

The Horror Film Genre as an Interpretive Device in an Adaptation of  
Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the  
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## Introduction

As my thesis, I have made an adaptation for film of *Suddenly Last Summer* by Tennessee Williams. The play tells the story of a young woman, Catharine Holly, who has been institutionalized shortly after her return to New Orleans from a vacation on the island of Cabeza de Lobo. Her cousin, Sebastian, a wealthy poet and gay sex-tourist died on this trip. He was killed and partially eaten by a group of impoverished young men (at least some of these men were his former sexual partners). Sebastian's mother, Violet Venable—in the hopes of suppressing the true circumstances surrounding the death of her son—attempts to persuade an ambitious young doctor to lobotomize Catharine as the play opens.

It should be noted that the horror film genre has greatly affected my thinking about this project, and I will be discussing three sub-genres of horror at some length: body horror, the slasher film, and race horror. The horror films and trends to be discussed come, in the main, from the period ranging from the late 1970s to the early 1990s and will, I think, be of great help in explaining certain choices I have made in the course of making this film. My main interest is determining whether the themes present in Williams's original text can be explored and expanded upon via recourse to the horror genre.

Additionally, my film moves the action of *Suddenly Last Summer* from the New Orleans of the early half of the twentieth century to modern-day Cape Town. However, the action takes place in a sort of netherworld or blank space that serves as metaphor for both cinema and the white cube of the gallery. This choice of staging is meant to refer to Catharine's mention of the "blazing white wall" against which her cousin's body was thrown after his death.<sup>1</sup> In fact, all throughout Catharine's description of how and why Sebastian died—and it must be remembered that it is this description that serves as the denouement of the play—mentions of white light, white heat, Sebastian's whiteness (as opposed to simply saying he looked pale), and the whiteness of the day itself are employed as a sort of leitmotif.

That Catharine uses “whiteness” in describing an incredibly violent chapter in her past is crucial to my understanding of the text and has helped me craft a cinematic strategy for my adaptation of this play. The violence and savagery that has marked Catharine’s past has followed her into the present, just as it has followed her from the impoverished island of Cabeza de Lobo to the wealthy Garden District of New Orleans, and—if Violet Venable has her way—it will follow Catharine into her future. Taking the key descriptive element of that violent day in Cabeza de Lobo and using it to paint the world of Catharine’s present will, I hope, make this connection clear.

### **From New Orleans to Cape Town**

*... I write about violence in American life only because I am not so well acquainted with the society of other countries.*

-Tennessee Williams

Perhaps the most interesting opportunity afforded by the change in setting has been the ability to redraw the geographical schema outlined in Williams’s text. In exchanging New Orleans for Cape Town and Cabeza de Lobo for Wolfkop (a fictitious town in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa), the national boundary so clearly established in the play is erased. The very real United States of America and the fictitious island of Cabeza de Lobo are unified within the borders of South Africa – a country in which, as is frequently noted, the first and third worlds are combined.

Of course, blurring the distinction between the two nations depicted in *Suddenly Last Summer* was what Williams intended. In his stage notes, he describes the set as “part of a mansion in the Victorian Gothic style,” but the “interior is blended with a fantastic garden, which is more like a tropical jungle”.<sup>2</sup> One does not usually associate Victorian Gothic style with tropical jungle (although the ‘Scramble for Africa’ did indeed reach its apogee during the reign of Queen Victoria), but it must be remembered that this “tropical jungle” is actually a garden, a small-scale and manageable replica of an actual jungle that is *contained* within the grounds of Violet Venable’s mansion. While this jungle/garden is restricted spatially, sounds from it keep emerging: “There are harsh cries and sibilant

hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents and birds, all of a savage nature”.<sup>3</sup> These “thrashing sounds” serve as a sort of punctuation in *Suddenly Last Summer*:

Doctor: Mrs. Venable? I can’t guarantee that a lobotomy would stop her—babbling!!

Mrs. Venable: That may be, maybe not, but after the operation, who would believe her, Doctor?  
(Pause: faint jungle music)<sup>4</sup>

### **The Monstrous Feminine**

... such as the *Venus flytrap*—you know what that is, Doctor? *The Venus flytrap*?

- Mrs. Venable, *Suddenly Last Summer*

*When monster meets monster, one monster has to give way,  
AND IT WILL NEVER BE ME.*

-Alexandra del Lago, *Sweet Bird of Youth*

The character of Mrs. Venable is clearly an example of one of Tennessee Williams’s “monster women”—Gore Vidal, who wrote the screenplay for the 1959 film adaptation of *Suddenly Last Summer*, coined this term and used it in reference to Williams’s female friends.<sup>5</sup> However, I would argue that the entire *mise-en-scène* of *Suddenly Last Summer* has been coded in a manner meant to suggest a space that is “monstrous in its femininity and feminine in its monstrosity”.<sup>6</sup> The very first set of lines in the text belong to Mrs. Venable and conclude with her making mention of the Venus flytrap that grows in what was once Sebastian’s garden (it is the only plant she actually names). The Venus flytrap—named for the Roman goddess of love, beauty (and sexuality)—is an insectivorous plant, and it seems quite telling that it is the only species of plant that the audience knows with certainty exists in the garden, for it is this garden and the patio directly adjacent to it that form the setting for the entire play. To place a Venus flytrap at its figurative center clearly situates the action of *Suddenly Last Summer* within the realm of the *vagina dentate* (toothed vagina). The garden and the patio would appear to occupy a binary opposition in which the former is subordinate to the latter. However, as was previously mentioned, the garden is not easily constrained and the parallels between the

two spaces manifest themselves in the figure of Mrs. Venable, whose money, charm, and air of gentility mask a carnivorous and sadistic nature. Thus what the Venus flytrap is to the world of the garden, Mrs. Venable is to world inhabited by the other characters in the play.

