born with the castration complex, which is, in turn, born from knowledge derived from the look or sight of a woman's genitals/lack of genitals (11). The woman's lack of a penis, which connotes "a threat of castration and hence unpleasure," causes such anxiety that they must be neutralized by being transformed into mere objects of fantasy, wholly controlled and manipulated by the male gaze (13). Thus, the gaze shapes cinema. Dominant cinema is, from Mulvey's perspective, completely controlled by active male characters who look at and objectify passive female characters; these female characters exist only as commodities to be consumed by an enraptured, voyeuristic, masculinized audience. Vision, once more, is of the utmost importance here. In *Kevin*, as we will see, the gaze is re-attached to a female body – Eva – to counter such masculinist notions of gaze-power as delineated in clinical psychoanalysis and actualized by hyper-masculine commercial cinema.

Feminist psychoanalysis has also found fault with the biological determinist model of motherhood so favoured in clinical psychoanalysis, finding it wholly inadequate. Nancy Chodorow's thorough study of the subject, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, is particularly incisive. Chodorow critiques clinical psychoanalysis's assumption that the parental relationship is, essentially, "an inevitable and necessary *single* mother-infant relationship," excluding all other forms of parenting (73). This assumption, she argues, propagates the view that women are more capable of parenting through their biological capacity to reproduce, a view that "implies major limits to changing the social organization of gender" (73). In other words, Chodorow's text argues for reading psychoanalysis as historically contingent, as working within a Western industrial society that privileges nuclear families, female dependence on men, and primary maternal care. She finds that these social structures are responsible for reproducing mothering across generations, even though biological capabilities of reproduction are no longer essential to childbearing (3-4). In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow aims to combine psychoanalysis with an examination of social structures to provide a more thorough understanding of women's relationships to motherhood across generations.

Like Irigaray, Chodorow privileges penis envy as a prime example of clinical psychoanalysis's biological determinism and claustrophobic model of femininity. However, while Irigaray attacks Freud's placement of the gaze in his account, Chodorow critiques Freud's address of female subjectivity. She incisively remarks that "Freud and his orthodox followers often unwittingly translate clinically derived accounts of fantasy into their own scientific account of reality [...] Thus, Freud does not tell us only that a little girl *thinks* or *imagines* that she is castrated or mutilated, or that she *thinks* she is inferior or an incomplete boy. Rather, she *is* so" (144-145). Chodorow, here, emphasizes that female inferiority is not something that girls and

women feel innately, but something that is socially learned throughout their earliest years of existence; though Freud is perhaps correct that this “sense of inferiority” is like a scar (23), he is wrong in thinking that such a scar develops naturally and across all women in the same way. Rather, this sense of inferiority is the result of centuries of restrictive social structures, of women *learning* their own inferiority, rather than innately knowing it. On this point, Chodorow celebrates Klein and Horney’s counter-theories to Freud’s penis envy model, writing that both theorists are right in believing that “girls do not originally think their own genitals are inferior and that they are castrated, but come to think so defensively” (149). Through Chodorow’s integration of psychoanalysis and sociology, she provides a model that can be more readily applied to cultural texts (films, for instance) since these, too, have been socially and culturally constructed. While clinical psychoanalysis provides models solely for the analysts’ patients, Chodorow’s updated theory allows for a wider application, an investigation not just into female minds, but into cultural forms.

Indeed, in her important work of Lacanian feminist psychoanalysis, *Imagine There’s No Woman*, Joan Copjec wryly observes that Freud “associated art with a weak, ‘compensatory’ pleasure and conceived it as a temporary means of stopping up life’s little lacks or as a salve to its minor disappointments” (7). Copjec’s work, more than Irigaray or Chodorow’s, combines analyses of cultural texts with models of feminist psychoanalysis to provide a critique not just of psychoanalysis itself, but of its status as “the mother tongue of our modernity,” and hence its effects on the social construction of gender (9). In her chapter on liberalist envy, Copjec locates the affect’s insidious forces in the film noir, *Laura* (1944), while arguing that envy functions as “the fathomless and bitter source of social rivalries” (161). Though clearly of great importance, Copjec notes (like Ngai) that social and political theorists have given little to no attention to the

affect, superficially defining it as toxic and petty (161). For Copjec, envy is closely related to idealization, simultaneously exposing and destroying idealized (envied) objects (160). Through this simultaneity of adoration and spiteful destruction, envy reveals privileged values and objects in our current social milieu (160). Furthermore, envy can never be resolved, since it “is not a matter of desires or an appeal to others for recognition, but of *jouissance*,” an insatiable desire (164). As we will see with a discussion of self-envy and child-envy in *Kevin*, this affect, indeed, continues to propagate itself in a feedback loop; in *Kevin*, this loop is constituted by a loop of exchanged gazes, both towards the self and others.

