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28 See Magretta and Magretta, "Story and Discourse," pp. 284–5.
29 Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasure: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 122ff.
30 Thomas Elsaesser, "Antigone Agonistes: Urban Guerrilla or Guerrilla Urbanism? The Red Army Faction, Germany in Autumn and Death Game," in Joan Copjec and Michael Sorkin (eds), *Giving Ground: The Politics of Propinquity* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 267–302, p. 274.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., p. 284.
33 Also, as Hoerschelmann points out correctly, both novel and film were made before the significantly more violent and bloody phase of German terrorism which climaxed in 1977. See Hoerschelmann, "'*Memora dextera est*'," p. 91.

Bliss Cua Lim, "Serial Time: Bluebeard in Stepford" Film & Literature: A Reader ed. Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 163-190.

Chapter 8

Serial Time: Bluebeard in Stepford

Bliss Cua Lim

"Stepford is Out of Step": Fantastic Nonsynchronism

Patriarchies are never simply old-fashioned. In *Stepford Wives* – both Ira Levin's 1972 novel and Bryan Forbes's 1974 film – the feminist heroine is implicitly reproached for assuming that modernity is always anathema to misogyny. "Stepford is out of step," she tells her husband, deriding the town's Men's Assocation as "outdated."[1] To her own undoing, she fails to realize – until the eleventh hour – that her "present" is characterized by nonsynchronous patriarchal responses challenged-forth by and contemporaneous with the women's movement.

Retooling a conception derived from Marxist philosophies of history, I use the term "nonsynchronism" to designate a fractured sense of time evoked by the figuration of competing contexts of experience, or discontinuous epistemological paradigms, in fantastic narratives.[2] My work on *Stepford Wives* is part of a larger project on fantastic cinema from various national contexts, including Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino films. In what follows, I would like to briefly contextualize my discussion of *Stepford Wives* in terms of my interests in fantastic nonsynchronism and historical difference.

Critical consensus holds that the fantastic depicts archaic belief systems re-emerging in the disenchanted present. Freud speaks of the uncanny as the return of "surmounted modes of thought,"[3] and literary scholars and anthropologists alike characterize the fantastic as degraded myth in a post-mythic age, pre-modern beliefs surviving in a rational time. The hegemonic idea of the fantastic as an anachronism in a completely rationalized modernity presumes a complete eclipsing or expulsion of the occult in the current age. I take the opposite view, and suggest that, in representing unsurmounted worlds in a

fractious present, the fantastic disquietingly insinuates, not the stability of one time vis-à-vis another, but their co-implication.

The concept of nonsynchronism designates that recurring notion, in the fantastic, that people do not all dwell in the same Now; that there is more than one time in any one time, that past, present, and future modes of being in the world are neither securely moored nor absolutely differentiated, but are mutually entangled. Though I cannot here undertake a full explication of the genealogies of the term "fantastic," I understand the fantastic as a meeting place for the anomalous and the ordinary (frequently, the supernatural and the natural) which, far from upholding an historicist drama whereby mythical or pre-modern thought is surmounted by modern rationality, very often espouses a nonsynchronous view of social life, calling attention to the problematic role of anachronisms and non-contemporaneities in historicist thought.[4] I proffer the concept of nonsynchronism not to advance yet another generalization or definition of the fantastic as a mode or genre, but to describe a certain kind of insight into historical alterity that the fantastic, in its figuration of disjunctive worlds and times, has a propensity to disclose.

Several strands of historical nonsynchronism abound in *Stepford Wives*. In the dialogue I quote from Levin's novel at the beginning of this section, the heroine Joanna, deceived by her husband's seeming adherence to feminist views, ridicules the Stepford Men's Association for being "outdated," "old-fashioned," and "out of step" with the current time. The film does not rehearse this scene, but the same characterization of Stepford's sexual politics as anachronistic emerges in the emphasis given to the word "archaic" in the screenplay, the word which Joanna and her best friend Bobbie use to describe the Men's Association and the very word that Bobbie forgets once she has "changed." The nonsynchronous texture of life in Stepford belies Joanna's historicist misprision that patriarchy is outmoded while feminism is contemporary. Instead, Stepford's homicidal husbands employ cutting-edge technology to reprise old-fashioned notions of femininity, embodying a temporally discrepant patriarchal ethos, at once futuristic, coeval, and deeply nostalgic.

My analysis of Forbes's film pursues an intertextual understanding of the film in which Levin's novel is granted little primacy. Intertextuality, Kristeva's own illuminating intertextual appropriation of Bakhtinian dialogism, names our recognition that every text is "an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point of fixed meaning," and that every term in narrative is "at least double."[5] Intertextuality is strongly suited to frame a discussion of fantastic nonsynchronism because intertextuality is always temporally discrepant. A radically intertextual method eschews the linear temporality underpinning the assumption that the film "comes after" and is thus obliged to be faithful to its literary "predecessor." Intertextuality cautions us against assuming that meanings can ever be wholly ascribed to a defining, "original" source or intention. It also reminds us that the cacophony at the heart of every utterance is historically nonsynchronous, a juxtaposition of discourses from diverse eras. Bakhtin writes that language is "heteroglot from top to bottom," embodying "the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past."[6]

I introduce the concept of intertextuality in order to distance my approach from the source–adaptation dyad that dominates studies of literature and film. Rather than conceiving of Levin's novel as a "source" which the film contests or transforms, this study positions the novel as only one of several discourses through which the nonsynchronous temporality of the Bluebeard tale – the story of a husband who murders a string of wives – is refracted. My discussion mobilizes Levin's book among an assortment of intertexts: centuries-old tropes of misogyny (the seventeenth-century Skull Doctor and the medieval Mill of Old Wives), Disney audio-animatronics, second wave feminism, and the Final Girls and serial killers of Hollywood horror films.

How is it possible to discern Bluebeard's dire visage in sunlit Stepford? Such a construal does not proceed by unveiling evidence of an intention – whether on the part of novelist, director, or screenwriter – to invoke folklore's murderous bridegroom; indeed, neither novel nor screenplay makes mention of him. Intertextuality is not a matter of intentional allusion because intertexts are both "conscious and unconscious quotations, conflations and inversions of other texts."[7] If, authorial intention notwithstanding, it is possible to perceive the Stepford husbands as kin to Bluebeard, it is because the figure of the serial killing husband is not a singular point of meaning but a variegated prism through which other discourses are refracted. The film can be apprehended as a Bluebeard tale because, as Kristeva puts it, "every text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another."[8]

If every text is a mosaic, then discursive ownership is impossible to claim. As Bakhtin deftly puts it, "The word in language is half someone else's."[9] Being half someone else's, every discourse is already an adaptation of texts that are themselves not originals. Yet adaptation studies has come under fire precisely for its ideal of fidelity to literary properties.[10] Discourse misconstrued as property underpins both the fallacy of originality and the "chimera of fidelity" in adaptation studies.[11] Creative spectatorship and fan ownership are only the most obvious rejoinders to the claims of copyright, attesting to the difficulty of reining in discourse as property.[12]

In my view, "source novels" are never the measure of "film adaptations." A single novel as a principal yardstick or comparison-text for cinematic meaning forgets that discourses have no fealty to originals, but are echoing chambers whose resonances are difficult to exhaust. The model of novel–film dyad, whether conceived as correspondence or transformation, might unwittingly confine our understanding to "the dungeon of a single context."[13] The source–adaptation paradigm excludes not only other, perhaps more salient intertexts, but more crucially, the "rejoinder" of the spectator, whose response to the film may have little or nothing to do with the novel it adapts, a novel which, in this sense, cannot claim to be the "source text" of the viewer's dialogic response. In Bakhtin/Kristeva's cruciform model, the text lies at the horizontal crossroads of authors and audiences and at the vertical intersection of one work with the corpus of other works among which it is positioned.[14]

In what follows, I first explore the likeness of *Stepford Wives* to Bluebeard tales to emphasize two crucial aspects of this narrative of marital murder: the essentializing,

equivalizing gesture of serial killing; and the nonsynchronous temporality of serial victimization as a narrative of fate (the victims recognize their future doom in the past death of their predecessors). The next section explores the significant departures of *Stepford Wives* from the Bluebeard structure: most obviously, its recourse to audio-animatronic doubles specifically attributed to Disney's pioneering work with this technology. At once emblematic of nostalgically pictured femininity and produced by cutting-edge industrial wizardry, the doll-doubles of Stepford are nonsynchronous in the extreme, and point up the uncanniness of Disney's ultra-modern innovations. This section also explores the film's proximity to folkloric tropes of recycling an intractable wife, and discusses *Stepford Wives'* allegorical portrait of erotic domination, evident in its fantasy of remaking women by violence and in its positioning of female mannequins as sexual surrogates. The last section of the chapter juxtaposes the Stepford heroine who dies – Joanna – alongside the triumphant Final Girls of horror. Like these victim-heroines, Joanna attests to the life-saving value of feminist paranoia: why then does she fail to survive? The narrative implicitly chides its heroine for thinking of the Men's Association as "old-fashioned" and "out of date" by revealing that the men of Stepford are never merely obsolescent, but wield the technological arsenal of the present to shocking ends.