In her essay, “*Alien* and the Monstrous-Feminine”, Barbara Creed notes that in “horror films such as *Alien*, we are given representations of the female genitals and the womb as uncanny—horrific objects of dread and fascination”.<sup>7</sup> Creed goes on to say that the film presents a “complex representation of the monstrous-feminine in terms of the maternal figure as perceived within a patriarchal ideology”.<sup>8</sup> In *Alien*, Creed argues, the specter of the mother emerges in “many guises” as the “treacherous mother, the oral sadistic mother, the mother as the primordial abyss” and in the form of the “all-devouring vagina, the toothed vagina, the vagina as Pandora’s box; and finally she is there in the chameleon figure of the alien”.<sup>9</sup>

In another essay, “Gynesis, Postmodernism and the Science Fiction Horror Film”, Creed offers a reading of the ‘Body Horror’ genre (the *Alien*/*Aliens* series, most of David Cronenberg’s films from the 1980s, etc.) that is centered on the female form and its representation:

Why this preoccupation with the maternal body,  
Process of birth, monstrous offspring, the alien  
nature of woman, her maternal powers—and most  
recently the representation of the male body as ‘womb’?  
I would argue it is because the body, particularly the woman’s  
body, through the process of gynesis, has come to signify the  
spaces of the unknown, the terrifying, the monstrous.<sup>10</sup>

Creed has borrowed the term gynesis from Alice Jardine and offers a definition: “within gynesis the ‘feminine’ signifies, not woman herself, but those ‘spaces which could be said to conceptualize the master narrative’s own ‘non-knowledge’, that area over which the narrative has lost control”.<sup>11</sup> However, as Creed notes, while the word may be relatively new, the phenomenon it describes is not; she quotes Jardine directly:

... that all of the words used to designate this space (now unbound)—nature, Other, matter, unconscious, madness, hylé, force—have throughout the tenure of Western philosophy carried feminine connotations whatever their grammatical gender) ... Those connotations go back, at the very least, to Plato's *chora*.<sup>12</sup>

Creed's project, then, may be best thought of as an attempt to situate the 'body horror' genre within the broader context of Western appropriation and deployment of the female form as a metaphor for the Other.

Creed's analysis of *Alien* has informed certain choices I have made in the depiction of Mrs. Venable. In my adaptation, she wears a blood-red gown and is, in fact, the only character who wears a color other than black or white. The effect of this, I hope, will be to clearly indicate that she is central to the action—the spider at the center of the web entangling all of the other characters. Pushing the notion of the monstrous feminine further, I asked the costume designer to create a face mask for Mrs. Venable—justified, I felt, by the fact that the character, who is quite vain, has had a stroke that has left her slightly disfigured. The mask, made of red leather with a zipper over the lips, is meant to refer to both the chador worn by Muslim women and the facial restraints worn by Hannibal Lecter and Leatherface in *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, respectively. Sadomasochism is also strongly implied. In terms of casting the role, I choose to use an actress who is actually quite youthful looking, Hayley Roberts, and requested that she play the role not as an old woman, but rather, as a sort of ageless being. Catharine Deneuve in *The Hunger* was the reference I used in attempting to guide Roberts's portrayal.

At this point, it occurs to me that I should also mention another feature of my depiction of Mrs. Venable, her accent. While all of the other characters are meant to be South African, Mrs. Venable is clearly from the American South. I decided that Mrs. Venable should be foreign as means of referencing the myth of Medea, who left her homeland for Greece with her lover Jason. The Medea character has informed my understanding of Mrs. Venable in two ways: firstly, she is a sorceress; secondly, she murders her own children.

Mrs. Venable as a practitioner of witchcraft is point to which I will return. Her representation as a maternal figure, in my film, may be said to illustrate Creed's understanding of the oral-sadistic mother: "As oral-sadistic mother, the monster threatens to reabsorb the child she once nurtured. Thus, the monster is ambiguous; it both repels and attracts".<sup>13</sup> When one considers the fact that Sebastian was killed and partially eaten (although not by Mrs. Venable), the oral-sadistic mother becomes a potentially potent figure in *Suddenly Last Summer*.

In Creed's view, the "desire for and attraction of death suggests also a desire to return to the original oneness with the mother".<sup>14</sup> This connection between femininity, maternity, and death is taken up by Ann Wilson in her essay, "The Politics of Sexual Ambiguity in *Sweet Bird of Youth*", in which she offers a harsh appraisal of Williams's play *Sweet Bird of Youth*:

In its expression of ideologies of sexuality, *Sweet Bird of Youth* is both troubled and troubling. It is troubled because Williams can't find a way of expressing his homosexuality, and troubling because the homoerotic impulses that drive the play depend on female characters who are described in images of death. Or, they are excessively feminine—to the degree of being parodies of femininity.<sup>15</sup>

Of all the "parodies of femininity" on display in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the character of Alexandra del Lago is certainly the most prominent. An aging movie queen leading her life in a perpetual haze of alcohol and drugs, she has fled to the hometown of Chance Wayne, a male prostitute she met at resort in Florida. Having assumed the pseudonym "The Princess Kosmonopolis", she is, as Wilson puts it, "creating a persona which, in its campy elements, make her seem like a drag queen".<sup>16</sup> Wilson's research appears to have shown that Alexandra del Lago is based on the actress Tallulah Bankhead and she uses this to advance her central argument:

Given that Bankhead, the icon of drag culture, seems to have been the inspiration for the character of Alexandra del Lago/Princess Kosmonopolis, there is a hint that the relationship between Chance and Alexandra del Lago may not be one between a man and a woman; rather, it is a relationship between a man and a persona of such exaggerated

femininity that the Princess Kosmonopolis could as easily be a man in drag as a woman.<sup>17</sup>

Tallulah Bankhead is an icon for a particular segment of the gay community (if such a thing can be said to exist) and, in Wilson's view, the fact that "Bankhead was biologically female seems less important than her performance of femininity, which was so artificial that even men can perform Bankhead."<sup>18</sup>

It is at this point that Wilson's own examination of *Sweet Bird of Youth* begins to take a troubling turn. I would argue that Bankhead's biological sex does matter. To say that it does not valorizes a normative ideal of gender that is culturally determined. Who is to say what is an exaggeration of femininity and what is its authentic expression (if such a thing can be said to exist)? Yes, Bankhead frequently drank alcohol. She was also flamboyant and sexually active, but she was still a woman. If a character that is based on her is a faulty or invalid representation of a woman, then how is one to determine what is a valid representation of a woman or a man?