## 2.9 The Horror and Envy of *Kevin*

At first glance, Lynne Ramsay’s film, though concerned primarily with motherhood, seems more arthouse than horror, and appears to contain very few traces of envy (if any at all). Indeed, this story of a woman coping with her son’s monstrosity seems more of a character piece than a genre film. This also seems like an odd narrative structure for explorations of envy. Eva’s memories are on display here, in a fragmented, non-linear fashion that recalls a Bergmanian sensitivity to trauma and the fatigue of everyday life. However, it is obvious that, though *Kevin* clearly has arthouse intensions, it is also a film built around certain horror genre conventions, particularly the sub-genre of the woman’s gothic. As Genz and Brabon define it in their book *Postfeminist Gothic*, the Female Gothic contains a “familiar set of narratives that revolve around an innocent and blameless heroine threatened by a powerful male figure and confined to a labyrinthine interior space” (5). Of course, *Kevin* features a woman (her blamelessness, however, remains always in question) trapped in a domestic space and tyrannized by a male figure—in this case, her young son, who she believes has manipulated her from infancy to puberty. *Kevin*’s

protagonist, Eva, assumes the role of the gothic heroine, feeling continually victimized by her son. Her negative relationship with her over-large, labyrinthine suburban home, (which she never wanted in the first place), feels imposing and all-consuming next to her pre-family, pre-Kevin New York City loft. Though by no means a decidedly “perfect” mother, Eva is convinced that her son has targeted her from birth, embodying another element of the Female Gothic heroine: paranoia. Indeed, these female heroines believe in some sort of evil in their labyrinthine spaces, which is eventually proven to exist, though only after the narrative’s other characters dismiss the gothic heroine as insane (Genz and Brabon 5). In *Kevin*, Eva’s husband, Franklin (John C. Reilly), bats away her accusations of Kevin’s cold-hearted deeds (such as pouring liquid drainer into his sister’s eye) as evidence of an unbalanced mind. As with most gothic heroines, Eva is eventually proven right—but at great cost. In this way, Eva also fits into the Final Mom template outlined in Chapter 1. She is faced with an internal threat within the domestic space, positioned as the consequence of her unhappiness with mothering; no other characters believe her claims, and yet she must continue to protect her family, unaided. Unfortunately for Eva, this threat is her own flesh and blood, and she cannot, ultimately, save her family. Coupled with its use of a horrific school shooting scene, and its narrative structure of constant suspense and dread, *Kevin* adheres to the horror genre as much as it does to the arthouse sensibility for which it is most well-known.

*We Need to Talk About Kevin*, in addition to burying its horror genre roots, might also appear emptied of envy. Indeed, at first glance the narrative appears envy-less. A mother reeling from the revelation of her son’s murderous tendencies? A woman grieving the deaths of her daughter and husband? There aren’t a lot of obviously enviable objects in such a film. When Kevin and Eva’s relationship is explored through Eva’s memories, however, envy’s foundations

are laid bare. Eva envies Kevin his consumption of her own time and resources, while Kevin envies Eva's adult independence, as well as the distribution of her energy amongst other bodies that are decidedly not his. Envy, in Ramsay's film, is not just tangential or intermittent, but a through-line of affect that energizes the film's critique of motherhood. What's more, Eva's constant turning-inward, her reliving of past events through memory, is a form of self-envy; Eva envies her past its optimism. Ramsay's film uses envy as the primary critical force behind its exploration of unhappy, unfulfilled motherhood. This envy is, in turn, constructed by both the gazes of characters within the film, and the film's gaze itself—it is both narrative and formal. These self-reflexively critical gazes exist in two primary forms: shameful self-envy, constructed through Eva's inward gazes and the film's movements in and out of memories, and child-envy, embodied by Kevin's targeted, spiteful, and destructive looks. Envy shapes the film's form and narrative simultaneously, and becomes its definitive maternal affect—the driving power of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*.

## **2.10 Towards a Utopian Past: The Inward Gaze of Self-Envy**

*Kevin*'s use of envy is significant not just for its intertwinement with motherhood, but also for its removal of a body from the seemingly necessary two-bodied model of traditional envy. Most often, the envier envies an Other, a separate body seen to possess something (a trait or object) that the envier desires. In *Kevin*, however, envy is directed toward the self; Eva directs envy inward, a folding back of envy that critiques postfeminist motherhood's unreachable expectations. Throughout the film, which spans Eva's life from her pregnancy with Kevin to her visits with him in prison after his pre-meditated massacre, Eva struggles to accept motherhood. She feels out of place around other mothers, illustrated by a scene in which a pregnant-with-

Kevin Eva flees from a Lamaze class full of glowing women lovingly stroking their swollen bellies. She also resists accepting the role of self-sacrificing mother, shown by her reluctance to leave the family's cluttered New York City loft for an anonymous, angular suburban home. Kevin needs "room to toss a ball around," her husband, Franklin, argues in a flashback. Eva, after much resistance, submits, but her dissatisfaction continues to colour the film.