On the Threshold of Seriality: Bluebeard and the Temporality of Fate

Bluebeard is folklore's first serial killer. Carol Clover incisively reminds us that "horror movies look like nothing so much as folktales." Like folklore, horror bears "the hallmarks of oral narrative: the free exchange of themes and motifs, the archetypal characters and situations . . . This is a field in which there is in some sense no original, no real or right text, but only variants."[15] Though comprised of countless variants and close cousins,[16] the hallmark of the Bluebeard narrative is its string of unsuspecting wives done to death by a homicidal husband or suitor. Its nucleus is sexualized, sequential murder. This emphasis on seriality perhaps guarantees its continuing relevance to popular culture. Marina Warner notes, "the fairy tale written by Perrault in 1697 thrills like a Hitchcock film before its time, it foreshadows thriving twentieth-century fantasies about serial killers and Jack the Rippers."[17] The Bluebeard figure has "metamorphosed in popular culture for adults into the mass murderer, the kidnapper, the serial killer: a collector, as in John Fowles's novel, an obsessive, like Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*."[18]

Described as a "wealthy serial bachelor"[19] who entices young women with his affluence, only to subject them, by turns, to his repetitive "project of marital coercion,"[20] Bluebeard is a potent emblem for women's longstanding fears of literal or metaphoric death in wedlock. In most versions, Bluebeard gives his new wife access to his considerable holdings, but sternly prohibits her from entering a certain chamber: "As for this little room, I forbid you to enter it, and my prohibition is such that if you happen to open it, there is nothing you should not expect from my anger."[21] Our heroine's inquisitiveness spurs her to transgression – "Bluebeard" has often been subtitled "The Fatal Effects of Curiosity"[22] – but nothing could have prepared her for what she finds in the forbidden chamber. In his version, Charles Perrault writes:

> At first she saw nothing, for the windows were closed, but after a few moments she perceived dimly that the floor was entirely covered with clotted blood, and that in this were reflected the dead bodies of several women that hung along the walls. These were all the wives of Blue Beard, whose throats he had cut, one after the other.[23]

To the new wife's unspeakable horror, the sanguine mirror both reflects the remains of other women and also augurs her own undoing, for Bluebeard discovers her disobedience. He prepares to murder her in the manner of her predecessors, but she is saved, sometimes through the timely intervention of her brothers, sometimes by her own cunning stratagems.

One writer puts it superbly: "Bluebeard" is a story in which "marrying is brought into association with being butchered."[24] Like "Beauty and the Beast," this folktale does not dramatize a courtship but pursues a marital plot, in the dual sense of narrative and conspiracy. In contrast to Freudian readings of the husband's animal nature as a metaphor for the woman's awakening into sexuality, Warner suggests that the sinister bridegrooms of "Bluebeard" and "Beauty and the Beast" afford brutally candid explorations of the marital dynamic.[25] From the late seventeenth century onwards, women of letters added their voices to the cautionary fables of elderly nurses or low-born women, re-spinning old wives' tales through an overt infusion of feminism, and reworking oral sources to decry arranged marriages and stifling gender roles for women.[26] At its core, *Stepford Wives* is a Bluebeard tale, a story of women serially murdered in marriage.

Stepford Wives traces the increasing alienation-in-marriage of Joanna, a semi-professional photographer in her mid-thirties who undertakes a city-to-suburbs move for her husband Walter. The film specifies that the couple and their two children have relocated from Manhattan to Connecticut, and opens with the family's last morning in Manhattan and their drive to Stepford.[27] The novel, for its part, begins with Joanna already in Stepford, being interviewed for the "Notes on Newcomers" section of the local newspaper. In her interview with the Welcome Wagon Lady, Joanna characterizes herself as "interested in politics and in the Women's Liberation movement. Very much so in that. And so is my husband."[28] The film is less forthright on this point; Walter is never described as actively involved in the women's movement, though Joanna discloses to a friend that she herself "messed around with Women's Lib" back in New York.

Once in Stepford, Joanna strikes up a fast friendship with another "ex-Gothamite," Bobbie, a vibrant, assertive young woman who, like Joanna, was active in the women's movement and recently moved to Stepford at her husband's urging. Their first conversation

in the film, which hews closely to the novel, establishes the grounds of their companionable bonding: their shared disapproval of their new female neighbors, Stepford's "compulsive *hausfraus*," as Joanna puts it.[29]

In a tone of humorous frustration, the two friends agree that Stepford women seem cast in the mold of television advertisements' nostalgia for idealized 1950s' femininity. "You see, doctor," Bobbie jokingly says to Joanna in the film, "my problem is that, given complete freedom of choice, I don't wanna squeeze the goddamn Charmin." In the novel, Joanna reflects that the Stepford wives were like "actresses in commercials, pleased with detergents and floor wax, with cleaners, shampoos, and deodorants. Pretty actresses, big in the bosom but small in the talent, playing suburban housewives unconvincingly, too nicey-nice to be real."[30] As newcomers, Joanna and Bobbie feel fenced out by the town's investment in nostalgic femininity, palpable in both their housework-oriented female neighbors, and in the Men's Association which their supposedly women-positive, "liberated" husbands have joined. (In the novel, both their spouses promise that the organization will be "co-ed" in six months' time.)

Convinced that a massive dose of consciousness-raising is in order, Joanna and Bobbie set about trying to organize a women's group in Stepford (in the novel, they make reference to starting a National Organization of Women chapter), but there are no takers save one: Charmaine, the unhappily married wife of a television producer, who loves tennis and hates housework, preferring to leave housekeeping to her maid. In the film, Joanna, Bobbie, and Charmaine manage to put together one consciousness-raising session, with the other Stepford wives in attendance, but the results are as chilling as they are hilarious: Charmaine begins by tearfully disclosing that her husband views her only as a "trophy wife," but when the other Stepford wives chime in, their deepest-felt anxieties concern baking and cleaning. One wife, Kit, is anxious because "It took me so long to get the upstairs floor to shine, I didn't have time to bake!" The other wives console her with enthusiastic testimonials on the virtues of house-cleaning aids. (Marie: "Well, if time is your enemy, make friends with Easy On.")

Despite the humorous overtones of this women's liberation meeting turned group commercial – this incongruous scene may account for Betty Friedan's storming out of the theater, if reports are true[31] – this is the first time we and the heroines truly recoil in horror at the Stepford wives, whose deepest personal priorities include cleaning products. As an upshot of this experience, Bobbie and Joanna realize that their female neighbors cannot be helped simply by conversion to feminism, since these women exhibit a troubling lack of consciousness, a total devolution of agency. The scene plays like a commercial in which a talking mechanical dishwasher extols the virtues of the most effective detergent available. We, like the film's heroines, begin to sense something automated about the Stepford wives, who, as Joanna rhymingly reflects in the novel, "work like robots all their lives."[32]

Todorov's fantastic hesitation rears its head in *Stepford Wives* as a feminist doubting of other women's humanity.[33] At this early stage in the narrative the protagonists waver between rational and preternatural explanations. After the surreal "women's lib" meeting, Joanna and Bobbie ask each other aloud whether they are going crazy. Their suspicions are further aroused upon learning that seven years ago, Stepford boasted a very active, feminist-identified women's organization. The officers of that women's club, which disbanded when membership dropped and its leaders resigned, are the very women who now have so little interest in anything outside their wifely duties.

Panic rises in Bobbie and Joanna as they begin to see themselves as part of a larger series of feminists who moved to Stepford only to undergo a radical transformation. All the submissive Stepford wives began as women with interests outside the family who moved to the suburbs at their husbands' behest, upper-class, college-educated wives of successful and prosperous men who gave up full-time work in order to raise children and keep house. Within the narrative, the idiosyncratic individualism of each woman gives way to a terrifying equivalence, as first Charmaine, then Bobbie, goes off for a weekend alone with their husbands, only to return more lovely but also completely vapid, no longer interested in anything but servicing their husbands and keeping the house sparkling clean. Terrified and increasingly suspicious of her own husband and his colleagues in the Men's Association, Joanna confides her worst fears to a female psychiatrist in the film:

> Oh Jesus. It's so awful. *If I'm wrong, I'm insane, and if I'm right, it's worse than if I'm wrong* . . . Bobbie my best friend changed in four months and that's what convinced me. That's how long I've been in Stepford. Four months. And I don't know what's going on, I just know something's wrong and *my time is coming* . . . Don't ask me to explain it, I just know. There'll be somebody with my name and she'll cook and clean like crazy but she won't take pictures and she won't be me. She'll – *She'll be like one of those robots in Disneyland*. (emphasis added)

In this agitated monologue, Joanna articulates a clear-sighted understanding of her own entrapment in a plot of serial murder. Like the heroine in Bluebeard's bloody chamber, she sees in the demise of her predecessors the portent of her own, and frantically tries to avert the equivalizing fate the Stepford husbands have in store for their wives.

