

Gaslight, Gaslighting, and the Gothic Romance Film

During the months immediately preceding and following Donald Trump's election as U.S. president, the term "gaslighting" suddenly and unexpectedly became a buzzword. The expression appeared repeatedly in the press in relation to Trump's denial of verifiable public information, including his own documented statements (see, e.g. Dominus 2016; Duca 2016; Ghitis 2017). The term derives from Patrick Hamilton's (1939) Victorian stage play *Gas Light*,¹ made popular in the United States through its second film version,² George Cukor's 1944 *Gaslight* (Hornblow and Cukor). Although differing in their details, in both narratives a thief who is trying to locate and steal some jewels inherited by his unsuspecting young wife tries to make her doubt her own sanity by, among other tactics, refusing to corroborate her observation that the gaslights are dimming, a result of his turning them up in the attic to search there. "Gaslighting"³ actually entered the vernacular in the 1960s, when psychologists began using the expression to describe an extreme form of psychological abuse whose goal was to control the victim's mind through fear and terror (Jacobson and Gottman 1998). The significance of gaslighting comes not simply from its strategy of deception but also from its pernicious intent and effect: to make the victim doubt his/her own perceptions and, ultimately, question his/her sense of reality.⁴

Gaslight is in multiple ways the urtext of Hollywood representations of domestic violence. The film is pathbreaking because of its focus on intimate partner violence in an era in which it was, if not totally unrecognized, considered a private matter. It is equally important because of

its compelling portrait of abuse as psychological, emotional, and verbal at a time when it was defined as solely physical. Indeed, notwithstanding its Victorian setting and Second World War release, *Gaslight* offers a more expansive view of domestic violence than many contemporary films through its uncharacteristically detailed representation of the various insidious types of non-physical abuse. The film takes up the setting, themes, and cinematic conventions of the Gothic romance⁵ and the larger category of the “woman’s film” (Doane 1987; Gledhill 1987), with mixed repercussions. Through its empathetic use of first-person visual and auditory point of view, for example, *Gaslight* powerfully depicts an abused woman’s experience of her husband’s behavior as erratic and enigmatic, domestic space as threatening, and her own perceptions as unreliable. Most notable is the film’s dénouement, which features a reversal where the victim takes revenge on her abuser, a moment of private justice that anticipates the more escalated postfeminist resolutions of later domestic violence films.

The tensions and contradictions that structure contemporary domestic violence films can also be traced to *Gaslight*. The film reveals the abuser as an obsessed criminal, situating him outside the bounds of normality and distancing abuse from normative patriarchal dominance. Further, *Gaslight* sends in a hero who not only rescues the victim but whose presence as a possible romantic partner implicates the woman for having chosen a “monster” as a mate, thus affirming what Diane Waldman (1983) refers to as “the wrong man’ ideology” (p. 37). Through these seductive tropes the film creates its own larger gaslight effect, sending distorted, potentially damaging messages to its audience about abuse, abusers, and victim/survivors.

This chapter examines *Gaslight* as an index of the growing awareness of, as well as ambivalent attitudes toward, male partner abuse of women in the mid-twentieth century. The first section of the chapter situates the film in relationship to particular variations of the Gothic romance, including the narrative and ideological pathways this genre opens and forecloses. The second section analyzes the film’s representation of domestic violence, in particular the specific strategies of verbal and psychological abuse implemented by the abuser. The final part of the chapter summarizes *Gaslight*’s larger implications as a precursor of contemporary domestic violence films.

GASLIGHT AND THE GOTHIC ROMANCE

The Gothic romance film⁶ takes its tropes and themes from its nineteenth-century Victorian literary predecessor, the Gothic novel. In the typical Gothic narrative a young woman meets and hastily marries a charming, frequently older, man who carries her off to his or her (usually remote) family mansion. What ensues within this space is a series of strange, ambiguous events that cause the heroine to doubt her husband's love and/or his identity, eventually leading her to believe that he may be a criminal or even a murderer, and that she herself is in danger. If the central image of the Gothic, as Norman Holland and Leona Sherman (1977) suggest, is "woman-plus-habitation" (p. 279), its primary thematic is "marrying a stranger" (Waldman 1983: p. 31). Tania Modleski (1984) summarizes the dilemma that this creates in the Gothic heroine, who "tries to convince herself that her suspicions are unfounded, that, since she loves him, he must be trustworthy and that she will have failed as a woman if she does not implicitly believe in him" (p. 59). Modleski's comments intersect with narratives of abused women, who speak of trying to sustain their love and trust in their partner despite the abuse: as one survivor/victim put it, "A loving woman like myself always hopes that it will not happen again" (as cited in Martin 1976: p. 4).

The Gothic romance film came into prominence as a Hollywood genre in the early 1940s and follows the formula of the Gothic novel in its setting as well as its focus on two interrelated issues: uncertainty about the male partner's behavior, and thus his "true" nature, and the woman's powers of perception and/or interpretation. These elements of the Gothic romance film explain its association with the "woman's film," described by Mary Ann Doane (1987) in her influential text *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* as a film addressed to women spectators that focuses on problems traditionally defined as "female," such as domestic life, marriage, reproduction and children (p. 3). For Doane, the defining characteristic of the woman's film is its foregrounding of female perspective through a range of point-of-view techniques (e.g. first-person voice-over, point-of-view shots, sound perspective) along with music, close-ups, and reaction shots that encourage the spectator to sympathize with the female protagonist. Thus the techniques of the Gothic romance film, or what Doane also refers to as the "paranoid woman's film" (p. 123), emphasize the conflicts between love and

suspicion, belief and (mis)perception as experienced by the female protagonist. It is the atmosphere of mistrust of an ostensibly loving partner and entrapment within domestic space created in these films that make them particularly effective vehicles for the representation of non-physical intimate partner violence.