*Kevin's* narrative structure conveys Eva's unhappiness with motherhood through contrasting certain moments in Eva's life against others. The film jumps between three primary temporalities: Eva as mother of a murderer (present day), Eva as struggling, unhappy mother (past), and Eva as independent, well-traveled, and childless working woman (utopian past). Thus, *Kevin's* narrative is built on and arranged around self-envy. Eva looks back at her past selves and envies them their freedom. Present-day Eva looks back on struggling, family-making Eva with envy for her naivety of Kevin's true potential for destruction; both present-day Eva and mothering Eva look back on childless Eva with the envy of prisoners seeing others living beyond bars. As Angela Sheppard writes in her essay, "Overcoming Self-Envy and Learning to Love the Unconscious," self-envy is "a function of time, a split in time," rather than a function of space, as are other forms of envy (103). Self-envy looks backward and forward through time, at previous selves and potential future selves, all of whom are presumed to be living better and more fulfilling lives.

Eva's envy of her past selves pervades the film's exploration of her relationship with mothering. During the early stages of raising Kevin, Eva often emphasizes the envy she feels for her past self, the self uninhibited by the responsibilities of raising a child. Through these memories, Eva is shown to feel trapped at home with Kevin, and frustrated by the child's seemingly targeted refusals to speak, become toilet-trained, or even pass a ball back and forth

with her. In short, Eva sees Kevin as rejecting the mother-child relationship as much as she does. At one point, the film cross-cuts between present-day Eva hiding from trick-or-treaters banging on her door, and a memory of Kevin throwing food against a wall, yelling infantilely, “I don’t like that!” to which memory-Eva mockingly responds, “Mommy was happy before wittle Kevin came along, you know that? Now Mommy wakes up every morning and *wishes she was in France.*” Her fake baby voice cuts through the air towards Kevin’s pouting, disgruntled face. As Eva finishes this declaration, another shot of Kevin throwing food at the wall invades the scene, before Eva’s face is back, looking off-camera at something that makes her expression falter. The next shot reveals this object to be her husband, Franklin, his face plastered with disappointment and disgust. Through her self-envy – her envy of the Eva who sunbathes in France and writes travel guides – Eva is made to feel ashamed. Her husband cannot understand these resentful feelings Eva directs towards Kevin; he cannot understand her unhappiness with motherhood.

Like Amelia in *The Babadook*, Eva is painted against a backdrop of postfeminist mothering, which demands total self-sacrifice and self-actualization while constructing a myth that the modern woman can “have it all.” Indeed, Eva is a successful careerwoman with a loving husband and adequate means to have a child. The fact that she doesn’t want one, and feels uncomfortable when she does have one is, for her, a reason to feel ashamed. Thus, shame over feeling like an inadequate mother is born from and engenders the self-envy that so pervades Eva’s character. As Polledri defines it, “Shame is a powerful inner tension, experienced as an acutely painful sense of inferiority that is at variance with one’s own wished-for image of personal goodness” (87). Franklin’s disappointed gaze, then, causes Eva to confront her inability to attain the idealized image of motherhood as mythologized by New Momism and postfeminism is shameful. Such shame continues to feed her self-envy, causing her to look backwards at past

selves more and more, since “Envy uses disguises to cover up [its] core issue, which is toxic shame” (Polledri 88). Looking at her past shameless selves, Eva only feels envy, which reproduces shame in a cyclical engendering of negative affect.

Ramsay’s film, however, does not support this shameful affect’s production. Rather, it positions Eva’s shame and her failure to incorporate an idealized image of motherhood as toxic to her personal development; postfeminist motherhood is, once again, critiqued for its anxiety-provoking expectations. Indeed, before Franklin crushes Eva with his look, the viewer has seen Eva toiling through hours upon hours of Kevin’s unending crying, watching him throw food at the wall over and over, and other similarly frustrating occurrences. Eva’s outburst is not framed, for the viewer, as unmotivated or unfair; rather, Eva’s self-envy, her envy of a woman who was unattached and independent, is merely a natural extension of the enormous life change that is so toxically naturalized: motherhood. In short, self-envy of childless selves is viewed through postfeminist-imbued characters like Franklin as selfish and disappointing; the film’s narrative, its jumping between variably envious and unenviable moments of Eva’s life, proposes that self-envy is born from the excessive pressures and artificial naturalization of motherhood.

### **2.11 The Camera’s Self-Envious Look**

In addition to being acknowledged in Eva’s moments of pining for France, *Kevin’s* self-envy is constructed through the camera’s very look—or rather, the camera’s gaze as it shares Eva’s perspective, a perspective made up of superficially empty gazes, which are revealed to be gazes inward, towards the self. A short sequence of memory-travel through the layers of Eva’s inward-looking consciousness illustrates this formal and stylistic construction of self-envy. Late in the film, present-day Eva, her hair greasy and straggly, sits in a diner on her own, bathed in