While I have many problems with the methodology used by Wilson to advance her argument, I do not disagree with the general thrust of her thesis. I simply wish she had taken a different approach. In his essay, "The Sacrificial Stud and the Fugitive Female in *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*", John M. Clum cites a study of the manuscripts of *Sweet Bird of Youth* that reveals that the character of Alexandra del Lago was originally male.<sup>19</sup> However, the restrictions of the 1950s were such that Williams would not have been able to depict a sexual relationship between two men, and it is generally accepted that this is the reason that he changed the gender of the character. This change did not come without cost and it is central to the underlying tension of *Sweet Bird of Youth*, as Wilson notes:

Both renderings of femininity in terms of death [and] "hyperfemininity" evacuate female subjectivity. The evacuation or absence (which means that all women are equated with death) met the needs of what, in the course of this essay, I discuss [in] terms of Williams' sense of homosexuality, which depends on a troubled representation of women that is not a consequence of personal pathology—although that aspect of Williams is well-documented—but socially produced by

the ideological forces of the moment in which he was writing.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps, then, the specter of the monstrous feminine that emerges in both *Sweet Bird of Youth* and *Suddenly Last Summer* is a consequence, or symptom, of the displacement of homosexuality that occurs in both plays. The difference being that in *Suddenly Last Summer* Williams chooses to dramatize the connection between the destruction of the homosexual and the creation of the 'monster woman': the death of her gay son, Sebastian, and her desire to protect his memory turns Mrs. Venable into a monster who wants to cut open her niece's brain.

### **The Final Girl**

*Do you want to bore a hole in my skull and turn a knife in my brain? Everything else has been done to me!*

-Catharine, *Suddenly Last Summer*

In her essay, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film", Carol J. Clover offers a succinct description of the most obvious feature of most horror films: "the killer's fury is unmistakably sexual in both its roots and expression; his victims are mostly women, often sexually freed women and always young and beautiful."<sup>21</sup> However, much like Creed, Clover is intent on situating this genre within a broader cultural context, noting that the violence against women endemic to horror films has "simply given visual expression to the abiding proposition that, in Poe's formulation, the death of a beautiful woman is the most 'poetical topic in the world'."<sup>22</sup>

Clover's chief aim is an expanded—and more nuanced—understanding of the process by which viewers identify with characters in horror films. She is specifically intrigued by the way in which young (presumably heterosexual) men engage with the genre, for there are few male characters with which one might readily identify:

Policemen, fathers, and sheriffs appear only long enough to demonstrate risible incomprehension and incompetence. On the bad side, there is the killer. The killer is often unseen, or barely glimpsed, during the first part of the film, and what we do see, when we finally get a good look, hardly invites immediate or conscious empathy. He is

commonly masked, fat, deformed, or dressed as a woman.<sup>23</sup>

Clover contrasts the depiction of men in the horror genre with that of the Final Girl, who is the hero—and often the only survivor—in most slasher films:

She is intelligent, watchful, levelheaded; the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the patterns and extent of the threat; the only one in other words, whose perspective approaches our privileged understanding of the situation.<sup>24</sup>

Clover suggests that the predominantly male audience of most horror films identify chiefly with the Final Girl. She attributes, in part, the willingness of male viewers (and presumably directors and studio executives, most of whom are also male) to countenance the Final Girl-as-hero paradigm to the “broader range of emotional expression traditionally allowed women.”<sup>25</sup> Put another way, it is easier (and perhaps more sexually exciting) for an audience to watch images of a woman fighting, stabbing, shooting, and dismembering an assailant, than it is to watch a man screaming, crying, begging for his life, or—in the absolute worst case scenario—fainting. As Clover observes, “abject terror is gendered feminine, and the more concerned a given film with that condition—and it is the essence of modern horror—the more likely the femaleness of the victim.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus the figure of the Final Girl serves as a device by which the horror film can accomplish its narrative aims without violating gender norms in too obvious a fashion. However, as Clover notes, the gender of the Final Girl is “compromised from the outset by her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance (penetration, it seems, constructs the female), her apartness from other girls, [and] sometimes her name.”<sup>27</sup> As with Wilson’s analysis of Alexandra del Lago in *Sweet Bird Youth*, Clover seems intent on reading the Final Girl as not really female:

The Final Girl is, on reflection, a congenial double for the adolescent male. She is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, a way unapproved for adult males, the terrors and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the

structures of male competence and sexuality.<sup>28</sup>

Clover's understanding of the "underlying fantasy" of the slasher film is rooted in psychoanalysis and has implications for films outside the horror genre: "Just as Bergman came to realize that he could explore castration anxiety more freely via depictions of hurt female bodies (witness the genital mutilation of Karin in *Cries and Whispers*) the makers of slasher films seem to know that sadomasochistic incest fantasies sit more easily with the male viewer when the visible player is female".<sup>29</sup>

In her book, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*, Isabel Cristina Pinedo comments on Clover's writing on this subject and notes that Clover's analysis produces an "oedipal story" in which the slasher film "dramatizes the male viewer's incestuous sadomasochistic fantasy of having sex with his father, but the desired and dreaded erotic penetration is displaced onto violence and onto a female body".<sup>30</sup> When seen in this light, the "sexual inactivity" of the Final Girl is, as Clover notes, "inevitable; the male viewer may be willing to enter the vicarious experience of defending himself from the possibility of symbolic penetration on the part of the killer, but real vaginal penetration on the diegetic level is evidently more femaleness than he can bear".<sup>31</sup>

In Clover's view, the Final Girl, for all her intelligence and resourcefulness, is not a representation of a truly empowered woman:

To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development, as some reviews of *Aliens* have done with Ripley, is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking. She is simply an agreed-upon fiction, and the male viewer's use of her as a vehicle for his own sadomasochistic fantasies an act of timeless dishonesty.<sup>32</sup>

Pinedo comments: "In Clover's scenario, the powerful female is underneath it all a male in drag".<sup>33</sup> She adds: "Broadly speaking, it [Clover's analysis] signifies the horror genre's inscription within a male-dominated discourse where power is coded as masculine, even

when embodied in biological females”.<sup>34</sup>

However, Pinedo feels that Clover’s conception of the Final Girl is itself rooted in a patriarchal formulation in which “smartness, gravity, competence, and the ability to fight are only prerogatives of the masculine in a male-dominated society”.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, Pinedo sees the possibility of some form of homophobia in this reading of the Final Girl, noting that “representations of violent women are steeped in anxiety about lesbians” to which she adds, “historically the lesbian has been defined more by her aggressiveness than by her sexual object choice”.<sup>36</sup>

For Pinedo, how we come to think of The Final Girl is of great importance to the broader project of female empowerment:

If a woman cannot be aggressive and still be a woman, then female agency is a pipe dream. But if the surviving female can be aggressive and be really a woman, then she subverts [the] binary notion of gender that buttresses male dominance.<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, Pinedo’s own analysis of the horror film genre would appear to undermine attempts to read the Final Girl as a feminist triumph. A successful horror film usually leads to a series of sequels in which the killer returns again and again to terrorize more and more beautiful young women. As Pinedo notes, there are two possible outcomes: the Final Girl from the previous film repeats her triumph, or the Final Girl from the previous film is killed and replaced by yet another Final Girl.<sup>38</sup> With some very notable exceptions (the Halloween series and Scream series, for instance), it is the latter and not the former that usually occurs. Thus a Final Girl—however notable her past successes may have been—is almost always disposed of and replaced by a newer model.