Both Doane and Waldman observe that the Gothic romance film overlaps with the conventions of other genres. Doane comments, “The paranoid gothic films exhibit a special kinship with the suspense film but also, perhaps even more importantly in this context, with the genre of the horror film. The horror film intensifies and structures its affect of fear by positioning a female character as the one who looks and who ultimately unveils the terror-inciting monster” (1987: pp. 140–141). Thus, for Doane, at the center of the Gothics is the women’s relationship to the gaze, which psychoanalytic film theorists have argued is the signifier par excellence of subjectivity in classical Hollywood cinema.⁷ Doane proposes that the paranoid Gothic films appropriate the woman’s look, disallowing spectatorship, an operation that serves as a kind of metacommentary on the woman’s film and the very possibility of the woman as subject within the social and psychic parameters of patriarchy.⁸ Yet, when considering the significance of the Gothic we should not let the general implications of the genre for female subjectivity obscure the Gothic’s particularity as a narrative of domestic violence per se. Confusion about male behavior, the feeling that her partner is a “stranger,” the destabilization of home and its subsequent loss as a safe haven, uncertainty about her own perceptions: all resonate in an acute and specific way for women who experience intimate partner violence.

Waldman identifies two different types of Gothic romance films corresponding to two different periods during the 1940s, a time of significant role redefinition for women due in part to their wartime entry into the workforce. Pre-Second World War Gothics, she observes, commonly resolve the question of the meaning of the man’s behavior by ultimately refuting the female protagonist’s perception that she is being rejected or threatened by her husband. A provocative example of this type of closure is provided by the (1941) film *Suspicion* (Edington and Hitchcock), which openly thematizes the question of the heroine Lina’s (Joan Fontaine) perception through the use of ambiguous camera shots that may—or may not—suggest that her husband Johnnie (Cary Grant) is trying to kill her.⁹ In the final scene, Johnnie confesses to the lesser sin

of lying to his wife and succeeds at the last minute in regaining her trust. Through this too-easy conclusion, *Suspicion* clears the way for a happy ending in the form of the restoration of the patriarchal family, rejecting the film's initial proposition that an apparently normal husband could intentionally harm his wife. Waldman notes the negative implications of this narrative twist in which "the male character 'corrects' the heroine's false impressions" and the emphasis on female point of view is ultimately used against the woman (1983: p. 33). Waldman further observes that, in the film, "moody, scornful, cruel and sadistic behavior is thematized as problematic for women, but it is eventually naturalized as simply part of being male, in fact evidence of the man's love for the heroine" (p. 34). In this way, *Suspicion* attempts (not completely successfully, judging from the reactions of audiences and critics as well as director Alfred Hitchcock himself¹⁰) to capitalize on our desire to believe, until the bitter end, that the man is devoted; in other words, the film proceeds to recover the abuser. Clearly, Cary Grant's charming leading man persona is a factor in determining what is recoverable, even adorable, in this film: if Grant is an abusive murderer, then anyone can be, a tenet that the film definitively refuses. *Suspicion* thereby perpetuates an ideology, one that is ubiquitous in Western popular culture, of love as "bruising but tender passion" (Jones 1994: p. 115), creating a context in which romance is completely compatible with manipulation and the threat of violence.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN *GASLIGHT*

Waldman argues that a significant shift takes place from pre-war films such as *Suspicion* to the Gothics of the war and post-war period. *Gaslight* is a prime example of these later Gothic romance films,¹¹ which validate female perception and expose the threatening husband. In *Gaslight*, Paula Alquist (Ingrid Bergman), a young, romantically-inexperienced woman, meets Gregory Anton (Charles Boyer), an older, passionate pianist who rushes her into marriage and convinces her to return to the London residence where she was raised by her aunt, Alice Alquist, a famous opera singer who was mysteriously murdered there when Paula was a young girl. What neither Paula nor the audience know is that Gregory is in fact Sergius Bauer, Alice Alquist's former suitor and murderer. After Paula returns to her aunt's house she is sequestered there by Gregory, who claims to do so at first because he wants to prolong their honeymoon and later because he is concerned for her welfare, but

who in fact wants to find and steal Alice Alquist's jewels. The infamous dimming of the lights that gives the film its title, along with the "disappearance" of certain objects (a brooch, a painting, a watch), which is then blamed on Paula, suggest that it is Gregory's manipulation of Paula's physical environment that ultimately leads her to doubt her own sanity. However, these elements and her vulnerability to them are prepared and compounded by Gregory's constant insinuations about her deteriorating mental state.¹² Significantly, in *Gaslight*, it is Gregory's efforts to undermine Paula's confidence in her own perceptual and cognitive abilities that take up most of the screen time.

Gregory's behavior correlates to and makes transparent the mechanisms of verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse as reported in domestic violence literature. Narratives by and about victim/survivors of abuse attest to the fact that abusers often cloak their abuse as innocent commentary and/or reverse it midstream so as not to be called out, in the process planting a seed of doubt in the woman about his trustworthiness, but also, most importantly, about her own judgment. As noted, non-physical abuse in its most severe form of gaslighting attempts to undermine the women's sense of her self, her confidence in her ability to "see" clearly, and so act autonomously. In *When Men Batter Women: New Insights into Ending Abusive Relationships* (1998), Neil Jacobson and John Gottman relate one victim/survivor's experience of gaslighting:

I began to believe that all of my girlfriends, people that I had been close to or trusted as confidants for years, were either sluts, evil, or stupid. I gradually took on these opinions as if they were my own, and after a while lost all of my friends. He never really told me that I couldn't see them, but he was so effective at convincing me that they were slime that I didn't want to see them. So, soon I had no friends, and I didn't feel that I could directly blame my husband for that. But I came to feel like it was just the two of us, alone on a desert island. I was as lonely as I would have been if we were the only two people on the planet. (p. 152)

As Jacobson and Gottman note, what stands out in this woman's account is how subtly and insidiously gaslighting operates and how it both stems from and compounds isolation, separating the victim/survivor from everything outside the batterer's world. What is perhaps most harmful about gaslighting is that it makes the abused woman more dependent on the abuser.