red light. The diner window is one of a pair; the other one sits adjacent, two squares of light staring out at the spectator like two bright eyes. The camera sits outside the diner, watching Eva from afar. She sits in the window on the right, facing into the diner, towards the window on the left. This seating arrangement creates the effect of Eva looking through the diner into the empty space of the window on the left; her gaze is hollow. Suddenly, Eva looks out the window, directly at the camera – at *us* – catching the camera as it (and we) watch unobtrusively. This unsettling moment is allayed somewhat when, in an exchange of gazes, there is a cut to an over-the-shoulder shot of Eva looking out the diner window, still bathed in red light. The film reveals that Eva is not engaging with any material object; her gaze is empty, directed at nothing. Here, the camera now participates in Eva's gaze-making, which aims itself aimlessly out of the window. There is a swift but soft fade to mother-Eva standing against the paint-splattered walls of her study (an earlier scene showed a young Kevin making this interior decorating decision with a water-gun full of paint in hand), looking worriedly but dreamily off-camera, to the right of the frame. As in the diner, her eyes drift softly, directed at nothing material. There is a brief cut to Kevin, sitting at his parents' table, noisily and wetly munching on a lychee berry. This is the morning after Celia, his younger sister, had to have her eye removed due to an unfortunate incident with liquid drainer (a moment indicative of Kevin's extreme envy, as a later discussion will explicate). With Kevin's appearance, this short sequence (seemingly a sequence of empty, undirected gazes) reveals itself to be a sequence of self-envious inward gazes. Indeed, diner-Eva, looking out her eye-window towards the camera, is truly looking at the Eva next to her paint-splattered walls, consuming this Eva in time with the film's spectators. Paint-splatter Eva herself looks inward, at something not privy to the viewer, but given the trauma of Celia's eye injury, the viewer can assume she is mulling over her thoughts regarding Kevin (who she suspects is

responsible), a hunch somewhat confirmed by the next shot, displaying lychee-munching Kevin in full performance of unconcern for his sister. These Evas, in all these different moments, are consumed by each other, are envious of each other. Present-day, diner-Eva is particularly envious of mother-Eva for her *time*—she still has the potential to stop Kevin from killing his father, sister, and classmates. She has time to stop Kevin from realizing his potential for destruction. These patterns are repeated throughout the film: present-day Eva looking back at mother-Eva, who in turn looks back at childless Eva. A loop of self-envy.

Of course, self-envy's relationship to shame cannot be forgotten here; shame traps Eva in this self-envious loop. Eva is undoubtedly shamed for her self-envy, as illustrated by Franklin's disgusted look, and comes to internalize that shame. Shame extends throughout Eva's body and throughout her lifespan as a mother—she feels ashamed of what Kevin has done. This is, undoubtedly, a natural response. However, due to Eva's shaming at the hands of her husband, and her feeling of being unable to measure up to the ideal mother-image of the glowing, happy-go-lucky pregnant women in her Lamaze class, she comes to handle these memories as evidence of her own failure. Eva could not stop Kevin, or prevent him from becoming monstrous. She feels she has failed as a mother. Kevin's monstrosity, through Eva's internalization of shame, becomes hypothesized as her own fault, seen through her exploration of these memories. This "I could have stopped it" feeling pervades Eva's memories; her self-envy is that of a woman envious of another with the ability to stop or prevent a tragedy that has already occurred. It is an impossible envy, as she cannot take that possession (time) away from that woman (herself), as it has already run out—an already depleted resource. Thus, Eva becomes trapped in a temporal loop of self-envy, unable to find release.

This loop prevents Eva from growing or changing as a person—she is only ever looking back on dead selves, neglecting to use them in the creation of new selves. As Sheppard writes, “Self-envy is about the destruction of what is good, creative, and growthful in the self” (110). Eva’s self-envy puts her in a state of arrested development. Indeed, self-envy results in “the destruction of meaning,” and “the capacity for normal thought.” Self-envy encourages a splitting of the self, so that the subject seems to exist in entirely separate spaces. As Polledri argues, “In self envy, one part of the self will deal with another aspect of that same self as if they were material from two different worlds” (Polledri 99). Eva looks back on her past selves as occupants of different worlds. She traps herself in a stasis, never changing. Thus, Eva’s internalized shame over her inability to fulfill models of postfeminist mothering leads to the development of toxic self-envy which traps her in an endless cycle of consuming past selves, a gluttonous act of empty consumption that recycles into nothing. Self-envy, for Eva, is a prison in which she must only ever confront her perceived shortcomings as a mother with no possibility for catharsis, change, or growth. Postfeminist mothering’s toxicity is, here, on full display, tossed between Eva’s seemingly empty looks—looks that gaze at a forever failing image of motherhood.