The concept of the Final Girl is steeped in issues related to the deployment of the female form in both narrative drama and visual culture and raises a number of questions surrounding the sublimation of the male artist’s desires, be they sexual or otherwise, in characters that are biologically female. It is possible to read *Suddenly Last Summer* as a

thinly veiled allegory for this process. Sebastian Venable, a male artist, initially uses his mother as a means of attracting the young men with whom he has sex. However, once Violet Venable's stroke renders her unfit for this purpose, he abandons his mother and begins to travel with Catharine, whom he also uses as a device to lure young men:

Catharine: My God, yes! It was a one-piece suit made of white lisle, the water made it transparent! I didn't want to swim in it, but he'd grab my hand and drag me into the water, all the way in, and I'd come out looking naked!

Doctor: Why did he do that? Did you understand why?

Catharine: Yes! To attract! Attention!

Doctor: He wanted you to attract attention, did he, because he felt you were moody? Lonely? He wanted to shock you out of your depression last summer?

Catharine: Don't you understand? I was PROCURING for him. She [Mrs. Venable] used to do it too.<sup>39</sup>

Catharine's presence on the beach in a revealing swimsuit—purchased for her by Sebastian—is a calculated display not of Catharine herself, but rather, of Catharine as a sexual spectacle. Much like an artist in a gallery space, Sebastian literally presents Catharine as an object meant to be seen and not touched, for Catharine is being used as a tool in what is essentially a 'bait and switch' scheme. It is the sight of her that attracts the young men that Sebastian—presumably through the use of blandishments and promises of money—sexually exploits. While this scenario is convoluted to the point of being somewhat unrealistic, it is of little consequence to Williams's chief aim, which appears to be an allegorical exploration of the ways in which male desire is often routed through images of women.

It is of some significance, I think, that Sebastian's elaborate plan to achieve sexual satisfaction results in his death, a death that he appears to have predicted:

Doctor: From what? Save him [Sebastian] from what?

Catharine: Completing—a sort of—image—he had of himself as a sort of—sacrifice to a—terrible sort of a—

Doctor: God?

Catharine: Yes, a—*cruel* one, Doctor.<sup>40</sup>

It is Sebastian's presentation of Catharine on the beach sets in motion the series of events that bring about his death. Thus what occurs on the island of Cabeza de Lobo is an image of male death actualized via recourse to an image of female sexuality.

I attempted to highlight this connection between Sebastian and Catharine by having them both dressed in white (as was mentioned earlier, Mrs. Venable wears red; all of the other characters wear black). I also inundated Catharine with white light at key moments in the film to foreground her status as a visual image.

### **Carnography**

In attempting to come to a better understanding of the manner in which gender and sexuality are made to work in the horror genre, Pinedo chooses to focus not on how the characters live, but rather, on how they die: "Although victims of both genders are objects of sexual investigation, and despite the evenhandedness of many slasher films in which roughly equal numbers of men and women are killed, male and female death are not the same".<sup>41</sup> Pinedo notes that in the most slasher films "male death is swifter, more distanced, and more likely to occur offscreen or to be obscured, whereas female death is extended, occurs at close range, and in graphic detail".<sup>42</sup> She concludes that the death of the female victim is "more erotically charged than that of her male counterpart".<sup>43</sup>

Pinedo contends that this erotic charge "suggests a connection between horror and pornography" and she uses the term "carnography" to investigate the ways in which both genres "reveal the hidden recesses of the body, porn through carnal knowledge and horror through carnage".<sup>44</sup> She outlines the major points of intersection between the two:

Both are concerned with the devouring orifice. But whereas pornography is concerned with the phallic penetrations of sexually coded orifices like the mouth (gaping in ecstasy or pain), vagina, and anus, horror is more concerned with the creation of openings where there were none before.<sup>45</sup>

In her essay, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess", Linda Williams also explores the connection between pornography and horror, but she adds a third category of film, romance fiction or melodrama, which she notes has been referred to as "soft-core emotional porn for women".<sup>46</sup> Williams observes that the three genres are marked by "heavy doses of sex, violence, and emotion" that are "dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite".<sup>47</sup> What appears to be at issue for the critics of all three genres is the extent to which the audience is invited, indeed expected, to forgo the maintenance of a "proper esthetic distance" between themselves and what happens on the screen.<sup>48</sup> Put another way, all three genres measure success by the degree to which the viewer's body responds to what he or she sees and hears. In pornography (generally considered the lowest form of the three) sexual arousal and, ideally, climax is required. The horror film requires the viewer to feel at least uneasy and, ideally, terrified. In the melodrama, the viewer must be made to feel sad; ideally, to the point that he or she (although the viewer is usually assumed to be female) begins to cry.

To accomplish their respective goals, filmmakers working in these three genres must defy many of the conventions that generally govern the assessment of a narrative drama's 'quality'. Consequently, these films are "marked by 'lapses' in realism, by 'excesses' of spectacle and displays of primal even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive".<sup>49</sup> It is the physical sensation elicited by the film from the viewer that is paramount, and these 'defects' of narrative form exist to give the viewer as many opportunities as possible to experience a state of sexual excitement, terror, or sorrow. As Williams notes, the formal requirements of these three genres stand in stark contrast to the "modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative".<sup>50</sup> Verisimilitude is what these three genres appear to lack and that is the main reason they are criticized in terms of form.