In *Gaslight*, Gregory's initially subtle manipulation of Paula manifests itself early on, when he reiterates his wish to marry her. Citing the fact that she does not know anything about him because they have only known each other for two weeks, a narrative element that aligns with the Gothic's marrying-a-stranger theme,¹³ she hesitates and says that she must go to Italy to spend time by herself, "just to know what I'm doing, just to be sure." Gregory reluctantly but graciously accedes to Paula's wishes. However, as Paula prepares to disembark from the train at Lake Como, the camera tracks in to frame her in the compartment window and a hand reaches from off-screen left and slowly grips her arm. The ominous moment, enhanced by the musical soundtrack, quickly passes as the camera reframes to reveal Gregory, who asks, "You aren't angry with me?" preempting any protest from Paula. She hesitates for a moment but then surrenders to his embrace, saying she would have sent for him anyway. In this scene, Paula's position as the object of surveillance by, in Doane's (1987) terms, an unseen and hence unreturnable male gaze provides a preview of Gregory's all-pervasive coercive control and of the eventual subordination of her will to his.

The extent to which Gregory takes advantage of Paula's emotional vulnerability and genuine desire to please the man she loves becomes even more evident in a subsequent scene where he gets her to return to the house she has inherited on Thornton Square, already established through dialogue and background music as a "house of horror" for Paula because it is the location of her aunt's murder. Here, Gregory shows himself to be a master of manipulation through suggestion in a way that foreshadows his complete dominance of the domestic sphere and of Paula. He initiates a discussion of where they will live and casually mentions his fantasy of having a home of his own "in one of those quiet houses in the little London squares," but is careful to defer to Paula. When she admits that there is such a house, Gregory protests that he could not ask her to return there. In a surge of loving self-sacrifice, Paula insists, "Yes, yes, you shall have your dream, you shall have your house in a square."

The women-plus-habitation focus of the Gothic novel is taken up in Gothic cinema on the level of representation through the film's images and the spatial relationships they construct. *Gaslight* epitomizes the Gothic romance film in its visual foregrounding of the mysterious space the heroine inhabits, undermining the idea of the domestic realm as a secure one for women and, on a larger level, potentially opening up to scrutiny the patriarchal institution of marriage. In *Gaslight*, the house

in Thornton Square is established as threatening through the choice of music, camera position and angle, low-key and high contrast lighting, and character movement.¹⁴ In the scene where Paula and Gregory prepare to enter the house for the first time as husband and wife, suspenseful music rises on the soundtrack and the front door creaks loudly as it is unlocked. Taking Paula and Gregory's point of view, the camera hesitates on the threshold for a moment before moving cautiously into the darkened space, revealing the staircase and the aunt's musty furniture and possessions, untouched since her death. Paula remains in the doorway until Gregory brusquely commands her to come in, establishing his authority over her and the house (Fletcher 1995). Later, when Paula begins to hear sounds in the attic where the aunt's possessions have been locked away at Gregory's suggestion (so that, unbeknownst to Paula, he can better search them), the camera conveys her anxiety in a series of low-angle point-of-view shots of the ceiling, the dimming of the gaslights literally compromising her sight. As in many Gothic narratives, the threat to the female gaze and female subjectivity is a double one, reflecting the past as well as foreshadowing the future: the house is the scene not only of the aunt's unexplained murder but also of Paula's gradual psychic "decreation" (Cavell 1996: p. 50), events which the narrative will ultimately link.

Once instated in the house Gregory uses the excuse of his desire for an extended honeymoon to turn away all visitors and for all intents and purposes holds her captive there. Although, even given *Gaslight's* Victorian time period, Paula's situation may register with some viewers as implausible, contemporary domestic violence narratives reveal that victims are often subjected to different forms of social isolation (Nielsen et al. 1992; Jacobson and Gottman 1998). These range from actual imprisonment or immobility (because of a lack of transport or money), to elective social separation due to physical injuries or fear of physical harm, or, as noted earlier, to the effects of gaslighting. In addition to its impact on the victim, who is denied the help and support she needs, isolation shields the batterer from outside scrutiny or public condemnation that might reveal or influence his behavior (Nielsen et al. 1992). Thus the claustrophobic space of the Gothic has not simply metaphorical but also literal significance in terms of the experience of domestic violence victim/survivors.

Along with physical isolation, in *Gaslight* one of Gregory's most effective abusive strategies is his repeated insinuation about Paula's memory. As Paula prepares for a long-awaited outing to the Tower of London, Gregory presents her with a brooch that had belonged to his

mother and then suggests that they place it in her purse, remarking in an innocent tone, “You know you are inclined to lose things, Paula.” After Paula inquires whether this is in fact the case, Gregory changes his tack and says lightly, “I’m teasing you, my dear.” Later, as they walk, Gregory uses an idle remark by Paula to allude to other supposed instances of forgetting, which he then quickly dismisses as “nothing.” However, when Paula confesses that the brooch is missing and turns to her husband to verify that he placed it in her purse, Gregory twists her inquiry into the opportunity for another accusation that compounds the first, asking “Don’t you even remember that?”