## **2.12 The Gaze of an Envious Child**

Eva’s self-envy is not only the cause of her own shame, but also the cause of Kevin’s own experience of envy. Throughout the film, Kevin reveals to the viewer his extreme bouts of envy towards his mother—envy which is, importantly, embodied by Kevin’s hyper-destructive gaze. His envy becomes clear quite early in the film’s narrative and his lifetime. The paint splatter over Eva’s study walls is a prime illustration of these early, destructively envious impulses and their connection to Kevin’s control over and obfuscation of vision. In this memory,

Eva is shown placing the final touch (an African mask) on her study walls in the family's new suburban home. The study's walls are plastered, floor to ceiling, with maps from around the world—all unblemished by paint. Kevin appears, glaring, in the doorway, about five years-old. "Those squiggly squares of paper: they're dumb," he states. Eva turns around, looks at him a moment, and gathers herself with a quick breath before responding, "Everybody needs a room of their own. You have your room—this is Mommer's room." Kevin appears unconvinced. She offers to help Kevin decorate his own room, but he coldly refuses. "They're dumb," he repeats again of Eva's maps. These maps are, for Eva, reminders of her past as a professional traveler, a successful travel guide writer. They are reminders of the world apart from (and missing) Kevin. For Kevin, they are "dumb." They are mute reminders that his mother has her own world. This reaction brings to mind Copjec's definition of envy as a destroyer of enjoyment, rather than a destroyer of objects—an affect that "envis satisfaction" (165). Kevin does not want the maps for himself; he wants to prevent his mother from enjoying them.

After Kevin's accusation of dumbness, the phone rings and Eva leaves the room. When she returns, her maps have been covered with paint, splattered with reds and blues; Kevin squats on a table, carrying his paint-filled water gun, wearing a not-quite-age-appropriate diaper. Kevin, envious of his mother's maps, has spoiled them. Again, envy is defined as a destructive impulse (Klein 5), a desire to prevent the envied person from finding enjoyment in their envied object. In this case, Kevin is not envious of the Eva for owning the maps, but is envious of the maps for their reminder of Eva's wider access to the world; Kevin, then, destroys them. Importantly, he destroys them by covering them up, by denying their visibility. With paint covering them, they are no longer maps. Their utility is destroyed. Kevin's destructive impulse is always rooted in destroyed vision, in destroying other people's ability to envy through vision. Indeed, when the

maps are covered with paint, Eva cannot simply use them as an object of self-envy; they still remind her of her past travels, but in a blemished, spoiled way. Already “dumb,” these maps are now blind. Returning to Copjec, Kevin has spoiled the maps’ capacity for creating enjoyment for Eva. Thus, Kevin’s own envious look attempts to neutralize the power of Eva’s own gaze; his gaze attempts to destroy Eva’s ability to look anywhere but at him, trapping her in unhappy domesticity.

Kevin’s status as envious gaze destroyer appears multiple times throughout the film. When Eva informs him that he’s going to have a sister, for instance, Kevin reacts negatively, in a way that suggests the dawn of sibling envy. He argues that he might not like having a new sister around, to which Eva responds, “Then you’ll get used to it.” Kevin goes on to point out that Eva’s used to him, but that doesn’t necessarily mean she likes him. In fact, this young, seven-year-old Kevin appears calmly convinced that his mother *doesn’t* like him. Later, when Kevin visits newborn Celia and Eva in the hospital, wearing a t-shirt that ironically suggests he’s a “proud big brother,” he attempts to ruin the moment by splashing water onto Celia’s face until she cries. Kevin’s envy of Eva’s distributed energies extends itself to (and even fixates on) Celia. Here, Chodorow’s evaluation of envy’s early stages proves useful. In, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow argues that envy appears in children when the infant is forced to confront the difference between its love for the mother and mother-love. For the child, “its mother is unique and irreplaceable,” whereas the child’s love for the mother “is replaceable—by another infant, by other people, and by other activities” (69). With Celia’s birth, as with Eva’s study maps, Kevin is forced to confront that Eva maintains interests in people and activities that are not Kevin-related; however, Kevin refuses to accept this, leading to intense sibling envy and bullying. This sibling rivalry is only encouraged by Eva’s immediate attachment to Celia, which

contrasts her struggle to connect with Kevin in any meaningful way. It is no surprise, then, that Celia becomes the target of Kevin's own destructive gaze. Or, more specifically, her *gaze* becomes the target of Kevin's destructive gaze. Kevin, as a teenager, destroys Celia's means of viewing the world in a truly significant act: he ruins one of her eyes, staging it as an accident involving liquid drainer. Eva is left to clean out Celia's eye socket every day, pus-saturated Q-tips lining Celia's bed as she completes this task; Kevin, in this way, forces Eva to view the product of his own destruction, which cannot, in turn, look back. He has destroyed Celia's power to possess a destructive gaze, while forcing his mother to acknowledge and constantly view this destruction and Celia's powerlessness. He has not only destroyed a rival (Celia), but has ruined Eva's *enjoyment* of this prized possession, unblemished. Kevin's envious gaze has spoiled everything. Both Eva's self-envy and Kevin's destructively envious look critique motherhood by exposing its pressures and expectations as toxic; both forms of the gaze spoil Eva's ability to grow as both a woman and a mother. Instead, Eva is trapped in stasis.