In terms of content, the criticism of these genres is rooted (particularly in psychoanalytic and feminist film theory) in notions of perversion.<sup>51</sup> In the case of pornography, this would *appear* to be obvious; however, sex is not in and of itself perverse. What critics of pornography do feel is perverse is the objectification and victimization of the individuals

(particularly the women) who appear in pornographic films. As Williams notes, “pornography, in this view, is fundamentally sadistic”.<sup>52</sup> In the case of horror films, the viewer’s identification with both the Final Girl and, perhaps, the killer is the root of the purported problem. Psychoanalytic film theorists often read both as gender-confused and their climatic battle is almost always a sensationally violent spectacle. The viewer of the horror film is thus steeped in his (the viewer is typically assumed to be male) most torrid fantasies of bisexuality and sadomasochism. Finally, of the third genre the question is often asked: “Is the weeping woman of the melodrama appealing to the abnormal perversions of masochism in female viewers?”<sup>53</sup>

However, this focus on perversion is obviated, perhaps, by Williams’ assertion that “sexuality is by definition perverse. The ‘aims’ and ‘ambitions’ of sexual desire are often obscure and inherently substitutive”.<sup>54</sup> She adds: “Unless we are willing to see reproduction as the common goal of the sexual drive, we have to admit, as Jonathan Dollimore has put it, that we are all perverts”.<sup>55</sup>

Perversion, sadomasochism, and notions of horror permeate my understanding of the relationship between Mrs. Venable and Catharine. Roberts’s portrayal of Mrs. Venable suggests, at times, something bordering on the brink of sexual excitement at the thought of Catharine’s lobotomy. Thus Mrs. Venable’s demand that Doctor Cukrowicz “cut this hideous story out of her [Catharine’s] brain”<sup>56</sup> while motivated first and foremost by a desire to protect the memory of her son, would also appear to be rooted in the aforementioned “erotic charge” that death of the beautiful young Catharine would provide. Doctor Cukrowicz is clearly compromised by his entanglement with Mrs. Venable, for he is the instrument through which she hopes to achieve her aim:

Doctor: Mrs. Venable ... you’re such an innocent person that it obviously hasn’t occurred to you that anyone less innocent might interpret this offer of a subsidy as—well, as sort of a bribe?

Mrs. Venable: Call it that; I don’t care. There’re just two things to remember. She’s a destroyer. My son was a creator! Now if my honesty has shocked you, just pick up your little black bag without the subsidy in it and run away from this garden! No one has heard our conversation, but you and I, Doctor Sugar.<sup>57</sup>

While the doctor's professional standing would certainly be compromised by any financial benefit he may receive from cutting into Catharine's brain, it is also potentially compromised when Catharine kisses him. The text of the play gives no clear indication as to whether he is or is not sexually aroused by Catharine's unmistakably sexual advance; it only says that he initially attempts to disengage himself from her embrace. Similarly, the doctor's intentions in regards to Mrs. Venable's financial offer are ambiguous; he is initially shocked, but not so shocked that he flees from the grounds of Mrs. Venable's mansion. Williams's stage notes imply that the doctor does at least consider leaving, but once he gets a good look at Catharine, he opts not to: "Sister Felicity holds the door open for Catharine as the Doctor starts quickly forward. He starts to pick up his bag, but doesn't".<sup>58</sup> What it is about Catharine that causes Doctor Cukrowicz to remain is uncertain. However, she clearly arouses something in him, whether his interest is sexual, medical, or economic is unclear, perhaps he is motivated by a combination of the three.

Thus it may be said that Catharine and Mrs. Venable embody the twin temptations of sex and money (as filtered through the doctor's own disinterested interest in a potential medical subject). That Doctor Cukrowicz is called upon to mediate between the two women as their exchanges become more and more heated would seem to highlight his role as an organ of the state (he is not just a doctor, but a doctor at a public hospital and at least some of his patients have been determined to be criminally insane). In the context of the conflict between Mrs. Venable and Catharine, the doctor's role as a representative of the state is, perhaps, of more consequence than his medical opinion. Mrs. Venable does not seem overly concerned with whether or not Catharine is mentally ill; she simply wants to see Catharine disciplined, punished, and silenced.

The schema created by Williams's is one in which the medical establishment, as embodied by Doctor Cukrowicz, is tasked with the responsibility not of curing or treating people, but rather, of maintaining some form of social order, which in this case involves ensuring that only one narrative on the subject of Sebastian Venable's life and death is allowed to remain intact:

Mrs. Venable: I won't collapse! She'll collapse! What I mean is that her [Catharine's] lies will collapse, not my truth, not the truth!<sup>59</sup>

Two bodies almost inextricably tied to two very different narratives. Yet despite the fact that Mrs. Venable has hired private investigators to look into Sebastian's death, she was not actually with her son when he died, so her ability to contest Catharine's version of events would appear to be rather dubious. On the other hand, Catharine's credibility is highly questionable for several reasons: her current circumstances (institutionalization along with large doses of various prescription medications), what we are told about her behavior before she went on vacation with Sebastian, the fact that Catharine's feelings for Sebastian may have been of a romantic nature (when accused of this by Mrs. Venable, Catharine neither confirms nor denies the charge), and finally the bizarre nature of the story itself. To summarize, a young woman with a history of emotional problems and violent outbursts goes on vacation with her cousin, a gay man for whom she may have had romantic/sexual feelings, the man dies, and the young woman returns home with a tale of sexual tourism and cannibalism. One can easily imagine a prequel to *Suddenly Last Summer*, in which a story very different from the one Catharine tells unfolds.

It is in this area that I feel my film may not be successful. In directing Lauren Steyn, the actress who plays Catharine, I neglected to emphasize my sense that Catharine may not be telling the complete truth about what happened. However, I would like to note that I do not believe Steyn's performance suffers because of this.

### **Dawn of the Dead**

We are all civilized people, which means that we are all savages at heart but observing a few amenities of civilized behavior.

-Tennessee Williams

The young men who kill Sebastian are, in the original text, from an island that we can safely assume is in the Mediterranean and, given the fact that Cabeza de Lobo is a Spanish name, it can also be assumed that this island is administered by Spain. Whether it is closer to the coast of Northern Africa or Southern Europe is not stated, leaving the

racial and ethnic implications of the island's exact position unexplored.