Through a pattern of persistent reinforcement/denial of the idea of her mental deterioration, Gregory leads Paula to distrust her own memory, perceptions, and physical actions until even an actual and understandable lapse of memory—repeating an order to the disdainful young housemaid Nancy (Angela Lansbury)—becomes for Paula another confirmation of her insanity. After a time, Gregory’s gaslighting is so successful that he controls her even in his absence. In one telling scene, Paula starts out of the front door to take a walk on her own, only to hesitate and then return defeated to the house when confronted with the questions that Nancy says her master will ask should he return while Paula is out.¹⁵

PORTRAIT OF AN ABUSER: GASLIGHTING AND VERBAL ABUSE IN *GASLIGHT*

Gregory’s gaslighting of Paula takes place to a large extent verbally. John Fletcher’s description of Gregory’s “repeated game of accusation, interrogation, and humiliation over a series of objects supposedly lost or hidden by his wife” (1995: p. 359) points to the importance of language in what might seem to be solely physical manipulation. Patricia Evans (1992) indirectly connects gaslighting with verbal abuse in her assertion that the latter “by its very nature undermines and discounts its victim’s perceptions” (p. 23). Evans further observes that verbal abuse attacks the nature and abilities of the partner; may be overt or covert; may be voiced in an extremely sincere and concerned way; is manipulative and controlling; is insidious; is unpredictable; contains a double message; and escalates, increasing in frequency, intensity, and variety. Gregory’s behavior in *Gaslight* embodies the majority of these characteristics, which viewers are able to observe at first hand because of the film’s recounting of the relationship from its infancy, if not its genesis.

A secondary effect of Gregory's verbal abuse—and the corollary of Doane's (1987) analysis of the threat of and to the female gaze in *Gaslight*—is his silencing of Paula. As Stanley Cavell (1996) remarks, “A way of describing the mode of torture that is systematically driving Paula out of her mind is to note that she is being deprived of words, of her right to words, of her own voice” (p. 57). Just as Gregory can be said to ultimately make Paula doubt her perceptions, he also controls language, using Paula's own words against her and leaving her virtually speechless and defenseless.

Among the specific categories of verbal abuse that Evans (1992) lists are withholding, discounting, blocking and diverting, accusing and blaming, judging and criticizing, threatening, undermining, ordering, and denial.¹⁶ An extended sequence at the center of *Gaslight*'s narrative reads like a glossary of these strategies and illuminates their function as complementary components of gaslighting. This sequence also demonstrates how such strategies alternate unexpectedly with displays of love and affection, serving as a kind of microcosm of the recurring cycle of domestic violence with its sporadic periods of kindness and contrition (Walker 1979). The skilled performances of Charles Boyer, who was nominated for an Oscar for his role in *Gaslight*, and Ingrid Bergman, who won her first Academy Award for her performance, effectively convey the scene's modulations in mood and tone. Particularly notable are Gregory's constant reversals, his shifts from condescending to domineering to loving in a way that reveals the charm of the abuser as well as his cruelty, and Paula's movement from timid to assertive to fearful and desperate as she struggles to react to and account for her husband's unpredictable—as well as her own purportedly irrational—behavior.

As the sequence begins, Gregory reprimands Paula for placing coal on the fire herself instead of ringing for Nancy. She attempts to explain that she does not want to trouble the servants, but Gregory interrupts her and commands her to ring. When Nancy answers the bell Gregory flirts with the maid and suggests that she might be able to help his wife improve her pallor, embarrassing Paula and provoking her to remark that his actions will only cause the servants to despise her more. Gregory pretends surprise at her comment and claims that he was only following her suggestion to treat the servants like equals.

Nancy re-enters to announce the arrival of Miss Thwaites (Dame May Whitty) a prying neighbor who has come to try once again to

call on Paula. She is accompanied by her “nephew,” in reality Inspector Brian Cameron (Joseph Cotten), a childhood admirer of Alice Alquist who, having noticed Paula at the Tower of London because of her resemblance to her aunt,¹⁷ has taken an interest in the long-closed murder case. After Paula tries to dissuade Gregory from refusing the visitors, he erupts in anger. Paula’s and Nancy’s surprised looks cause him to stop and attempt to camouflage his outburst by remarking calmly, “If you wanted to see her you only had to say so.” Cavell notes that here Gregory bullies Paula into agreeing that she could easily have had her way, “(thus suggesting that Paula’s problem is her own metaphysical, intellectual occultism, and not social and psychological violence)” (1996: p. 54). Gregory then comments that Paula does not have time to see them anyway, since she must dress and do her hair before they go out. Her fearful response, “Going out? We are? You didn’t tell me—or have I forgotten?” meets with laughter as Gregory exclaims, “Of course you haven’t forgotten anything. This is my surprise for you. We’re going to the theatre.” A close-up of Paula’s face reveals both her joy and her extreme relief as she embraces Gregory, who chides, “And you thought I was being cruel to you—keeping people away from you, making you a prisoner” and then sits down at the piano to play a Strauss waltz while Paula dances around the room.

This happy moment is cut short as the camera cuts to a close-up of Gregory’s face, which grows suddenly cold as he says, “Paula, I don’t want to upset you. If you will put things right when I’m not looking we’ll assume it did not happen.” Following his gaze to an empty space on a wall, Paula acknowledges nervously that a small picture is missing but insists that someone else must have taken it down. Paula watches in humiliation as Gregory questions the older housemaid Elizabeth (Barbara Everest) and then asks her to kiss the Bible as proof that she is telling the truth. Gregory proceeds to send for Nancy, ignoring Paula’s pleas not to do so and declaring, “Since you have thrown suspicion on the servants they must be cleared of it.” After he has interrogated Nancy, Gregory turns to Paula and asks, implying that it is his wife not he who considers the housemaid untrustworthy, “Shall I ask her to kiss the Bible or will you accept her word?”