### **2.13 Envy's Positive Potential**

*We Need to Talk About Kevin* demonstrates that envy is not merely an inconsequential and morally unsound affect. Rather, Ramsay's film powerfully highlights envy's potential for sociocultural critique, particularly its dissection of postfeminist mothering. Envy, here, shapes maternal relationships and argues against attempting to internalize postfeminism's pristine image of New Momist mothering. Both Eva and Kevin employ envy as a defense mechanism, as a means of reacting against a world that doesn't seem to have a place for them or their discontent. Envy's function in Ramsay's film demonstrates the importance of negative affects, especially when attached to motherhood. Though (as discussed in chapter two) New Momism and

postfeminism demand total self-sacrifice to transform oneself into a “good” mother, this self-sacrifice cannot come without a slew of negative affects, from resentment to envy to sadness. Through allowing these negative affects space to properly vocalize themselves, to manifest themselves in bodies, narratives, and styles, the *Final Mom* film has worked towards naturalizing negative maternal experiences. All mothers experience envy and irritation with regards to mothering. As *Kevin* demonstrates, envy is not just a moment of mothering, but a state of mothering, an unshakeable part of adopting a maternal identity. Rather than suppress these negative affects, resulting in a stasis of performative positivity, these “bad” feelings should be allowed room to grow and shape each other—to question the very definition of “good” vs. “bad” mother.

In *Kevin*, Eva functions in an envious state, but is clearly not a “bad,” monstrous, abject mother. She is more like a gothic heroine who, as a victim of her social situation, feels trapped in a nightmarish labyrinth of domesticity, with Kevin guarding the way out. Kevin’s destructive gaze is not the film’s attempt to punish Eva’s ambivalence towards her newfound domestic identity. Instead, it is positioned as an illustration of the manipulation and pressure postfeminist mothering forces on its subjects, and the destruction of a woman’s personal identity through the self-sacrifice of motherhood. Eva’s maps *are* Eva (they are part of her identity), but Kevin ensures that this Eva cannot exist. Through its use of the destructive, envious gaze, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* produces a critique of motherhood’s own powers of destruction, powers that make ambivalent feelings towards motherhood feel morally wrong. Ramsay’s film illustrates the difficulties of holding onto one’s individualistic identity amidst the quicksand of maternal identity-making. Though the film’s title begs a discussion of Kevin, this is not enough. We need

to direct discussions away from the monstrous and towards the maternal. We need to talk about Eva.

## Conclusion: Towards Ambivalent Mothering

Though negative affective experiences are not usually sought after or persistently desired, this thesis has demonstrated how such unwelcome affects might question and critique naturalized cultural structures. Unpleasant feelings – like envy and irritation – are itchy, annoying, and shameful, yet critically powerful. Motherhood (so often idealized as a grotesque image of unquestioning self-sacrifice) benefits particularly from an *unpleasant* of feeling. Through allowing mothers to express their dissatisfaction, anxiety, and unhappiness, motherhood's martyred image can be reshaped and reconfigured not in the image of saint, but in that of a flawed and complex human being. The new Final Mom films are cultural texts willing and capable to perform this re-shaping. As our discussion of *The Babadook* has proven, irritation can serve this purpose. Amelia, the film's primary maternal figure, at first feels ashamed of her irritation towards her son, Samuel; this irritation, embodied by her persistent toothache and the Babadook monster's irritation of film's ontological roots, is eventually accepted and integrated into Amelia's mothering practices. Rather than being eradicated, this unpleasant affect is accepted as a natural and acceptable part of mothering. Kent's film allows motherhood to be questioned through Amelia's affective struggles. Chapter three, focusing on *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, proved another unpleasant affect's critical power: envy. Tracing envy through clinical and theoretical psychoanalytic discourse (with a focus on its feminization through models of penis envy), this chapter argued for envy's relationship to the gaze—the cinematic gaze, in particular. Looking at Eva's experiences of self-envy, of inward gazes, our discussion revealed envy's power to both halt one's identity development, as well as its ability to reflexively comment on its own restrictive, shameful qualities. Eva is made to feel ashamed of her envy, particularly her envy for her past, motherless self. Through this multi-faceted critique, *Kevin*

demonstrates that envy, far from being an affect worthy of suppression, is, like irritation, a natural affective experience with rich critical potential. Eva's envy does not just function as a locus of shame; rather, it critiques the traditional and popular conception of motherhood as an experience all women should crave and excel at.

As these case studies demonstrate, this thesis's working model of affect is critically and theoretically crucial in its ability to mobilize affect as a postfeminist critique. In this work, I crafted a hybrid model of affect by combining the subjectivity and collective affective experience prescient in Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, the formalist approach of Eugenie Brinkema's *The Forms of the Affects*, and Sianne Ngai's emphasis on tone, or affective experience lacking roots in character or spectator bodies, in *Ugly Feelings*. This model sought to de-privilege spectator experience, focusing instead on movements of affects between character bodies, narratives, and film form itself. Thus, in *The Babadook*, irritation travels between narrative (through Amelia's irritated outbursts towards her son and towards other mothers), her toothache, and the Babadook's disruption of film form through preventing light from rendering a legible image. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, envy, our primary affective focus, is not as easily divisible between narrative, character bodies, and form, but exists simultaneously in a single manifestation that influences all three: the gaze. Here, envy exists formally through the cinema's emphasis on the gaze, attaches itself to characters' gazes, and functions narratively as meaningful gazes are exchanged between characters throughout the film. These two chapters demonstrate the model's power for cultural critique. Envy and irritation, through their various movements and manifestations, incisively and astutely critique postfeminist mothering's various expectations. This tripartite model, then, has proven integral to discussions

of film's cultural impact, as well as its ability to de-naturalize ideological institutions through affective experiences.