As Pinedo observes, "race is a structuring absence in the milieu of the horror film where monsters, victims, and heroes are predominantly white, a racially unmarked category".<sup>60</sup> She suggests that the reason for this is that in "American culture, race is already monstified" and goes on to say that "if the racial other is marked as monster in the larger culture, then to do so in the horror film is to tread too closely to prevailing anxieties".<sup>61</sup>

Pinedo's suggestion that race is a "structuring absence" in the production and criticism of horror films has informed my adaptation of *Suddenly Last Summer*. One of the main struggles for me has been developing a means of representing Sebastian and the young men who kill him. Their absence from the text allows them to be used as points of reference for the other characters, but it denies them a voice of their own and deprives them of any sense of real agency. Who was Sebastian Venable really and what can we as viewers really expect to know about the young men who kill him? Yes, we know that Sebastian was a poet and that the men were poor, but many viewers may come away with nothing more than the sense that Sebastian was a predatory gay sex-tourist who met a well-deserved end at the hands of a pack of savage cannibals (this is true, perhaps, of even gay and non-white viewers). Needless to say, I was uncomfortable with this representation, and it was at this point that I began to think along lines similar to what Pinedo defines as race horror.

Pinedo has coined the term race horror in reference to a particular subgenre of horror that, in marked contrast to the majority of horror films, takes race as its chief focus: "Race horror retains its capacity to estrange danger by introducing a dark and ancient religion, one associated with savagery and third-world peoples".<sup>62</sup> "The monster of race horror" as Pinedo observes, "is associated with the religion, be it as follower or god. African, Aztec, and American Indian religious lore are invoked to explain the nature of the evil at work in the film".<sup>63</sup> In her analysis of the 1987 film, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, Pinedo notes that the film, which is set in Haiti, "associates the political tyranny of the Duvalier regime with voodoo, identified as a religion that can turn dissidents into zombies and use them to

terrorize others. Portrayed as a magical religion, voodoo is shown to have profound effects on the body”.<sup>64</sup>

Race horror has informed my representation of Sebastian and the young men of Wolfkop. I have decided to use the literal eating of Sebastian’s flesh by the men who murder him into a symbolic fusion between the two with the character of Miss Foxhill serving as a sort of medium or vessel. Foxhill’s role in the original text is agonizingly minimal and she seems to exist merely as a means of demonstrating Mrs. Venable’s power and sense of privilege. This feeling of entitlement might well have led Mrs. Venable to sacrifice the life of a servant – in a ritual involving something akin to demonic possession—in the hopes of resurrecting some version of her son, a zombie, who comes back not as he was originally, but rather, forever marked by the signs of his final living moments. Thus this new version of Foxhill wears the white suit that Sebastian wore on the day he died, but also has half of his face painted black in acknowledgment of the fact that he is the ghost of both Mrs. Venable’s dead son and the men who killed him. Additionally, I requested that the actress who plays Catharine (Lauren Steyn) acknowledge that she knows exactly who and what the Sebastian/Foxhill figure is during the final scene of the film, in which she recounts the events that occurred in Wolfkop.

Initially, I had imagined Foxhill would be played by a black actor with half of his face painted white, but when the first actor I approached was unable to play the part, I realized that what I really wanted was to foreground the idea that this was a representation, someone’s distorted view of blackness. I then decided to cast a white actor with half of his face painted black (it should be noted that the use of blackface by minstrels in both the United States and South Africa did not play a role in my thinking about this project and so I have chosen not to discuss it). Also, I did want to imply that some form of miscegenation had taken place; however, I decided against casting a mixed-race actor because I wanted to heighten the sense of something unnatural, perhaps supernatural, having occurred. In some versions of the zombie myth the zombie is actually a human who has been fed the blood of a vampire, but who has not been fully transformed and exists as a slave of the vampire. Thus Foxhill’s existence, in my adaptation, is due to a

slightly altered understanding of miscegenation as a literal mixing of the blood.

### **Shades of Horror**

*Cousin Sebastian said he was famished for blonds; he was fed up with the dark ones and was famished for blonds.*

-Catharine, Suddenly Last Summer

The specter of interracial sex and its importance to race horror is explored by Pinedo in her analysis of the film, *Candyman* (1992). In this film, the monster is the ghost of a black man who impregnated a white woman and was murdered by her father and a white mob: “They saw off his right hand with a rusty blade, strip him, smear his prone body with honey to draw the bees that sting him to death. Then, in proper fashion for a lynching, they burn his body”.<sup>65</sup> Helen Lyle, a young white woman pursuing doctoral studies in urban legend at the University of Illinois, is intrigued by reports that the spirit of this “Candyman” haunts the Cabrini-Green Housing Projects of Chicago and decides to investigate. Unfortunately for Helen, Candyman becomes attracted to her and attempts a seduction, the implications of which are thoroughly explored by Pinedo:

But as the interracial romance of the past once conjured up disgust and loathing in the white mob, so the suggestion of intimate contact with Candyman conjures up body horror in the audience. Aside from the conspicuous hook implanted in his stump, there is the matter of Candyman’s decomposed body cavity which, as he reveals to her, is swarming with bees. When they kiss, bees stream from his mouth. Thus body horror operates here to undermine the acceptability of interracial romance.<sup>66</sup>

This scene may be said to collapse the distinction between two subgenres of the horror film: body horror and race horror. This blurring of the boundaries between the two reveals the potential ideological subtext of the horror genre, which is dependent upon coded references to very real groups and phenomena if it is to have any aesthetic force. Put another way, the horror film—regardless of its roots in the realms of fantasy—must, on some level, confront the viewer with very real fears if it is to illicit an actual sense of dread. Evidently, the fear of death alone is not always enough, and so we see monsters

that bear the markings of society's racial and sexual anxieties. It is still an image of death that is being conveyed; however, it is not merely the death of the individual that is being represented in body horror and race horror films.

In her essay, "Becoming the Monster's Mother: Morphologies of Identity in the *Alien* Series", Catharine Constable describes the battle between Ripley and the alien queen in Darwinian terms: "Both are parthenogenetic mother figures who are tropes for the perpetuation of their respective species".<sup>67</sup> Clover concurs, noting that "the Final Girl, Ripley, is pitted in the climatic scene against the most terrifying 'alien' of all: an egg-laying mother".<sup>68</sup> As Constable observes, the conflicts between the two "take the form of attempting to destroy each other's generative [reproductive] powers" and killing each other's offspring is their chief aim (in *Aliens* Ripley has become a surrogate mother to an orphaned girl named Newt).<sup>69</sup> Thus the ultimate success of the alien queen would be not just the death of Ripley and a handful of other victims, but the death of the entire human race. This is a goal that the monsters of slasher films such as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* could never hope to accomplish; however, the monster of the *Aliens* series (with her equally monstrous reproductive system) could do this with ease if it were not for the intervention of Ripley, who represents the fully matured Final Girl recast as a mother figure—a mother figure with an adopted daughter, as opposed to a biological mother, an important distinction given the discomfort surrounding the female reproductive system upon which the body horror genre is based.