With Nancy exonerated, Paula repeats her affirmation that she did not take the picture and grabs the Bible and desperately kisses it. Gregory, unmoved, commands, “Go look for that picture.” Strident, sinister music crescendos on the soundtrack as Paula slowly enters the hallway

and climbs the stairs, suddenly turning to pull the picture from behind a statue on the landing below the sealed door to the attic. Gregory says accusingly, “So you knew where it was all the time!” Paula, dazed, replies, “No, I didn’t know. I only looked there because that’s where it’s been found twice before.” Paula, distraught, pleads, “If I do all these senseless, meaningless things, then I don’t know what I do any more. If it’s true you must be gentle with me, you must bear with me, please.” Gregory refuses to comfort her and exits frame right to enter Paula’s bedroom, leaving only the cast of his shadow on the bedroom door. Paula follows him, her shadow reaching out to his, and begs in a terrified voice, “Please, please, take me in your arms, please, please.” The scene ends dramatically as Gregory, his face impassive, exits the room and closes the door.

This sequence lays out in a particularly effective way the range as well as the specific modes of verbal and psychological abuse: Gregory’s cultivation of antipathy between Paula and the servants, especially the impertinent Nancy, in order to better manipulate each of them; his torture of Paula with the news of their surprise outing, all the more cunning because it plays on the very phobia he has invented, her fear of forgetting; his treatment of Paula as a feeble-minded child, especially evident in the tone of his repeated commands and his banishment of her to her room; his withholding of affection and sympathy from Paula when she most needs it. Equally significant are Gregory’s angry outbursts, glimpses of his controlling and abusive nature that are quickly stifled, suggesting his sensitivity to the reactions of those around him and his ability to modify his own behavior in an instant, cited by researchers as a characteristic of many abusers (e.g. Walker 1979: p. 40). Particularly noteworthy throughout the sequence are Gregory’s constant reversals, which prevent Paula from establishing her emotional and psychological bearings. This technique is reflected in the choreography and spatial dynamics of the scene as the couple move from the drawing room to the stairs, ultimately ending up in Paula’s bedroom, where she experiences her most fearful moments. Thomas Elsaesser (1987) notes that a “vertiginous drop in the emotional temperature punctuates a good many melodramas—almost invariably played out against the vertical axis of a staircase” (p. 370). Doane (1987) in turn remarks that the staircase in the Gothic film is the site of a traditional specularization of the woman as object of the gaze but also marks a passageway to a forbidden space connected with her victimization. In this sequence, the extreme, calculated



Fig. 2.1 Gregory (Charles Boyer) discovers that Paula (Ingrid Bergman) has “stolen” his watch in *Gaslight* (George Cukor 1944)

rise and fall of Gregory’s abuse culminates in the moment where Paula is literally cornered at the top of the staircase, barred access to the attic where the murdered aunt’s possessions—and with them the truth about Gregory—are concealed.

In a subsequent scene, Paula attempts to assert herself and resist Gregory’s attempts to isolate her by insisting on attending a musical evening at the home of Lady Dalfoy, an acquaintance of her aunt who was kind to her as a child. Gregory, however, uses the outing as a new opportunity to humiliate and discredit Paula, fabricating the loss of another object, this time his watch. A forward-tracking movement that ends in a medium shot of the couple with other guests in the background (see Fig. 2.1) suggests the importance of this first instance of gaslighting outside the domestic sphere, designed by Gregory not only to undercut Paula’s momentary confidence but also to provide public evidence of her illness, a turning point in the narrative that paves the way for his next devious move. When Gregory whispers that his watch

is gone, Paula diverts her gaze from the concert to him as he slowly takes the object out of Paula's purse, the accelerating music of the concert emphasizing the drama of the "discovery." Paula exclaims "No" and despite Gregory's admonition not to make a scene in public begins to sob hysterically, displacing the piano performance as the evening's main spectacle but also catching the attention of Inspector Cameron, who had contrived to be seated near her in order to talk to her. Acting the concerned husband and shepherding her home, Gregory further tortures Paula by chastising her for the outburst he has orchestrated, saying, "I've tried so hard to keep it within these walls, my own house ... Because you would go out tonight the whole of London knows it."

Gregory then plays what is his ultimate card in the game of crazy-making and terror he has pursued against Paula: he "lets slip" a passing reference to Paula's mother, whom he says died of insanity when Paula was only a year old. Claiming to have consulted with the mother's doctor, he tells Paula, "It began with her imagining things that she heard—noises, footsteps, voices. And then the voices began to speak to her. And in the end she died in an asylum with no brain at all." Here, Gregory targets what is perhaps Paula's greatest emotional vulnerability: her uncertain family history, referenced in an earlier scene where she tells Gregory, "My mother died when I was born. I don't know anything about her, or my father. I lived with my aunt, always, as if I were her own."¹⁸

Gregory continues by accusing Paula of attending the performance in order to meet Cameron, whom he jealously claims is her admirer. When Paula insists that she does not know him and is not lying, Gregory reinforces his ruse by feigning remorse, which he twists into another accusation, saying, "I'm sorry, I should not have said that. I know you never lie to me. I believe you. You're not lying. It's worse than lying. You've forgotten. You've forgotten him as you forget everything." Gregory concludes his verbal assault with a scarcely veiled threat presented as a logical, even humane course of action: "The case is one for people who know about those problems. We shall have visitors, Paula, and soon." When Paula responds, "A doctor?" Gregory says solemnly, "Two. I believe two is the required number."