It is important to note that, though we discussed *The Babadook* and *Kevin* for their dealings with irritation and envy, respectively, these affects are not specific to these two films. Envy, for instance, exists strongly in *The Babadook*; just as Eva in *Kevin* envies her past, childless life, Amelia envies her past with her husband, Oscar. Likewise, irritation permeates *Kevin*. Eva constantly exists in a state of irritation regarding her son, illustrated through his constant food-throwing, crying, and refusal to toilet train. Indeed, this thesis is not suggesting that these affects exist in an isolated form within two films' rigid confines. Instead, this thesis demonstrates that there is a model of maternal affect at work in these films—in the Final Mom films. Unpleasant affects predominate. Envy and irritation, along with disgust, anxiety, and ambivalence, are affective themes throughout the Final Mom films, exposing these films as a unified body radiating critical potential. By examining Amelia, Eva, and their predominant unpleasant affects, this thesis gestures to the Final Mom films' thematic use of negative affect to critique motherhood. The model of affect employed here is just that: a model that can be applied to other texts, adding to the sociocultural critiques predominant in this thesis.

A discussion of negative affects provides something of a launching pad for future discussions of motherhood. Indeed, celebrating negative affective experiences as natural to mothering explores a side of the institution that has not been thoroughly discussed. However, these negative affects hardly occur in isolation. Rather, negative affects generally occur alongside positive ones, clashing against them in the creation of ambivalence. Other Final Mom films demonstrate this: *The Orphanage*, for instance, focuses on a mother who loves her adopted son, but ends up committing the most egregious act a parent can commit (infanticide), leading to

a crisis of self-identity rooted in ambivalence. *Under the Shadow* depicts a mother, Shideh, who loves her daughter, but also resents the child for keeping Shideh from realizing her dream of becoming a doctor. Thus, both love and hate, adoration and resentment clash and contrast. Even *The Babadook* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* depict both positive and negative affects alongside each other. *The Babadook*'s ending, for instance, shows Amelia finally revelling in the act of mothering, showing real affection towards Samuel for the first time in the film's run; the Babadook monster, however, (that embodiment of unhappiness), still lurks in their home's basement. Thus, negative affect cannot be fully eradicated, but must always exist alongside the positive—ambivalence prevails. *Kevin*, too, reveals this clash of affects. Eva, though resistant to Kevin, tries desperately to love her son. Her true joy in mothering, however, comes when Celia is born. In Celia, Eva finds the affection and attachment she sought in Kevin, leading to a positive experience of mothering. Kevin and Celia, then, represent this clash of affective experiences inherent to mothering: negative (Kevin) and positive (Celia). Ambivalence becomes the underlying bedrock of these films, embodying an affective experience that cannot be reduced to a simple “good/bad” binary. Looking forward, discussions of affect and motherhood (within and beyond the horror genre) should take ambivalence into account as a nuanced and self-reflexive affective experience.

Ambivalence is difficult to describe or explicate fully, based as it is on tension and conflicting views. Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as “the coexistence in one person of contradictory emotions or attitudes (as love and hatred) towards a person or thing” (1). Through this conflict, ambivalence becomes a confusing, tormenting, and paralyzing affective experience. It does away with the linear routes of action provided by more clear-cut affects. Irritation, for instance, provokes its subject to dispose of their irritant. Envy incites the

action of destroying the other's enjoyment of an envied object. Ambivalence, on the other hand, does not offer an answer: how does one act when they feel both love and hate, desire and repulsion? It is a feeling that does not know how it feels. As a result, ambivalence also possesses great critical and analytical power. Rather than attempt to resolve these conflicts and tensions (by attempting to eradicate negative or unpleasant affects), ambivalence should be explored for its very conflicts and tensions—for its very confusion. Part of this confusion lies in ambivalence's multiple constituent affects. It is not a singular affective experience, like fear or disgust, but encompasses many affects at once. It is, then, a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a particular feeling. Motherhood has too often been reduced to a singular feeling (happiness, joy, love, etc.), rather than analyzed for its complexity. Ambivalence is key to properly examining motherhood in future discourses, with Final Mom films proving ideal texts for these examinations.