The investigative heroine has arrived at the brink of truth: the suburban husbands in the Men's Association are in the business of remaking all their wives, conspiring to murder them and install automata in their place. As docile as they are buxom, the Stepford wives are sexually available to every male fantasy (the real women of Stepford, in both film and novel, do not often oblige their spouses' prurience), and undertake thankless household chores with unquestioning enthusiasm. These mechanical dolls (parodically nicknamed "fembots" in *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* [Jay Roach, 1997]) literalize serialized uniformity. The ultra-feminine robots, despite pitch-perfect engineering to resemble the ruined wives, are fundamentally indistinguishable from one another, women-made-collectibles by serial killing's erasure of difference, its logic of repetition.

The serial correspondence achieved by murder in Stepford is at the heart of the Bluebeard tale. When Joanna tells her therapist that her "time is coming" she is articulating the selfsame shock of recognition that Bluebeard's bride experienced upon opening the door

to the bloody chamber. *Stepford Wives* stages the very threshold of recognition that Casie Hermansson identifies in the Bluebeard plot:

> Bluebeard's tableau of his wives' bodies defamiliarizes the reflection they stage for the viewing wife: *the image is based on the past (they are previous wives, and no longer alive) but encodes the sign of her future (she is to be a dead one)*. As one variant Bluebeard says, "as you have seen, so you shall become!" . . . The iconic tableau incorporates *evidence of the serial act*, or repetition-compulsion by another name. The icon feeds itself by physically drawing in newcomers, who have already been encoded there in the abstract, and by *suppressing their individual differences through this use of like-ness*.
>
> The effect of these structures of uncanny likeness infused through Bluebeard's destructive vision is apparent at *the moment on the threshold. As she gazes upon the bodies of her predecessors, Bluebeard's wife realizes (in both senses of understanding and making it happen) that she is now within Bluebeard's serial plot, and she is horrified*. (emphasis added)[34]

Hermansson's acute reading reveals the crux of Bluebeard's "death artistry,"[35] his maniacal work-in-progress. An ever-accreting tableau of dead wives, masculinist design executed upon female corporeality, the bloody chamber as icon of equivalizing vision insinuates the essential homogeneity of women – collectible and quiescent – in the patriarch's eyes. This ghastly tableau is what brings slasher and serial killer movies into the compass of the Bluebeard tale. Whether in *Stepford Wives* or recent films like *The Cell* (Tarsem Singh, 2000), the homicidal lover kills to refashion female identities into the inert similitude of dolls on display.

Hermansson suggests that the implications of the equivalizing gesture of seriality are not exhausted by the motif of collection; rather, the most fundamental (and frightful) consequence of serial logic is its grisly encryption of nonsynchronism. The bloody chamber is a temporally nonsynchronous mirror in which the new wife recognizes, in the downfall of her predecessors, her own impending death. As Hermansson points out, this moment at the threshold of knowledge is crucial. Will she recognize herself in these dead women and collude in Bluebeard's foregone conclusion regarding her essentialized identity, or will she refuse it by artful subterfuge, forging, as in some variants of Bluebeard, another double of herself, not one which prophesies her submission, but one which forfends it?

In moving to Stepford, Joanna, like several women before her, finds herself at the doorway of Bluebeard's fatal chamber, faced with horrific evidence of how her antecedents met their gruesome doom. Nonsynchronous seriality lies in the dissolution of linear past, present, and future in the circular repetition of a fate that is both not yet and always already hers. The heroine of *Stepford Wives*, alongside her counterparts in Bluebeard stories, *stands on the threshold of a prior fate*: in recognizing what has befallen other women, she sets in motion her own impending destruction.

The trope of the fateful threshold and its desperate echoing of disparate but interwoven times and fates are clear to scholars of the Bluebeard tale. Philip Lewis understands the "body-reflecting" pool of blood in Bluebeard's forbidden room as a mirror in which the new wife first identifies with "the corpses on the walls": "she, the present wife, belongs to this group made up of Bluebeard's mysteriously missing previous wives . . . The bruising effect of this self-recognition, in which the live victim is forced to identify with her dead predecessors, is to immerse her experience of identity and desire in anxiety, to relate them to the coming of her own death."[36]

In the Blubeard plot, nonsynchronism is literalized in the mirroring effect of serial temporality. Its logic of inexorable sequentiality belongs to narratives of fate, which serve to cast the present as the already-past of an inevitable future. Put another way, Joanna, who fears that her time is coming, sees, like Bluebeard's wife, the downfall of other women as the portent of her own undoing; in the moment at the threshold, serial temporality fuses with the time of the omen. A bad omen involves a perverse temporality akin to Barthes's "vertigo of time defeated." The inverse of Barthes's punctum (something past and long dead that haunts us with disturbing present-ness due to photographic indexicality),[37] the omen is a present we experience as past at the moment it occurs: a past "construct[ed] in the form of a future,"[38] a feeling that the present is already behind us, already a past that cannot be changed, and hence that the future it augurs is inevitable. For Joanna in Stepford, the terrified would-be victim at the threshold of a serial killer's plot, the present is already past, construed from the vantage-point of a future blighted before it happens.

In *Stepford Wives*, the Bluebeard figure is not a single bridegroom but the husbands of Stepford taken as a diabolical collective. Seriality in *Stepford Wives* lies not in one man's killing a string of wives, but in all of these men colluding to kill each of their spouses. In *Stepford Wives*, the serial bachelor of folklore is replaced by collaborative perpetrators of seriality and sameness: each real wife is dispatched precisely as part of a communal effort to make the women into one same essential Wife. All of these different, vibrant women are being recreated as automata, ageless reiterations of a supposedly quintessential femininity. "The Robber Bridegroom," a Bluebeard variant by the Brothers Grimm, features a collective serial killer (a troupe of maniacal bandits, unlike the wealthy Bluebeard who acts alone), and, indeed, the Stepford husbands seem to draw from both fairytale prototypes, merging the communal homicide of thieves in the woods with the financial privilege of the widower in his castle. The crucial contribution of *Stepford Wives* is precisely the pluralization and abstraction of the Bluebeard figure. The film takes folklore's forerunner to the twentieth-century serial killer and widens the scope of the narrative's indictment: in Stepford, what kills our heroine is not one merciless husband but an entire ethos. The animate but annihilated suburban wives live out a slow death-in-life; in their routine obedience and lives of leisure they are but a torpid shadow of their former selves.

Yet what distinguishes the Stepford husbands from Bluebeard and the Robber Bridegroom is their repugnant audacity, their cynical confidence in putting their death-artistry on conspicuous display rather than totally closeting their crimes. The whole of Stepford is, to borrow Lewis's evocative phrase, a "euphemized sepulcher";[39] the upscale

Connecticut suburb is a strangely bloodless crypt, both undeniably public and terribly private, an open secret, to be precise. The place is a memorial under the sign of erasure, preserving yet obliterating the forever subjugated dead women who are the town's inert center, a sanitized, bloodless chamber, hiding in plain sight, recalling the profile of the serial killer, whose monstrosity is both cloaked and disclosed by his too-normal normalcy.[40]

Like "Sleeping Beauty," "Bluebeard" and *Stepford Wives* disclose a structure of ominous prophecy.[41] In the novel, Joanna feels "a sense of beforeness" touch her when she hears about her best friend's planned weekend getaway with her husband. Once Bobbie "changes," Joanna frantically attempts to take her children and flee Stepford because "it's going to happen to me in January,"[42] thus epitomizing folktale motifs of predestination and the heroine's desperate desire to be delivered from her coming doom. *Stepford Wives* thus reconfigures the fairytale's emphasis on fatalistic pedagogy.[43] Unlike "Bluebeard," in *Stepford Wives* the heroine, despite her knowledge, dies; the cautionary tale proceeds to confirm the omen, to pursue the nonsynchronous, fatal vision glimpsed by the heroine at the threshold of seriality to its bitter conclusion.

In the novel, Joanna meets her end when she asks her best friend, Bobbie, to prove she is human by cutting her finger so Joanna can see if it bleeds. The novel elliptically suggests that Bobbie agrees to do so but turns the knife against Joanna instead. In the next scene, a dutiful Joanna appears at the supermarket, indistinguishable from the Stepford wives she so recently deplored. The novel's narration, heretofore centered upon Joanna's free indirect speech,[44] shifts focalization to Ruthanne Hendry, the first African American woman to move to Stepford and, the novel ominously implies, the town's next fresh kill.