On one level, Gregory's actions and behavior are broadly representative of batterers who leave "no visible wounds."¹⁹ Yet the specific forms of psychological and verbal abuse in which Gregory engages are a direct function of his identity not only as male but as white, mature, and upper-class. As noted in Chap. 1, recent discussions of intimate partner violence

emphasize the importance of considering the behaviors of batterers as well as the experiences of victims in the context of multiple social and cultural factors, including but not limited to gender. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) argues and sociologists such as Natalie Sokoloff and Ida Dupont (2005) concur in their analyses of factors impacting violence against women, despite the fact that abuse cuts across boundaries of race, economic status, age and sexuality, its methods and effects differ according to the particular intersections of these categories. In *Gaslight*, Gregory's abusive behavior toward Paula in the form of criticism, condescension, and suffocating "overprotectiveness" reflects the fact that he is her senior both professionally (he accompanied Paula on the piano during her lessons when she was a vocal student) and in terms of age; likewise, his race and his class (elevated through his acquisition by marriage of the house on Thornton Square, of which he would have sole ownership in the event of Paula's committal to an asylum) and his position as employer are factors in his ability to seduce and control the young maid Nancy and, through her, Paula.

That Gregory's behavior is consonant with the privilege and rights of white, upper-class men during the Victorian era may work to naturalize his actions in the film, but a few select scenes render his actions more transparent: for example, whereas Nancy is swayed by Gregory's charm and status, the other servant, Elizabeth, who is not only older but also partially deaf and so less subject to Gregory's verbal manipulation, responds to his reference to Paula's supposed mental deterioration—"You see how it is, Elizabeth"—with the barely-concealed ironic remark, "Yes, sir, I see *just* how it is." Waldman (1983) notes that the rare feminine solidarity evident in *Gaslight* through Elizabeth, who fears losing her position but in the end refuses to tell Gregory that Inspector Cameron has been in the house, is typically short-lived and gives way to another frequent element of the Gothic formula, the male rescuer. Nonetheless, in such moments, if briefly, *Gaslight* allows us to see behind the veneer of a set of behaviors that are normal within a certain milieu and to recognize them as a form of abuse made possible by the privileges extended to men of a particular race and social rank.

In the concluding sequence of the film, Cameron enters the house in Gregory's absence and, in order to secure Paula's confidence, produces a glove given to him as a child by Alice Alquist. Cameron provides the antidote to Gregory's crazy-making, corroborating, as Elizabeth cannot, the sound of footsteps above and demonstrating to Paula that he quite

literally shares her perspective, causing her to exclaim in relief, “You saw that, too? Oh, then it really happens. I thought I just imagined it!” It is thus only when Gregory’s gaslighting is revealed and confirmed via Cameron that Paula regains confidence in her reality and her sense of self. The need for external validation for victim/survivors of intimate partner violence (Weitzman 2000),²⁰ who may experience a form of cognitive dissonance as they struggle to reconcile their partner’s declarations of love with the experience of abuse, is poignantly conveyed by Paula’s disbelief when Cameron, recounting her own observations, leads her to acknowledge the truth about Gregory: “You’re wrong, you’re making a mistake. I know him. He’s my husband. I’ve lived in the same house with him. You’re talking about the man I’m married to.”

The final scene of *Gaslight* where Paula confronts Gregory, who has been captured and restrained in a chair in the attic by Cameron, is rightfully celebrated for the ingenious and satisfying way that Paula uses her abuser’s weapons—the game of lost objects and her fabricated madness—against him in a space associated with her own victimization. This scene also reveals the abuser’s all-consuming need for control in the way that Gregory continues to attempt to manipulate her through the combined power of the look and language as well as, ironically and predictably, her memory. Asking Paula to come close to him and gaze into his eyes, Gregory says, “You remember our first days? You remember Italy? If I ever meant anything to you, and I believe I did, then help me Paula. Give me another chance.” Paula appears to assent and retrieves the knife that Gregory has placed in a drawer, but then insists that she cannot see it and, throwing it down, ironically laments that she has lost or hidden it, just as she has so many things. Expressing false regret at her inability to come to her husband’s aid and directly invoking the insanity that he has tortured her with, she asks sarcastically, “How can a madwoman help her husband escape? If I were not mad I could have helped you. But because I am mad I hate you, and because I am mad I have betrayed you, and because I am mad I am rejoicing in my heart, without a shred of pity, without a shred of regret, watching you go with glory in my heart!”

Thus, in what Cavell calls Paula’s “aria of revenge” (1996: p. 59), which evokes the aunt’s operatic voice and revives her own, Paula calls Gregory out using his own language, strategically coded to let him know that she understands what he did and that he will pay, if unofficially, for his violence against her with his own freedom. Paula’s confrontation of

her abuser is staged within the intimate boundaries of the private sphere (Cameron and his assistants remain behind the closed attic door) rather than the public arena of a courtroom or police bureau, reflecting the circumscribed parameters of female agency in the time period of the narrative.²¹ *Gaslight*, then, punishes Gregory for Alice Alquist's murder but enacts only the private justice of a revenge fantasy for his abuse of Paula. This conclusion not only confirms that abuse is a domestic problem but also does not challenge the institutions—marital, legal, and social—that help to create the conditions for women's victimization.

THE LEGACY OF *GASLIGHT* AND THE GOTHIC ROMANCE FILM

As a later Gothic romance, *Gaslight* validates the perspective and emotions of an abused woman, giving a vivid and moving account of non-physical violence, including, most significantly, the many modes of gaslighting. Further, the film allows viewers to witness the abuser's strategies at length rather than infer them from the heroine's comments or narrative exposition, or, as in *Suspicion*, from highly ambiguous events and shots. As such, *Gaslight* is a direct rebuttal to the primarily private nature of domestic violence that makes accounts of abuse vulnerable to discreditation or the impasse of a "he said/she said" scenario. These elements of *Gaslight* stand in contrast to certain contemporary—and what thus might be assumed to be more "enlightened"—domestic violence films that join the couple's relationship *in medias res*, allot less screen time to the abuser, and make physical abuse the central event of the narrative.