Indeed, Final Mom films are replete with ambivalence, particularly in more self-reflexive examinations of motherhood's traditional iconography within the horror genre. The 2016 horror-comedy, *Prevenge*, directed by and starring Alice Lowe, is one such ambivalently conflicted text. Even the film's premise calls attention to motherhood's vilification in horror cinema, as well as the pressures and expectations placed on new mothers to unquestioningly embrace motherhood. *Prevenge* follows Ruth (Alice Lowe), a hugely pregnant woman struggling to accept her impending motherhood while coping with the death of her partner (similarities to *The Babadook*, *Inside*, and even *The Others* should be clear). However, her unborn baby is not an innocent object awaiting its arrival in the world; rather, Ruth's baby is a monstrous entity who orders Ruth to kill those involved with her partner's death, torturing its mother if she fails to comply. Though this seems like a simple "evil child" narrative, the film rejects such an

archetypal reading. Director Lowe constantly forces viewers to question whether evil resides in the baby itself, in Ruth as a grieving soon-to-be-mother, or in the pressures of mothering. For instance, in a drily comical scene between Ruth and her nurse (Jo Hartley), Ruth is informed that if she hears a high-pitched sound later in pregnancy, she'll be able to squirt milk from her breasts, "like two rockets." "Why are you telling me that?" Ruth asks, tiredly. "Well, just so you know you have absolutely no control over your mind or your body anymore," the nurse responds, before reaching to tenderly pat Ruth on her protuberant belly. "*This one does,*" she gleefully states. "She's got all the control now." Of course, this scene functions on a couple of levels. The nurse's statements drip with dramatic irony, considering the viewers are aware that Ruth's unborn daughter *does* control her—to the point of murder. However, the scene's subtler gesture is to contemporary mothering's insistence on allowing babies total control over their mothers' energy, activities, and identity development, even before they're born. Ruth is told to submit to her unborn child, to give up her identity in favour of her baby's. In a comically incisive critique of this culturally celebrated act, *Prevenge* asks whether this demand for submission might not be a sadistic act in itself. However, Lowe also cares for the child, speaking to it, and treating it as the final reminder of her late partner. Ruth cares for her body, then, in an act of love (preserving the baby's health), but also hates her lack of control, desiring bodily autonomy once more. Ambivalence exists in the film's pregnant body, as well as its narrative twists and turns. *Prevenge* serves as an ideally complex template for maternal ambivalence.

In keeping with this thesis's model of affect, we can trace ambivalence throughout the film's stylistic and generic elements, too. In keeping with ambivalence's critical power, this film does not know how it feels. Even generically, the text shifts between comedic scenes (such as Ruth's conversations with her nurse), typical splatter horror (when Ruth attacks several people in

brutal ways), and maternal melodrama (when Ruth sadly reflects on her partner's death and her dissatisfaction with motherhood). These generic shifts are marked by stylistic and formal moves. Her scenes with the nurse, for instance, are set in all-white hospital rooms, shot bleakly with an overblown, white sky pouring in from outside. The entire setting radiates sterility, emphasizing the de-personalization of pregnant bodies, the eradication of singular identity. Ruth's splatter horror moments, on the other hand, are often set at night, inside nightclubs which illuminate other figures with red, neon lights. These scenes evoke a *giallo* tradition, combining bright, gaudy colours with total bodily decimation. Finally, her maternal melodrama moments are usually set around nature, near clifftops and seascapes, reflecting Ruth's more relaxed (but melancholy) inner life. With these constant shifts in genre and style, *Prevenge* demonstrates an ambivalence about its own filmic categorization. It seems to find each of these filmmaking modes lacking in the power to properly critique motherhood; instead, it chooses to draw from each, resulting in a *melange* of styles. *Prevenge*'s very core, then, is structured around tension and conflict—around ambivalence.

Through *Prevenge*'s genre explorations, ambivalence is posited as the all-encompassing position of Final Mom figures like Ruth. Indeed, other similar figures, like Amelia of *The Babadook* and Eva of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, struggle with ambivalence, and find themselves paralyzed by the conflicting experiences of maternal affection and identity preservation. Taking this thesis's model of affect and its exploration of negative affects, future discourses on motherhood might focus entirely on ambivalence, for ambivalence can embody not just love and hate, but irritation, envy, disgust, desire, fear, and adoration all at once. It is the superstructure, so to speak, of maternal affective experience, and yet is not permitted full voice in contemporary experiences of mothering. As discussions of postfeminism and New Momism

have shown, mothering is expected to be accepted and desired without question. Ruth, Amelia, Eva, and even the mother of *Goodnight Mommy*, all break with this restriction of univocality. All these powerful female figures – these Final Moms – revel in ambivalence. All of them demand an acceptance of confusion, of a lack of catharsis—of not knowing how one truly feels.

The affective experience of motherhood shifts and changes from day to day, moment to moment, mother to mother. The new Final Mom films of horror demonstrate that these changes should not be frozen or halted, but celebrated. They demand that motherhood's negative affective experiences be accepted along with the positive. They acknowledge irritation and envy in all their unpleasantness.

In short, they ask for an appreciation of ambivalence.

Through further explorations of these texts (their narratives, characterizations, and formal elements), we might extend our appreciation of mothering's emotional complexities. The Final Moms can allow us to see maternal figures beyond the “good mother/bad mother” binary—as women, as mothers, and as individuals. As irritated, envious, loving, nurturing – even murderous – figures, steeped in ambivalence and full of desire for change.

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