In the film version, Joanna is cannier than her novelistic counterpart: suspecting that the much-altered Bobbie will *not* bleed, she plunges the kitchen knife into her best friend's stomach. The weapon sticks out incongruously, bloodless on the robot's pristine white apron. In the end, it is not Bobbie's double that kills Joanna but her own. Bedraggled and terrified, Joanna watches helplessly as her own idealized mechanical countenance approaches her in a diaphanous nightgown, a stocking held taught between two hands. This ending underscores the likeness-in-difference with which the serial plot has framed her. For the Stepford wife, seriality always implies a rendezvous with fate, the heroine's providential meeting with and becoming her double. On the threshold of epiphany in *Stepford Wives* and "Bluebeard," our heroine finds herself entangled in the nonsynchronous time of fate, the linearity of cause and chance factored out, part and parcel of another temporality of repetition and variation, her future already foregone.[45]

Remaking Wives: The Technologies of Nostalgia

Screenwriter William Goldman emphasizes that *Stepford Wives* must be seen in its historical specificity, as a response to and engagement with what has been called the "second wave feminism" of the 1960s and 1970s:

> Ira Levin's novella, on which the film was based, came out in the early seventies, when the Women's Liberation Movement was the hot topic on all the TV talk shows. Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* had opened the floodgates, Gloria Steinem was a magazine cover girl, and all across the country people were echoing Freud's great unanswered question: "What do women want?"[46]

In this light, the Stepford husbands are placeholders for averse reactions to the women's liberation movement. By the late 1960s and early 1970s certain ideals of what has been called the "egalitarian feminism"[47] of the women's liberation movement had become mainstream, and patriarchal convictions regarding masculine superiority had gone underground, so to speak, just as, in the 1990s, political correctness as a kind of received etiquette has not so much eradicated prejudice as dictated its dissimulation.

The disobeyed Stepford husbands are the maniacal vanguard of a patriarchal order contested by the women's liberation movement. The conspiratorial men of Stepford feel themselves to have been wronged by their wives, but have kept silent about their disapproval regarding autonomous women, preferring to work in secrecy. Even more than Bluebeard, who murdered his wife because he could not trust her to keep her word, the Stepford husbands seem all the more motivated by unconscionable masculine pettiness. When Joanna asks the head of the Men's Association why the men executed their wives and replaced them with robots, he replies:

> Why? Because we can. We found a way of doing it and it's just perfect. Perfect for us and perfect for you. Think of it the other way around. Wouldn't you like some perfect stud waiting on you around the house, praising you, servicing you, whispering how your sagging flesh was beautiful no matter how you look?

The wifely shortcomings for which the Stepford women must die are tragically banal: they are killed for not keeping a sufficiently tidy house, for refusing to play along with their husbands' sexual preferences, for sometimes neglecting to prepare dinner because they are wrapped up in part-time work. The Stepford wives, then, are executed for their lack of fit with a conception of femininity against which they have been secretly weighed by their husbands, only to be found wanting. Bluebeard's desire for domination, however unjust, was at least forthright. In the folktale, Bluebeard's prohibition was made plain to his wife, his wrath expected. In *Stepford Wives*, however, the women are unaware of their husbands' displeasure. Unlike Bluebeard's wives, the Stepford wives die not because they are curious, not because they have, in spite of themselves, knowingly crossed their husbands, but because they fail to appreciate the depths of their husbands' commitment to certain gender norms. The Stepford husbands meld Bluebeard's iniquity with anti-feminist subterfuge: covertly masculinist, some of the men are even avowed feminists. (In both novel and film, Joanna's husband Walter pretends to differ with the Men's Association's policy of excluding women, only to use his evenings at the organization for

foul play.) In the age of feminism, none of the husbands openly espouses gender ideals loudly contested by the women's movement. The husbands know better than to argue with a feminist, preferring instead to replace her with a less quarrelsome version of herself.

Bluebeard kills his wives, whereas the men of Stepford murder women in order to "recycle" them. The Bluebeard tale features a nefarious husband, but *Stepford Wives* juxtaposes the inhumane husband with a literally inhuman wife, a doll who borrows a semblance of life. Central to *Stepford Wives*, then, is the folkloric "idea of a man who wants to master the feminine by actually creating it in the image of his desire."[48]

The film and novel take their title from the fantastic conceit of the narrative: the Stepford wives are real women retooled, made more pliant, more comely, and perpetually young. In this, *Stepford Wives* recalls another aggregate of folkloric tropes, the seventeenth-century Skull Doctor, Lustucru, and the medieval Mill of Old Wives, magical smithies and wondrous machines in which one's sharp-tongued, aging missus could be ground up or pummeled, and by such violence transformed into a nubile, subservient wife.

Warner describes one baleful French image: Lustucru (a contraction of *L'eusses-tu cru?*, "Would you have believed it?") is "forging new heads for women brought to him by their menfolk – husbands, chiefly – in order to make them into properly docile wives." Like Bluebeard's bloody chamber, the workshop of Lustucru the Skull Doctor (*Le Médecin céphalique*) is bedecked with the remains of women, row upon row of the female heads he has hacked off. The sign above the workshop displays a decapitated woman along with the words "Everything about her is good." Should we fail to catch the deeper drift of this grotesque scene, Lustucru's centrally framed anvil is inscribed: "*Touche fort sur la bouche. Elle a meschante langue* (Strike hard on the mouth: she has a wicked tongue)." Warner historicizes the popular burlesque sketches of Lustucru, "the champion of henpecked husbands, a hero among men," by pointing out that this trope emerged in response to "the intellectual ambitions of seventeenth-century aristocratic women," "the bluestockings of the Paris salons" who "criticized arranged marriages and the dynastic and social market in wives, and sought instead to cultivate equal, companionable relations between men and women."[49]

I draw attention to the kinship of *Stepford Wives'* conceit of reforging a recalcitrant wife to decapitation at the Skull Doctor's smithy not in order to impute any conscious allusions to seventeenth-century misogyny on the part of Ira Levin. Rather, if we presume Levin's unfamiliarity with Lustucru, the real issue – nonsynchronous heteroglossia – becomes even more pointed: the fantasy of disciplinary violence against women as a means of curbing their desire for self-determination has startling longevity and variety of expression. At once topical and perennial, this poetic invention is neither wholly medieval nor purely modern. It is a recurring figure of anti-feminist tirade continually tailored and reconfigured to the contestations of the moment, but also perpetually encoding chastisement of unruly women. The dark fantasy of the Skull Doctor betokens patriarchal resentment against a nascent feminist consciousness. Lustucru's popularity emerged in the context of a feminist campaign among seventeenth-century literati and aristocrats; similarly, a backlash sensibility against second wave feminism is the context for *Stepford Wives*.

The seventeenth-century Lustucru was himself derived from the medieval motif of the Mill of Old Wives, the theme of "recycling wives when their husbands are tired of them."[50] In burlesque sketches, the mill was portrayed as a mechanical process by which women considered unattractive because of their age and their stridency are first pulverized then refinished so as to emerge young, pliable, and newly amorous to the arms of waiting husbands, who show no signs of having aged. *Stepford Wives* is a dark, twentieth-century echo of the Mill of Old Wives.

Like Lustucru's hammer, which smote women on their heads and on their mouths, and the Mill of Old Wives, which ground women to a pulp in order to remake them, the grotesque notion of recycling one's tiresome wife is a conspicuous fantasy of dismemberment. Violence toward the woman's body is really directed against her mind: the Skull Doctor decapitates and "strikes hard on the mouth" to chastise the wife's "wicked tongue," and similarly in Stepford the uncanny mannequins are feeble-minded and well spoken by design. The word list which the real women are asked to speak into a recorder literalizes this fantasy of women's circumscribed expression, as the "new and improved" Stepford wives are equipped with sweet new tongues and an approved vocabulary from which the word "archaic" is conspicuously absent.

In *Stepford Wives*, the technology that reproduces women in the image of masculinist desire is not a medieval mill but audio-animatronics, pioneered by Walt Disney enterprises in the 1960s. In the novel, Joanna discovers that the serial marital homicides-cum-makeovers begin with the arrival of Dale "Diz" Coba, so nicknamed because he "worked in 'audio-animatronics', at Disneyland, helping to create the moving and talking presidential figures featured in the August number of *National Geographic*."[51] Slowly, other men, necessary accomplices, arrive in town: specialists in optics, microcomputers, sound, biochemicals, vinyl polymers, systems engineering. As male experts in industrial technologies take hold of Stepford, women's organizing in the town experiences a rapid downturn.

Joanna's psychiatrist in the novel is skeptical and slightly condescending when Joanna confides her fears of a conspiracy against women in Stepford. Striving to rationalize Joanna's paranoia, the doctor intones:

> It sounds like the idea of a woman who, like many women today, and with good reason, feels a deep resentment and suspicion of men. One who's pulled two ways by conflicting demands, perhaps more strongly than she's aware; the old conventions on the one hand, and the new conventions of the liberated woman on the other.