Waldman (1983) explains the evolution in the later Gothic romance in terms of the changes in women's status during the Second World War:

The shift from denial to affirmation of feminine perspective acknowledges the potential of an alternative or oppositional discourse, perhaps made possible by the exigencies of war-time activities. Yet its power is diffused through the narrative overthrow of the patriarchal tyrant and his replacement by a gentler, more democratic type. Indeed several of the films must motivate the husband's patriarchal behavior by placing the film in an earlier period, Victorian England (*Gaslight*) or America (*Experiment Perilous*); or, in *Dragonwyck*, in the feudal manor system of the Hudson River Valley of the 1840s. (1983: p. 38)

These comments point to several tensions in the conclusion of *Gaslight* that have major repercussions for later domestic violence films, which continue to draw heavily on the conventions of the Gothic romance. The first relates to the identity and nature of the “patriarchal tyrant” or, in the terms of this discussion, the abusive man. Gregory’s last words to Paula as he is being taken away render his mistreatment of her incidental to his real obsession: “I don’t ask you to understand me. Between us all the time were those jewels like a fire, a fire in my brain that separated us, those jewels which I wanted all my life, I don’t know why.” Gregory’s motive/problem, the film suggests, is his desire to find Alice Alquist’s gemstones, which are hidden in plain sight on the embellished bodice of one of her costumes. Gregory’s gaslighting, in other words, is simply a means to a criminal end, unconnected to coercive control as an abusive strategy or to larger patterns of gender, race, and class-based dominance. Even the seemingly incidental detail of Charles Boyer’s pronounced “foreign” accent potentially marks Gregory’s character as “other.” Thus, while *Gaslight* does unmask the suspicious husband and find him guilty, it is as a bigamist (Inspector Cameron informs Paula that Gregory has another wife in Prague) and a compulsive jewel thief turned murderer. Paula herself revises the narrative of her romance and marriage retroactively in response to Cameron’s revelation of Gregory’s identity: “If that were true, then from the beginning there would have been nothing. Nothing real from the beginning.” Such implied distinctions between a “real” romance and a “false” one, “abusive monsters” and “normal men” are the very ones that are upheld by the conclusions of later domestic violence films.

The second tension relates to the narrative’s introduction of, in Waldman’s (1983) words, a “gentler, more democratic type,” the attractive and sympathetic Inspector Cameron. Here, as Waldman remarks, *Gaslight* falls in line with other war-era Gothic romances in suggesting that the heroine is at least partially responsible for her troubles by having the faulty judgment or the naïveté to marry the wrong man. Further commenting on the ideological function of the rescuer figure, which she sees as undermining the Gothic’s subversive potential as a critique of male domination, Waldman notes: “In order to promote the ‘wrong man’ ideology, the films must somehow imply that with the second one things will be different. The best way to do this is simply not to allow this romance to progress very far” (p. 37). Indeed, Detective Cameron arrives in time to rescue Paula from Gregory but not early enough to do

more than hint, through his request to come to see Paula—and through Miss Thwaites' surprised “Well!” at the sight of this new, potential couple—at a happy future.

Such a narrative trope reflects negatively and broadly on women's reason and powers of discernment, but it has especially damaging implications for abused women. In the context of intimate partner violence, the judgment pronounced on the wrong man is often accompanied or even subsumed by a parallel judgment on the victim/survivor, who is frequently deemed wrong in how she sees the man, wrong in how she chooses, and wrong in how she acts. Though the idea that abused women are at fault for their abuse may seem to be outdated in the current era of post-awareness, recent research reveals that such myths persist, if in new postfeminist versions, particularly in the media. Pamela Nettleton (2011) observes in her study of domestic violence stories in popular magazines between 1998 and 2008 that women's magazines promote the idea that women are responsible for every aspect of domestic violence, including identifying potentially violent men, avoiding them successfully, recognizing triggers that incite male violence, and predicting and then avoiding or resisting abuse (pp. 147–148).²² The “wrong man ideology” (Waldman 1983) articulated in *Gaslight* can be seen to undergird these assumptions, making intimate partner violence and its solutions a perpetual “woman's problem.”

The sustained, detailed depiction of an abuser's tactics and the validation of the victim/survivor's perspective in *Gaslight* constitute a remarkable moment of visibility not only for domestic violence in general but what is still its most invisible and therefore least acknowledged form, psychological abuse. Even today, *Gaslight* redefines what we conceive of as intimate partner violence, extending its own thematic/logic of the power of vision and language to viewers, potentially facilitating the first steps to understanding and awareness, if not to action or intervention. The underside of this later Gothic romance is seen in *Gaslight's* characterization of the abuser as abnormal, its reliance on the formula of the male rescuer turned potential mate, and its inability to openly critique the gendered hierarchies that have traditionally characterized marriage and other social institutions in Western societies. These tensions point to a persistent contradiction at the heart of representations of domestic violence that contributes to their larger ideological gaslighting effect: the promulgation of the myth that, despite its prevalence and frequency, violence against women by their intimate partners is an anomaly,

the unfortunate fate of a small and suspect group rather than the widespread consequence of hegemonic masculinity and the imbalance of power that structures heterosexual relationships in patriarchy. *Gaslight* thus demonstrates and prefigures the ambivalent legacy of the Gothic romance as an appealing yet deeply problematic paradigm for popular media narratives of abuse, one that continues to inform private attitudes, public discourse, and institutional responses.