In contrast to the *Alien/Aliens* series, the race horror genre is less concerned with the death of the entire human race and is mainly troubled by the corruption of the white race. This corruption can take myriad forms and constructs the white protagonists as victims or villains, depending of course, on the ideological frame with which one views the particular film. In *Candyman* for instance, the monstrosity of actual interracial sex (and perhaps even mere social contact) is made evident by Helen Lyle's eventual death and transformation into a monster: "She appears when inadvertently summoned by her unfaithful and guilt-wracked husband, who repeats her name five times into the mirror, and like Candyman she kills him with a hook".<sup>70</sup> This transformation from victim of the

monster to the monster itself is an essential element of horror films in which vampires or zombies play a role. In some films an actual disease or biological agent is transmitted; however, even if the transformation is attributed to some form of magic, it is generally fear of contamination or infection that these films explore. The *Alien/Aliens* series employs a similar device; the alien queen often implants her embryos into human bodies, where they gestate and eventually tear themselves through the stomachs of their human hosts.

However, when placed within the context of race horror, this infection need not be biological and can take the form of a cultural shift in values and mores. In the 1987 film, *The Believers*, for instance, the villains are a group of affluent and mainly white New Yorkers, who have fallen under the sway of an unnamed black African man who believes in human sacrifice, specifically the sacrifice of first-born sons. This group attempts to kill a boy, Chris Jameson, who is the son of a white police psychiatrist named Cal. In *The Believers*, as Pinedo observes, the “dark and ancient gods of African religion have contaminated the white, middle-class home”.<sup>71</sup> However, the exact source of this contamination bears further scrutiny.

While race horror films often associate “evil with a darkness of the soul, and disturbingly, with a darkness of the skin”,<sup>72</sup> it is usually a white person or a small group of white people who introduce the ‘disease’ into the broader community. What types of white people are these one might ask? Pinedo offers a hint; in *The Believers* the unnamed “African is introduced to the States through Kate and Dennis Maslow, white Columbia University anthropologists who meet him ‘in the bush’ when he is a child”.<sup>73</sup> As was previously mentioned, the Helen Lyle character in *Candyman* is also an academic. In the context of American media culture, white academics who choose to live in New York City and Chicago—the settings of *The Believers* and *Candyman*, respectively—and have an unseemly interest in the culture of black people are more likely than not metonyms for socially liberal whites generally. Thus these two films appear to have an extremely conservative agenda in which even intellectual engagement with the racial Other leads to degradation and death. Put another way, it is the white academics of these films who act

as the conduit by which the evil of the racial Other is introduced into the broader white community; had Helen Lyle not investigated the myth of the Candyman and the Maslows not adopted an African child, this 'evil' would have remained confined to the housing projects of America's inner cities and the continent of Africa.

While Sebastian may not have been an academic, as a gay artist he is a figure of similar opprobrium for the conservative media culture from which the race horror subgenre springs. That his resurrection cannot be accomplished without a fusion of his essence and that of the men who murder him (who in my film are clearly meant to be black African) is meant as an allegorical representation of the contamination that both the race horror and body horror subgenres fear.

### **The Dark Continent**

*... and this you won't believe, nobody has believed it, nobody could believe it, nobody, nobody on earth could possibly believe it, and I don't blame them! They had devoured parts of him.*

-Catharine, Suddenly Last Summer

While race does not emerge as a major theme in the text of *Suddenly Last Summer*, I would like to consider a relatively recent production that was able to unearth the play's potential racial subtext. In 1994, JoAnne Akalaitis mounted a revival of *Suddenly Last Summer* at the Hartford Stage Company. While most of the cast was white, the role of Catharine was played by a black woman (Lisa Arrindell Anderson) with the role of Miss Foxhill being played by an Asian woman (Dawn Akemi Saito). Ben Brantley, writing for The New York Times, observes:

The fact that she (Anderson) is the only actor who is black, and that she is playing a persecuted truth-teller in the Deep South, seems more than an example of color-blind casting. So does the use of an Asian actress, walking with mincing submissiveness in a Suzie Wong dress, as Mrs. Venable's secretary. Ms. Akalaitis must have bigger cultural issues in mind. Why else would she move the date of the play from 1935 to 1940, which would place Sebastian's last European tour in the midst of a world war? <sup>74</sup>

Unfortunately, I did not see Akalaitis's production; however, I do find much to admire in what I do know about her interpretation. In Akalaitis's schema, the casting of a black

Catharine is meant to be a problem, or rather, *black Catharine is the problem*: her own mother is disgusted by the story she tells (a story she tells loudly and in public at almost every available opportunity), her brother finds her behavior perverse, she is selfish, she is disrespectful, she is ungrateful, she engages in inappropriate sexual behavior, she is violent (she deliberately burns a nun with a cigarette, for instance), and she is now poised to become a burden to the state.

Akalaitis's decision to cast the role of Catharine with a black actress serves as a means of shifting the viewer's focus from the past and the distant locale of Cabeza de Lobo to the present discourse on urban decay as it manifests itself in both the United States and South Africa (albeit with some significant variations). Within this discourse black Catharine is perceived as a problem, just as all black people are. That a single black woman is made to serve as a representation of all black people, or rather, all the supposed sins black people commit, is meant as a parody of a discourse that perceives (and conceives) many historically marginalized groups as monolithic blocs. Any doubt that Akalaitis is playing with stereotypes would seem to be dispelled by the casting of an Asian actress in a "Suzie Wong dress" in the role of Foxhill, a character whose significance I discussed previously. One wonders how Akalaitis's audience might have reacted to some of Mrs. Venable's more pointed lines. On the subject of black Catharine's impending lobotomy, for instance, Mrs. Venable makes her expectations quite clear: "You said that it pacifies them; it quiets them down; it suddenly makes them peaceful".<sup>75</sup> In the context of Akalaitis's production, which clearly takes racial stereotypes as one of its major targets, this line could refer to a wide range of alleged faults, from committing violent crimes to speaking too loudly in a movie theater. I say this not as a way of making light of crime or racism, but rather, to highlight the way in which Akalaitis's production satirizes the discourse on race in contemporary American media culture.