But Joanna does not feel her suspicions to be the delusions of a woman caught between worlds old and new; she insists that the Stepford wives resemble nothing so much as audio-animatronic attractions at the Hall of Presidents in Disneyland: "They're like . . . [those] figures of all the Presidents [in Disneyland], moving around, making different facial expressions. Abraham Lincoln stood up and delivered the Gettysburg Address; he was so lifelike."[52]

The uncanniness of the robotic Stepford wives derives from their nonsynchronous constitution: as Joanna's therapist suggested, the women of Stepford are both old *and* new, triumphs of cutting-edge engineering put to the service of vivifying an ideal Woman forged in the fires of nostalgia (as Joanna crudely puts it, "a stay-in-the-kitchen wife with big boobs and no demands.")[53] As one critic notes, nostalgia is key to the husbands' motivations for murder:

> These high-tech executives . . . grow fascinated with the manufactured nostalgia of television: grandmas with homey, clean houses and kitchens, ruffled aprons, homecooking, families staying together watching television. Nostalgia becomes demonic as the men of Stepford, with the power of the new technologies at their disposal, create perfect robot replicas of their wives, programmed to behave like the television grandmas, with which they replace their murdered wives.[54]

Disney products are closely bound up with the drive to "construct and commodify nostalgia."[55] Eric Smoodin writes: "Disney – the entrepreneur, the corporation, and all of the products – signified the homely values of family and country even while demonstrating the possibilities of the future, the inevitability of constant technological innovation."[56] Disney discourse weds a saccharine invocation of an idyllic past to the futurist lexicon of technological euphoria. The historical nonsynchronism of Disney discourse is nowhere more palpable than in audio-animatronics. In the mid-1960s, Disney's version of "Abraham Lincoln-come-alive" was a poster child for the corporation's accomplishments in the new technology. In the selfsame *National Geographic* interview Levin cited in his novel, Disney explains his deployment of cutting-edge audio-animatronics ("animation with sound, run by electronics"). The *National Geographic* reporter is awestruck by the audio-animatronic Lincoln's "chilling realism"; the "illusion was alarming."[57] Like Disney's Lincoln, the mechanical women of Stepford fascinate and frighten because of their constitutive nonsynchronism: they are both nostalgic and futuristic.

Disney-style audio-animatronics gone awry are central to the most powerful moment in the film: Joanna plunges a knife into the doll-that-was-Bobbie and the mechanical mannequin malfunctions. In a brilliantly orchestrated performance, Paula Prentiss as Bobbie becomes a veritable broken record, breaking into a repetitious, failed monologue accompanied by actions that miscarry. "How could you do a thing like that?" she asks over and over, taking one coffee cup after another off its hook, walking toward the counter, and missing it every time, so that each cup comes crashing down on the floor. Tossing one spoonful of coffee after another into the air, and twisting back and forth from the refrigerator, Bobbie says repeatedly, in a voice both wounded and insincere: "I thought we were friends." In this chilling scene of mechanical failure in a Stepford wife's spotless kitchen, we see the automatic woman, the ideal wife, as she truly is, as she was intended to be: one more appliance among others in a beautifully equipped house, of a piece with the gleaming toaster and the new fridge. She is both quintessentially archaic (a woman produced by Lustucru's smithy) and an unquestionably modern apparatus – woman retooled, updated, and instrumentalized as kitchen aid and sex gadget.

Doll-doubles and Domination

At the beginning of the film, Joanna, about to leave Manhattan for Connecticut, sees an incongruous sight, and takes out her camera in order to capture it on film: across the street, a man is carrying an unclothed female mannequin under his arm; her face is featureless and her eyes are covered by a swath. With hindsight, we see that this early scene combines foreshadowing and Sophoclean irony: *Stepford Wives* is a story about the disparity of knowledge-power between husbands and wives. In the city, sharp-witted Joanna notes the titillation, the peculiarity, of a man clasping a comely female dummy, but in Stepford she is too deceived to see the same thing all around her until it is too late. When Walter gets in the station wagon, preparing to push off for the suburb, his daughter tells him what they have seen: "Daddy, I just saw a man carrying a naked lady!" Without missing a beat, Walter replies with a double-entendre: "Well, that's why we're moving to Stepford" – they move both to get away from the tawdriness of Manhattan and to live Pygmalion's dream.

In one sense, the Stepford wives are not so much characters as ideas interacting: they are ciphers for female submission and deadening conformity. The film's presentation of the wives as dolls facilitates this, mobilizing the semantic weight of doll figures as inauthentic for the purposes of social criticism.[58] In the comi-tragic "supermarket quadrille" at the end of the film,[59] we see the wives identically outfitted in floor-length dresses, their flawless faces framed by large summer hats (figure 8.1). Shapely and tractable, the "compulsive *hausfraus*" are more akin to superficial mannequins than they are to well-rounded people, and this allows them to embody that "constriction of meaning" that characterizes the allegorical caricature's "transformation of the real into an abstraction." It has been said that "caricature is allegorical in essence, since it strives for the simplification of character in terms of single, predominant traits."[60] This allows the Stepford wives to depart from the well-rounded characters of realist convention in order to attain the striking iconographic legibility of personified ideas: the fembots are clueless and parochial, exempla of infantilized femininity, doll-like abstractions of Woman.

Stepford's open secret relies on the capacity of a marionette to convincingly "pass" for a woman. The conventional association between dolls and femininity is not owing to the fact that mannequins mirror women, but that women are expected to fashion themselves in accordance with prevailing notions of femininity, to come as close as possible to resembling the *idea* of Woman. In the film, when Joanna first confronts the automaton masquerading as Bobbie, the doll replies: "Nothing's got me. I just wanna look like a woman. And keep the house looking decent, too." The implication, of course, is that

Figure 8.1 Joanna's audio-animatronic double joins the other *hausfraus* in a "supermarket quadrille"
(*Stepford Wives*, dir. Bryan Forbes, prod. Edgar J. Scherick, 1974)

some women do not look like a Woman, that gender does not derive from natural essence but is an exacting performance, a life-work.

The men of Stepford betray a peculiar relation to essentialism. Essentialism is defined by Elizabeth Grosz as "the attribution of a fixed essence to women," the belief that particular traits and practices – "nurturance, empathy, support, non-competitiveness and the like" – are "given," "shared in common by all women at all times" so that a woman cannot "act in a manner contrary to her essence."[61] Although the men of Stepford fashion their new wives in the visage of essentialism, their motives for matrimonial homicide in the first place betray an anti-essentialist recognition that the women in their lives are *not* much inclined to housework and to entertaining their husbands' sexual whims. That is, the husbands' serial murders are a perverse acknowledgment of the distance and difference of real women from whatever the essentialized conception of them (the *hausfrau*) entails. The murders are the husbands' harshest possible response to undeniable evidence that their wives are not universal Woman, and, further, that their wives, sympathetic as they are to the women's movement, are openly critical of this essentialized conception of femininity. The epigraph to the novel, a quotation from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, drives home this point:

> Today the combat takes a different shape, instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavors to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence. Now the attitude of the males creates a new confict: *it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go*. (emphasis added)[62]

This epigraph suggests that the husbands of Stepford, in their palpable bad grace, their unwillingness to let go, pursue essentialism with bad faith. Although they realize that femininity is not inherent in women, this realization does not result in their abandoning essentialism, but in their insisting upon it. Thus they remake their singular wives into the same icon of womanliness; their Disneyland equivalent of the Mill of Old Wives grinds down difference to produce it as sameness. In these husbands, the Bluebeard *topos* of seriality, their signal lack of compunction toward the newcomers to whom they dispense the same death as their predecessors, is their staunchest expression of their desire to discipline gender difference into uniformity.

The doll-doubles of Stepford are a figuration for the husbands' complete subjection and annihilation of their erotic other. The thematic of domination has always been prominent in the Bluebeard tale, its apparent warnings against the foibles of feminine curiosity notwithstanding. Like *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), another horror film drawn from an Ira Levin novel, *Stepford Wives* features a heroine whose failure to triumph over those who conspire against her is rooted in her inability to distrust her husband until it is too late. In Polanski's film, Rosemary expresses no more than passing annoyance over the marital rape that leads to the conception of the monster in her womb; maternal instincts undo her, leading her to eschew her own convictions against Satanism and agree to raise the child of the devil because it is also her own. Rosemary never once considers leaving her husband, despite the fact that he's raped her, isolated her from her friends, and prohibited her from reading books or seeing doctors of her own choosing. Ultimately *Rosemary's Baby* is not a story of her husband's Faustian compact (the devil's bargain with a struggling actor) but of an entirely more commonplace contract between man and wife, which both Levin novels consider a form of conventional bondage. Only this unquestioned, naturalized marital domination could have allowed Rosemary to carry Satan's child to term, or enabled each wife in Stepford to collude in her own undoing by speaking the entirety of standard English vocabulary into a tape recorder at a man's request. Both films use the motif of devilish conspiracy to forge a cautionary fable about what Jessica Benjamin has called "the bonds of love":

> Obedience to the laws of civilization is first inspired, not by fear or prudence, Freud tells us, but by love, love for those early powerful figures who first demand obedience. Obedience, of course, does not exorcise aggression; it merely directs it against the self. There it becomes a means of self-domination . . . It is a problem that must be defined not simply in terms of aggression and civilized constraints, but as an extension of the bonds of love.[63]

Benjamin asks, "How is domination anchored in the hearts of the dominated?"[64] In other words, what are the erotic means of subsuming resistance? Her answer: obedience, defined by Benjamin as "self-domination," is "first inspired" by love.