NOTES

1. Hamilton's play was produced in the U.S. as *Angel Street*, premiering on Broadway in 1941.
2. An earlier screen version of the play was filmed in 1940 by British film director Thorold Dickinson (Corfield and Dickinson 1940).
3. For an account of the history of the use of the term "gaslighting" and its iterations, see Yagoda (2017).
4. Psychoanalyst Dr. Robin Stern (2007) uses the phrase the "Gaslight Effect," derived from the 1944 movie, to describe the hidden manipulations in controlling relationships. While not limiting this effect to heterosexual romantic relationships, Stern does note that the majority of her patients with this condition are women.
5. Waldman (1983) uses the term "Gothic romance film," while Doane (1987) refers to the "gothic film." I have chosen to retain Waldman's term in my own analysis in order to emphasize the focus in the films in this study on scenarios of courtship and marriage.
6. Waldman's (1983) list of U.S. Gothic romance films includes *Rebecca* (Hitchcock, 1940); *Suspicion* (Hitchcock, 1941); *Shadow of a Doubt* (Hitchcock, 1943); *Gaslight* (Cukor, 1944); *Experiment Perilous* (Tourneur, 1944); *Undercurrent* (Minnelli, 1946); *Dragonwyck* (Mankiewicz, 1946); *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (Godfrey, 1947); *Secret Beyond the Door* (Lang, 1948); *A Woman's Vengeance* (Korda, 1948); and *Sleep My Love* (Sirk, 1948) (n. 5, p. 39).
7. Theories of the gaze in relation to subjectivity in classical Hollywood cinema derive largely from Lacanian psychoanalysis, epitomized in feminist film theory by Laura Mulvey's (1989) watershed article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," originally published in *Screen* in 1975.
8. Doane's (1987) richly complex analysis of Gothic films in *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* is titled "Paranoia and the Specular" (Chap. 5).
9. In *Suspicion*'s most infamous scene, the spectator sees Johnnie and Lina in an extreme long shot on a cliff, where they seem to be struggling. The

- camera then cuts to a medium close-up and we hear Johnnie say, “What did you think I was trying to do—kill you? I was trying to fix your hair.”
10. Hitchcock told François Truffaut during a series of well-known 1962 interviews that, in part because of audience responses after preview screenings, RKO Radio Pictures pressured him to change the ending of *Suspicion* in order not to depict Cary Grant as a murderer (“Alfred Hitchcock’s 1941 ‘Suspicion’ was met with a skepticism that continues to this day,” *Los Angeles Times* 2016).
 11. Waldman (1983) notes that, along with *Gaslight*, the major later Gothic romance films include *Shadow of a Doubt* (Hitchcock, 1943), *Experiment Perilous* (Tourneur, 1944), and *Sleep My Love* (Sirk, 1948) (p. 34).
 12. Fletcher (1995) observes that, possibly because of Paula’s intense reactions to these events, viewers regularly misremember or misconstrue the dimming of the gaslights and the husband’s footsteps overhead as being produced deliberately by Gregory to drive his wife mad, even though in the film it is not clear that he realizes at first that she is aware of them (p. 361).
 13. Waldman (1983) comments that the combination of pre-war marriages, separations and reunions as a result of the Second World War and the record divorce rate of 1946 give the phrase “marrying a stranger” a “specific historical resonance” (p. 31).
 14. *Gaslight* won an Academy Award in 1945 for Best Art Direction (black and white).
 15. Paula’s obvious unease at simply being out of the house and the controlling function of her fear of Gregory bring to mind Jeremy’s Bentham’s model for the “Panopticon,” a prison designed so that those inside were never sure whether or not they were being observed. Michel Foucault (1975) has famously analyzed the Panopticon as an ideal modern form of control, since its unequal gaze creates subjects who have internalized the mechanism of their own surveillance.
 16. A similar list can be found on the website of the National Domestic Violence Hotline, on the page “What is Gaslighting?” (2014) (<http://www.thehotline.org/2014/05/what-is-gaslighting/>).
 17. Doane (1987) discusses the implications of Paula’s resemblance to her aunt in terms of paranoia, and Fletcher (1995) in terms of fantasy and the primal scene as re-enacted by both Paula and Gregory. While Fletcher’s analysis is interesting in the light of Gregory’s admission of his inability to understand his own actions, my focus here is on Gregory’s behavior toward Paula rather than its unconscious motivations.
 18. Fletcher (1995) comments that Paula’s statement, together with her likeness to her aunt, suggests that Alice Alquist was in fact her mother, which

- would not have been publicly admissible at the time for a renowned, unmarried opera singer (p. 355).
19. The phrase is the apt title of Mary Susan Miller's (1995) book on non-physical abuse.
 20. Although the historical and cultural contexts are quite different from those in *Gaslight*, in her study of abused women in upscale marriages, Weitzman (2000) observes, "*outsight*—the validation that others bring from the outside by concretizing the experience with words and recognition—precedes insight, which in turn precedes action" (p. 35).
 21. Cavell (1996) further comments of this circumscription of female agency in *Gaslight*, "Women's options in this universe—apart from the exceptional aristocratic title (such as that possessed by Lady Dalroy) and outside of the state of matrimony (if these women are indeed to be understood as being outside, rather than serving as further figures for present states of matrimony)—are the flirtatiousness of the maid, the deafness of the cook, or the shocked spectatordom of the spinster: a set of options perfect for maintaining the perfect liberty and privilege of the male" (pp. 60–61).
 22. Nettleton (2011) notes that domestic violence narratives in men's magazines, on the other hand, "promote the idea that that men are not responsible for their domestic violence and that they cannot help themselves for a variety of reasons, including male biology, difficult childhoods, sports careers, and military service" (p. 148).

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-65063-0>

Domestic Violence in Hollywood Film

Gaslighting

Shoos, D.

2017, XI, 175 p. 6 illus., 5 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-65063-0