### **Something Unspoken**

Repression, disfigurement, excision, and dismemberment are among the major themes explored by Williams in *Suddenly Last Summer*. In an odd twist of fate, these issues have surfaced in the production history of the play. When first staged on January 7, 1958,

*Suddenly Last Summer* was paired with another play, the much shorter *Something Unspoken*. Both were presented under the collective title *Garden District*.<sup>76</sup> While *Suddenly Last Summer* is still staged at fairly regular intervals, it is rarely presented with *Something Unspoken*. This strikes me as unfortunate, for the two plays approach similar issues in such different ways that they almost seem to be commenting upon one another, thereby giving the viewer a better understanding of Williams's intentions.

*Something Unspoken* is the story of two women. Cornelia Scott is a wealthy Southern woman of about 60, who lives with her secretary, Grace Lancaster, who is in her early to mid-forties. The relationship between the two is ambiguous and is never clearly explained, although Cornelia appears to want some form of clarification: "Grace!—Don't you feel there's—*something unspoken* between us?"<sup>77</sup> While it is never actually stated in the text, it soon becomes clear that what is unspoken between the two women is the fact that they are lovers and have been for the past 15 years. Grace is particularly coy about this fact. When presented with fifteen roses by Cornelia ("A rose for every year, a year for every rose!"), Grace replies: "... Why, of course! I've been your secretary for fifteen years!"<sup>78</sup> What is so interesting—or, to be blunt, odd—about this response is the fact that Grace clings to the pretense that she is simply Cornelia's secretary. While the two women are clearly living in a time and place in which homophobia was rife (the American South in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), they are currently the only two people in the house, a fact angrily noted by Cornelia:

Cornelia: Anything to avoid a talk between us? Anything to evade a conversation, especially when the servant is not in the house?<sup>79</sup>

However, while the servant is not in the house, the two women are not actually alone. The audience can hear every word that comes out of their mouths and see every move they make. The action of the play may not actually breach the fourth wall, but the characters are aware of some unnamable force lurking behind it. Put another way, Williams has constructed *Something Unspoken* as a bitter parody of the restrictions placed upon him as a writer. Even though Grace and Cornelia are ostensibly alone in their home, the one place where they should be able to have an honest conversation about their

relationship, the dictates of the 1950s were such that this conversation could not be represented on stage. In *Suddenly Last Summer* this silence about sexuality reaches truly bizarre heights, for this is a play which centers on the revelation that Sebastian was a gay man who was murdered by men he paid to have sex, and yet the words gay, homosexual, or even sex are never once uttered.

Of course, it is also possible to read *Something Unspoken* as a comment on internalized homophobia. Grace's refusal to discuss her relationship with Cornelia in frank terms may be a result of shame or even self-hatred and is, perhaps, the result of an inability to completely escape the influence of the dominant ideology on same-sex relationships in her society, an ideology that does indeed conceive of such relationships as shameful.

There is a third possible reason for the tension between these two women and it has to do with money, specifically which of these two women has it, a point made by Grace quite forcefully:

... And in addition to that, you have your wealth!  
Yes, you have your fortune! All of your real estate  
holdings. Your blue chip stocks, your bonds,  
your mansion on Edgewater Drive, your shy little  
secretary, your fabulous gardens that pilgrims cannot  
go into ...<sup>80</sup>

The "shy little secretary" is Grace, of course, and it is strongly implied—although never actually stated within the text—that Grace is financially dependent upon Cornelia. Thus it is possible that Grace's resistance of Cornelia is motivated not by internalized homophobia, but rather, by a discomfort with the power imbalance upon which their relationship is based:

Cornelia: Sit down. Don't leave the table.

Grace: Is that an order?

Cornelia: I don't give orders to you. I make requests!

Grace: Sometimes the requests of an employer are hard to distinguish from orders.<sup>81</sup>

However, Grace does not seem to perceive the difference in their positions simply in terms of economic power:

I am very different! Also turning gray, but my gray  
Is different. Not iron like yours, not imperial, Cornelia,  
But gray, yes, gray, the color of a ... cobweb ... something  
White getting soiled, the gray of something forgotten.<sup>82</sup>

Here we have one of Williams' perennial themes, the loss of youth and the attendant fading of one's beauty and sexual desirability. However, by having Grace refer to herself as "something white getting soiled", connotations of sexual shame, specifically the shame of sex with another woman, are reintroduced. That there are multiple possible sources for the tension that exists between Cornelia and Grace is a testament to the complexity of this brief play. Issues of sexuality, class, age, and gender all exist as lines of force that impede the ability of these two women to build a relationship based upon open and honest dialogue.

### **Conclusion**

In his book, Tennessee Williams and Film, Maurice Yacowar examines the problems encountered in adapting *Suddenly Last Summer* for film in 1959, noting that there was the "familiar issue of toning down the sensational elements of a drama to appease the more conservative film audience".<sup>83</sup> In Yacowar's view, this problem was compounded by the "allegorical, nonrealistic nature of the original play. The extremities of Williams's subject matter were tempered here by the air of unreality created by several special effects in the stage presentation".<sup>84</sup> While Yacowar finds the film version impressive, he does acknowledge that his view is not universally shared:

The danger in filming the play was that this element of fantasy in the stage presentation would be lost. In Williams's view, the film failed by turning the allegorical drama "into a literal film, which made it absolutely unbelievable ... and rather distasteful." He "loathed" the film.<sup>85</sup>

In attempting to offer an explication for both the conceptual basis and aesthetic strategy

of my adaptation of *Suddenly Last Summer*, it occurs to me that my project is of a somewhat paradoxical nature. While I am a media artist who seeks to question representations of race, gender, and sexuality in consumer culture, I have made a film that makes use of grotesque caricatures of historically marginalized groups. In his essay, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2", Craig Owens speaks of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* as being caught within the "unavoidable necessity of participating in the very activity that is being denounced precisely in order to denounce it".<sup>86</sup> In Owens' view, Sherman's chief aim is the "deconstruction of the supposed innocence of the images of women projected by the media, and this Sherman accomplishes by reconstructing those images so painstakingly, and identifying herself with them so thoroughly".<sup>87</sup>

Owens' observations have informed the methods I employ in my own art practice. To some extent, I feel that my work is a something akin to a 'funhouse mirror' that reflects back a distorted reflection not of the individual viewer, but rather, of the individual viewer as constructed by the lens of mainstream media. The chief aim of my films is to trigger a moment of recognition for the viewer in which he or she realizes how desire (be it individual or communal) is often encoded and transmitted in popular culture.

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