In this light, *Stepford Wives* can be seen as an allegory for marital domination in the context of suburban life, a chilling tale of "how domination is anchored in the hearts of

the dominated." The Stepford wives have only been metaphorically murdered: the dolls are placeholders for their own utterly dominated selves, whittled into complete submission over the years (unlike the Bluebeard tale, the victims are not fresh brides but wives married about a decade) so that they no longer resemble the autonomous subjects they once were. Their city-to-suburbs move is a figure for a feminized movement away from a public or workplace life toward permanent retirement in the private sphere, a withdrawal into the atomized world of home-keeping and child-rearing, the contraction of the woman's previously wider social circle into the confines of the home or the parochial community.

This is what makes the Stepford wives as disturbing as they are ridiculous. On a literal level, the robotic Stepford wives are so many doubles for women, serial variants of the same sexually available, housework-inclined woman, a perverse simulacra of the women who are made equivalent by their death-transformation into the same mechanical wife. But if *Stepford Wives* has entered popular vocabulary as a cautionary fable for conformity, it is because its figure of feminine doubling, more than its reworking of the folkloric tales of serial *lustmord* (sex murder), hints that the heroines are not entirely antithetical to the compulsive *hausfraus* that replace them. Indeed, as Keppler suggests, the double as a second self is never wholly different from the first identity. Stepford sounds a note of admonition for women: not only to warn against male conspiracy but to counsel against conformity and complacent submission to the breadwinner, which marriage and economic wealth might encourage. (In Perrault's "Bluebeard" the young heroine, after having been wined and dined in grand manner at the monster's estate, agrees to marry him because his wherewithal has made her think that he "had not so very blue a beard after all.")[65]

Joanna and Bobbie are stay-at-home, married women very much in danger of becoming like the "*hausfraus*" they disparage: insular wives with no interests outside home and family. This common ground between the heroines and the *hausfraus* they so detest frames *Stepford Wives* as a story about the marital dynamics of a generation of upper-class, white women at the height of mainstream awareness of the women's movement in the United States. On this semantic register, *Stepford Wives* reads less like a Bluebeard tale about a man's capacity to turn on his wife, and more like an object lesson on how, for aggregated reasons, women enable their own subjection.

In Forbes's film, Joanna's death at the hands of her mechanical double (figure 8.2) is rendered via a shot/reverse-shot: to her horror, the heroine's gaze discloses the monster to be another self. This may be read allegorically as a metaphor for a woman's banal marital demise, a figuration for her succumbing to tendencies in herself which collude in her own oppression, in exchange for creature comforts and male companionship. The novel contrasts the wealthy, duped women of Stepford with an outsider, a working woman named Mary who can see at first glance that the Men's Association is the culprit in the town, changing women's quality of life for the worse: "If my old man was alive he'd have to knock me on the head before I'd let him join!,"[66] she cries, highlighting by contrast the avowed feminists' deference to their husbands, whose membership of the Men's Association they protested against but nevertheless accepted.

Figure 8.2 In the film version, Joanna (above) meets her doom at the hands of her double (below)
(*Stepford Wives*, dir. Bryan Forbes, prod. Edgar J. Scherick, 1974)

The story of Stepford's Bluebeard husbands, tyrannical spouses who do away with their wives in the name of forcing them to submit to their will, does seem to be an allegory for what Benjamin incisively calls the "undertow" of the master–slave dynamic of domination in "'ordinary' intimate relationships."[67] But, in light of her discussion of domination, the question we are prompted to ask of the Stepford husbands is why they should find the lifelessness, inhumanity, and complete numbing obedience of their wives so pleasurable; where is Benjamin's expectation of the master who, having utterly destroyed his partner by bending her to his will, feels a terrible pang of isolation?[68]

To my mind, there are two ways to consider this question in *Stepford Wives*: first, the narrative may be understood as an allegory for the numbing interpersonal dynamics of marriages in which complementarity has given way to a polarization of power. Such a reading would suggest that *Stepford Wives* is too simple a figuration of erotic domination, and Bluebeard, who searched repeatedly for a female other rather than taking up with a corpse, counts as a more textured rendering of how the wife as erotic other can become dehumanized by patriarchal husbands. Lewis writes of Bluebeard's loneliness as an erotic tyrant: "Yet insofar as, lifeless, they [his dead wives] cannot furnish him the active recognition he sought to secure from wifely obedience, his relation to them leads to the disappointment that rekindles his search for satisfaction through marriage."[69]

One might, however, take another view, and see *Stepford Wives* as a categorical departure from the Bluebeard tale: while the folkloric killer may have disposed of his wives, he never took up residence with a sex doll. The fact that the husbands in Stepford do not seem to have any misgivings about taking a lifeless object for a life-long erotic companion suggests that for these men their wives were never fully people in the first place. Personhood, otherness, recognition, and assertion were never things they desired from women because their wives were never, in their eyes, social agents: their social others, those they engaged in the dialectic of mutuality, were other men. In the novel, Joanna expresses surprise that Dale "Diz" Coba worked at Disneyland because "You don't look like someone who enjoys making people happy." To this Diz replies coldly, "How little you know."[70] In the face of his repetitious brutality against women, Diz can only earnestly maintain that he enjoys making people happy if he has never seen a woman as a person in the first place. The serial-killing husbands' dehumanizing logic of misogyny is the secret of Stepford's bloody chamber. The compulsive *hausfraus* of Stepford are, in fact, the remains of the women they resemble in their husbands' eyes, always-already less than human, always-already a means to be mastered and instrumentalized. This is the secret that the wives of Stepford, each in her turn, preserves by embodying.

Paranoia in the Town that Time Forgot

> "Something fishy is going on here! We're in the Town that Time Forgot!"
>
> Bobbie, *after* abortive attempts at women's organizing in Stepford.[71]

The Bluebeard tale has often been framed as a diatribe against female curiosity, but, insofar as the heroine survives *despite* her inquisitiveness, "Bluebeard" and its variants may be seen to uphold the generative effects of female suspicion. (Curiosity, I would argue, is collocated with suspicion and paranoia due to their shared semantic element: inquisitiveness is prompted by a felt imbalance in knowledge that one seeks to rectify.) Indeed, one may well argue that Joanna and her predecessors die in Stepford, as Bluebeard's wife did not, because they did not exhibit enough of the latter's incorrigible curiosity. Bluebeard's wife knew enough to fear her husband and called out to her sister to ask whether rescue was on its way; but all the Stepford wives except for Joanna do not think to suspect their husbands, to their own great loss.

Terrified and paranoid, but nonetheless stout-hearted and resourceful, Joanna in *Stepford Wives* shares a certain kinship with the female victim-hero of horror and exploitation films, the protagonist that Carol Clover calls the Final Girl. The hold of the Final Girl on the feminist imagination has everything to do with (as Clover put it) this figure's nuanced embodiment of women's anger as well as their fear. Clover is correct to posit the Final Girl's debt to the mainstreaming of feminist discourses: "the female victim-hero['s] . . . status in both roles has indeed been enabled by 'women's liberation.' Feminism, that is, has given a language to her victimization and a new force to the anger that subsidizes her own act of horrific revenge."[72] The heroine-victim is evidence of the historical malleability of even the most rigidly and normatively gendered genres: the woman's movement is troped in the horror heroine's indignation at her vulnerability in the face of attack, and in her concomitant resolve to empower herself and turn the tables on her persecutor.

Clover's Final Girl, "the one who did not die," is an admixture of qualities. As the last remaining survivor of an horrific ordeal – the slasher film, like the plot of serial homicide in *Stepford*, is a longevity narrative powered by an engine of relentless attrition – the Final Girl has survived the longest and learned the most, and as such is more intensely terrified than any other character. She is a wellspring of resourcefulness and slumbering strength, which, once unleashed, vanquishes the monster through means more violent than his own (think of Ripley in the *Alien* tetralogy, or the heroine of the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [Tobe Hooper, 1974]). As grim as her nemesis, yet exhibiting extreme vulnerability and paranoia, the Final Girl is quintessentially a shaken woman brandishing a chainsaw. (In *Stepford Wives*, Joanna bests her husband with a ski pole.)

For Halberstam, the Final Girl survives primarily because of her "productive fear:"

> [I]t is precisely the fear of being watched, the consciousness that she may be being watched, that saves the woman and allows her to look back. The women who are not worried about being watched within the horror film very often die; the alternative to paranoia in horror films very often is nothing more than a gullibility and a kind of stupid naiveté.[73]

The productive paranoia that Halberstam reads in the Final Girl is thus a specific articulation of the kind of fruitful disquiet that is often present in grim fantastic narratives. But Halberstam has incisively shown how, in an era profoundly affected by feminism, such necessary apprehension, in a woman, becomes charged with cautious knowledge about a strong woman's precarious footing in patriarchal society.

The panic-stricken heroine of *Stepford Wives* exhibits the Final Girl's feminist paranoia, her productive, life-preserving fear, and her folkloric cunning. Why, then, does she die? Why does she not, like her cousins in folklore or in the slasher film, counter

her husband's death-artistry with a symmetrical escape-artistry? I believe Joanna's undoing lies in her inability to grasp the nonsynchronism of patriarchial dynamics: she disparages the Stepford wives and husbands as anachronistic, failing to appreciate the contradictions which make it possible to be both nostalgic and fully in the present (in the case of the husbands), simultaneously modern women and old-fashioned *hausfraus* (in the case of the wives). Like Bobbie, who calls Stepford "the Town that Time Forgot" (Bobbie, even more paranoid than Joanna, like her, fails to survive), Joanna sees the Men's Association and their docile wives as relics of the past. In one scene in the film, Joanna tries to convince a Stepford wife to come to their women's group meeting:

> JOANNA: Doesn't it bother you that the most important organization in Stepford is sexually archaic?
> MARIE: Archaic?
> BOBBIE: Old fashioned! Out of date!
> MARIE: Does it ever bother me? . . . No, it doesn't.

The word "archaic" has a special importance in the film: in the climactic scene between Bobbie and Joanna, Joanna's stabbing of her friend is preceded by her realization that Bobbie no longer knows what "archaic" means. "It's not on the word list, is it?" says Joanna, realizing. For Joanna and the narration, this lapse of vocabulary is telling because it means that the insipid wives in Stepford do not know what they themselves are: sexually archaic, exponents of old-fashioned, out-of-date sexual roles. In the novel, Joanna is surprised to note that the Men's Association is not, in fact, a traditional institution, but an organization newer than the women's club, not yet seven years old. Joanna is mistaken to conceive of the husbands as a simple anachronism, for in their nonsynchronous deployment of technological wizardry in the service of nostalgia, and in the nascence of their response to the contemporary women's movement, they are, in fact, a pernicious social force in the present. In their historicist derision of the Men's Association, our heroines fail to see that patriarchal discourses are never simply retrograde, that modernity does not always only banish, but can often collude with, differing historical forms of misogyny.

In the late seventeenth century, Charles Perrault appended a campy moral to "Bluebeard," one which worked to undermine the warnings against feminine curiosity that the tale was often understood to provide:

> If one takes a sensible point of view
> And studies this grim story,
> He will recognize that this tale
> Is one of days long past.
> No longer is the husband so terrifying,
> Demanding the impossible,
> Being both dissatisfied and jealous;
> In the presence of his wife he is now gracious enough,
> And no matter what colour his beard may be
> One does not have to guess who is master![74]

In this reflexive, self-ironic epilogue, Perrault shifts the emphasis from moralizing to temporalizing. The narrator tells us that "overbearing husbands" like Bluebeard, and their harsh "abuse of male privilege,"[75] no longer exist: there is, then, no longer any need to revisit this outdated cautionary fable regarding women's vulnerability in marriage. As one scholar remarks, in Perrault's "historicizing commentary," the moral "no longer claims to apprehend the sense of the events; rather, from its transcendental standpoint it claims only its anachronism, its complete obsolescence."[76] Yet along with twentieth-century serial killers and other inheritors of the Bluebeard narrative structure, *Stepford Wives* belies Perrault's droll insistence that patriarchal domination in marriage is a thing of the past. Rather, *Stepford Wives* as a Bluebeard narrative conveys the nonsynchronous texture of gender norms, a field of contestation characterized not by obsolescence, but by a discontinuous collocation of essentialism, feminism, and patriarchal rejoinders to the women's movement.

Halberstam has insightfully commented that the horror audience often "worries that what it consumes will later consume it."[77] Indeed, despite three decades' distance from the novel and the film, "Stepford" continues to command immediate legibility as a cipher for "narrow self-definition" and "dim conformity," invoked as a warning against Martha Stewart fans, planned communities, and the fitness-obsessed, upper-class culture of certain gay communities. One acerbic critic writes: "contemporary gay life and lifestyle is total Stepford;"[78] another notes: "It didn't take long for the term 'Stepford Wife' to go into the lexicon as shorthand for a clueless, zombie-like lady of leisure with an empty head."[79]

Stepford Wives is more than an indictment against retrograde male malevolence: it is a memorable warning against historically tenacious forms of internalized domination and upper-class complacency. Its nightmare vision is not easily shaken off, which may account for its longevity in the popular imagination. Like Perrault's moral to "Bluebeard," *Stepford Wives* begins by framing patriarchy as a throwback to less sexually enlightened times, but I have argued that it ends by insinuating the nonsynchronous tenacity of sexual oppression. Erotic domination subtends the essentializing logic of serial murder and is well served by its fatalistic temporality; as the Stepford fembots demonstrate, it thrives in futuristic fantasies nostalgic for feminine marionettes.

Acknowledgment

I am extremely grateful to Bibi Tinio for her illuminating comments on an earlier version of the essay that forms this chapter.

1 Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1972), pp. 17–19.

2 See Ernst Bloch, "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to its Dialectics (1932)," *New German Critique* 11 (Spring 1977): 22. For a fuller discussion of my reformulation of this term, see Bliss Cua Lim, "Spectral Times: The Ghost-film as Historical Allegory," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 9 (2) (Fall 2001), 287–329.

3 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny (1919)," in James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17 (1917–1919) "An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works" (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 247.

4 By historicism, I mean a linear, universal, and evolutionary view of history. Dipesh Chakrabarty defines historicism as "the idea that things develop in historical time, that this time is empty and homogeneous, that history is layered and contains what Marx called the 'unvanquished remnants of the past' . . . [It] consists in a very particular understanding of the question of contemporaneity: the idea that things from different historical periods can exist in the same time (the so-called simultaneity of the non-simultaneous) but belong to different worlds. Thus we may have a 'medieval' object before us, but it is [a] relic from a past world that is no longer there. One could, in historicism, look at peasants in the same way: as survivals from a dead world." Chakrabarty underscores the pernicious ethical implications of historicism: it enables one to deny the contemporaneousness of others, positioning them as backward or anachronistic. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Time of History and the Times of the Gods," in Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (eds), *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 48–50.

5 Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966), trans. Alice Jardine, Thomas Gora, and Leon S. Roudiez, in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 36–7.

6 M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, in Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 291.

7 Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 204.

8 Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," p. 37.

9 Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," p. 293.

10 Dudley Andrew, "Adaptation," in James Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 31.

11 Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," in James Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 54.

12 See, for example, Henry Jenkins, "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching," in C. Penley et al. (eds), *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 171–204.

13 Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," pp. 273–4.

14 Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," pp. 36–7.

15 Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 10–11.

16 Charles Perrault's and Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier's versions in the 1690s, the Grimms' in 1810, and the operas of Maurice Maeterlinck/Paul Dukas and Béla Bartók in the early twentieth century, to name a few. See Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1994), p. 268.

17 Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 241.

18 Ibid., p. 269.

19 Casie Hermansson, "Reflecting Revision: Bluebeard and the Uncanny," paper presented at a panel on "The Uncanny in Contemporary Horror" at the Eighteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, Fort Lauderdale, March 19, 1997, p. 2.

20 Philip Lewis, *Seeing Through the Mother Goose Tales: Visual Turns in the Writings of Charles Perrault* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 198.

21 "*Pour ce petit cabinet, je vous défends d'y entrer, et je vous le défends de telle sorte, que s'il vous arrive de l'ouvrir, il n'y a rien que vous ne deviez attendre de ma colère.*" Charles Perrault, *Contes*, ed. Marc Soriano (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), p. 258, trans. by and quoted in Lewis, *Seeing Through the Mother Goose Tales*, pp. 207–8.

22 Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 244.

23 Charles Perrault, "Blue Beard," in *Perrault's Complete Fairy Tales*, trans. A. E. Johnson et al. (London: Penguin, 1961), p. 73.

24 James M. McGlathery, *Fairy Tale Romance: The Grimms, Basile, and Perrault* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 71.

25 Marina Warner, *The Absent Mother, or Women Against Women in the "Old Wives' Tales"*, lecture delivered as Tinbergen Professor at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, Faculty of Societal History and Study of the Arts, on January 18, 1991 (Hilversum: Verloren, 1991), pp. 38–9.

26 "[F]eminism and the fairytale have been strongly associated . . . in the writings of the French 'prècieuses' Cathèrine d'Aulnoy, Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve, and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, who all campaigned in their different ways for women's greater independence, and against arranged marriages through their fairytales." Warner, *Absent Mother*, p. 23.

27 Stepford was not explicitly identified as Connecticut in Levin's novel; the specificity of setting is something injected by director Bryan Forbes, who shot the film in Westport, Connecticut. When interviewed, Forbes maintained, "I didn't shoot in any sets at all. I didn't build any sets. That's Connecticut – the white picket fences, the manicured lawns, etc. etc. I wanted to keep that normality." *The Stepford Life: Interviews with Director Bryan Forbes, Producer Edgar J. Sherick, and Stars Katharine Ross, Paula Prentiss, Nanette Newman and Peter Masterson* (dir. David Gregory, 2001), *The Stepford Wives* Silver Anniversary Edition DVD (dist. Anchor Bay Entertainment, Inc., 2001).

28 Levin, *The Stepford Wives*, pp. 12–13.

29 Ibid., p. 22.

30 Ibid., pp. 70–1.

31 Susan Brownmiller writes: "I wasn't among them, but according to a gossipy report in the *New York Times*, Betty Friedan, the mother of us all, walked out in a huff, and Lois Gould, whose novel 'Such Good Friends' had been a 1971 screen hit, pronounced it 'junk.' Rattling her sabers in the *New Yorker*, the rambunctious film critic Pauline Kael, no friend of feminism, took an opposite tack and eviscerated 'Stepford' with words like 'boobish' and 'cruddy' in a passionate defense of hardworking, misunderstood men." See Susan Brownmiller,

"Domestic Engineering: A Feminist Deconstructs *The Stepford Wives*," AMC About the Movies (available at http://amc.thoughtbubble.com/about/stepfordwives1.html).

32 Levin, *The Stepford Wives*, p. 102.

33 For Tzvetan Todorov, the fantastic appears in the instant when one nearly believes, but does not fully believe; when one nearly rejects, without entirely dismissing, that event which scandalizes one's frames of reference. In his view, hesitation lies at the core of the fantastic: "'I nearly reached the point of believing': that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life." Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 31.

34 Hermansson, "Reflecting Revision," pp. 2–3.

35 Ibid., p. 2.

36 Lewis, *Seeing Through the Mother Goose Tales*, pp. 213–14.

37 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 78–9, 96–7.

38 Johannes Fabian, "Of Dogs Alive, Birds Dead, and Time to Tell a Story," in John Bender and David E. Wellbery (eds), *Chronotypes: The Construction of Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 192.

39 Lewis, *Seeing Through the Mother Goose Tales*, p. 212.

40 Mark Seltzer astutely remarks that the emergence of the category "serial killer" in the mid-1970s is a "naming event" possessed of "its own internal 'torque.' It involves the positing of a category or type of person as a sort of point of attraction around which a range of acts, effects, fantasies and representations then begin to orbit." One aspect of the serial-killer profile with which actual serial killers have come to "over-identify" is the notion of "abnormal normality." One self-confessed serial killer described himself as "an average-looking person with a family, job, and home, just like yourself." In popular discourses on the serial killer, it is this typicality, this "sheer ordinariness," that makes the idea of serial killers so unnerving. Mark Seltzer, "The Serial Killer as a Type of Person," in Ken Gelder (ed.), *The Horror Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 97–9.

41 Max Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*, trans. Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald, introduction by Francis Lee Utley (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 30.

42 Levin, *The Stepford Wives*, pp. 113, 131.

43 For Warner, folktales are distinguished by their cautionary fatalism. See Warner, *Absent Mother*, pp. 18–19.

44 A character's internal monologue in the guise of narrator's discourse, for example, "Was she dreaming?" See Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

45 Keppler argues that fate opposes "Timelessness to Time" – fatalism refutes an understanding of time as simple forward progression. For him, fatalistic time is a nonsynchronous "all-at-onceness." C. F. Keppler, *The Literature of the Second Self* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1972), pp. 196–8.

46 William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* (New York: Warner Books, 1983), pp. 203–7 (available at http://www.gynoid.com/goldman.htm).

47 Elizabeth Grosz, "Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism (1989)," in *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 50–3.

48 Marina Warner, "Women Against Women in the Old Wives' Tale," in Duncan Petrie (ed.), *Cinema and the Realms of Enchantment* (London: British Film Institute, 1993).

49 Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 29. See p. 28 for an eighteenth-century rendering: a woodcut from Normandy showing the Skull Doctor at work in his smithy.

50 Ibid., pp. 43–4. See p. 43 for a nineteenth-century Danish woodcut of the Mill of Old Wives.

51 Levin, *The Stepford Wives*, p. 153.

52 Ibid., pp. 146–7.

53 Ibid., p. 162.

54 E. B. Daniels, "Nostalgia: Experiencing the Elusive," in Don Ihde and Hugh J. Silverman (eds), *Descriptions* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp. 77–8.

55 Eric Smoodin, "Introduction: How to Read Walt Disney," in Eric Smoodin (ed.), *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1, 10.

56 Ibid., p. 10.

57 Robert De Roos, "The Magic Worlds of Walt Disney (1963)," in Eric Smoodin (ed.), *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, reprinted from *National Geographic*, August 1963, pp. 159–207 (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 65–6.

58 On the doll as a metaphor for subjective inauthenticity and lack of autonomy, see my article, "Dolls in Fragments: *Daisies* as Feminist Allegory," *Camera Obscura* 47 16.2 (Fall 2001), 37–77.

59 Brownmiller, "Domestic Engineering," n.p.

60 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), pp. 32–4.

61 Grosz, "Sexual Difference," p. 48.

62 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, quoted in Levin, *The Stepford Wives*, p. 5.

63 Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), p. 5.

64 Ibid.

65 Perrault, "Blue Beard," p. 71.

66 Levin, *The Stepford Wives*, p. 79.

67 Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, p. 65.

68 For Benjamin, human relationships are characterized by a dialectic of assertion and recognition; when the relations are mutual, these two terms exist in a reciprocal balance. Domination is the opposite of mutuality: it is the polarization of these two terms, so that one partner in the dynamic exhibits pure assertion (the master) while the other exists only to recognize him (the slave). Domination and submission are a breakdown of necessary tension between self-assertion and mutual recognition that allows self and other to meet as equals. Domination, in polarizing assertion and recognition, dehumanizes the person who only ever submits; the master finds the recognition, however total, to be unsatisfying because it does not emerge from a true other. The complete dependency and recognition-without-assertion of the slave dehumanizes her; on his part, the master finds himself acutely alone "because the person he is with is no person at all." Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, p. 53.

69 Lewis, *Seeing Through the Mother Goose Tales*, p. 211.

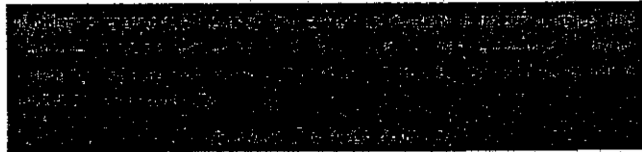
70 Levin, *The Stepford Wives*, p. 53.

71 Ibid., p. 42.
72 Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, p. 4.
73 Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 124–7.
74 Perrault, "Blue Beard," p. 78.
75 Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 244.
76 Winfried Menninghaus, *In Praise of Nonsense: Kant and Bluebeard*, trans. Henry Pickford (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 69.
77 Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 159.
78 Tim Teeman, "Down with the Stepford Gays," *New Statesman* 129/128: 4427 (March 12, 1999), 23–4 (available at http://newfirstsearch.oclc.org). For other examples of Stepford's valence in popular media, see Christina Shea, "Planned Communities: The Good Life or Stepford Revisited?," *USA Today* (September 1999) (available at http://newfirstsearch.oclc.org).
79 Brownmiller, "Domestic Engineering," n.p.

Chapter 9

Boyz N the Hood Chronotopes: Spike Lee, Richard Price, and the Changing Authorship of *Clockers*

Paula J. Massood



In the closing scene of Spike Lee's *Clockers* (1995), Strike Dunham – the film's young, ulcer-prone protagonist – escapes from the life-threatening dangers of urban life. In the film's final frames we witness both an emigration and a migration as Strike concurrently leaves behind his past and heads toward a more promising future. This in and of itself is neither new nor innovative. We are familiar with Hollywood's happy endings, designed to let audiences walk out of the theater with a satisfying feeling of narrative closure. The way the scene is shot adds to its redemptive qualities: infused with a golden light, Strike heads into the sunset before the screen fades to black.

In a variety of press releases and interviews, Lee stated that he wanted *Clockers* to be more than just another "hood" film: what he referred to as the "black gangster, hip-hop shoot-'em-up . . . drug genre."[2] One of Lee's primary concerns was to differentiate *Clockers* from hood films such as John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and the Hughes Brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993), films with similar subject matter and settings. As Lee stated after the film's release, "It was always our intention that if we succeeded with this film, that this might be the final nail in the coffin and African-American filmmakers would try telling new stories."[3] While *Clockers* is wholly self-conscious of, and reliant upon, the hood films immediately preceding it, the film occupies a different