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# **The Body in the Pool: Reflections on David Cronenberg's *Maps to the Stars***

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## Abstract

*Placing David Cronenberg's Maps to the Stars (2014) in the Gothic tradition reveals the ghostly and often overlooked mother-daughter dynamics at play in that genre, veering between the internalized fears of Gothic terror and the externalized evil of Gothic horror.*

'Terror and Horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them [...] and where lies the difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreading evil?'

(Ann Radcliffe, *On the Supernatural in Poetry*, 1826)

Agatha (Mia Wasikowska), a young girl on the cusp of adulthood, disembarks from a Greyhound bus in downtown Los Angeles wearing her credentials ('bad babysitter') quite literally on her sleeves. What the film later reveals as a film franchise (her brother Benji (Evan Bird) is the child star of the Hollywood blockbuster *Bad Babysitter*), can be taken at face value: she had been cast out of the family unit and institutionalized by her parents for trying to kill her younger brother and herself in a house fire. The scarred young woman, the incestuous relationship between brother and sister, her coming back from the dead to claim her brother, the

family home destroyed by fire - all these narrative elements evoke the adaptation of one of the most famous examples of American Gothic: Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (US 1960, dir. Roger Corman). And indeed, Agatha's quest - like that of every true Gothic heroine - is to lay bare the family's guilt, their darkest secret, her mother's deepest fear: 'Now the world will know we have done wrong'. While her mother Christina (Olivia Williams) acknowledges some kind of unspecified 'wrong-doing' - her own incestuous relationship with her brother/husband Stafford (John Cusack)? the abuse of their children? - and battles with her internalized guilt and despair, Stafford externalizes the family drama and tries to rid himself of it by exorcizing his daughter Agatha, just as he encourages his patients/clients to cast out their demons. It could be said that Christina and Stafford embody the uncertainty and obscurity of Gothic terror and the projection and identification of evil in Gothic horror.

David Cronenberg's *Maps to the Stars* (2014) might be less obviously in the Gothic horror tradition than some of the director's early 'body-horror' films (e.g. *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977) or *The Brood* (1979)), but all the elements, put in place by 'Monk' Lewis in 1796, are clearly recognisable and as transgressive as they were then: incest, fratricide/patricide/matricide/filicide, suicide pacts, abusive mother/father figures, visitations by the dead, repulsive exploitation, mental disintegration and corruption cloaked as redemptive spirituality. In the film, many of these signature Gothic elements have been updated for the spectacularised neo-

liberal world of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Los Angeles, a world obsessed with the ever-new, ever-young, and yet spellbound by and enthralled to its own past: Lewis' celebrated monk has become a TV therapist to the stars, redemption is not found in saving your soul but in cultivating a celebrity status with its empty promise of unconditional devotion, and the stars on Hollywood's Walk of Fame, where Agatha Weiss kneels in adoration, are the saints of this new religion. However, what is truly shocking is not so much that these excessive desires and obsessions are not safely 'othered', instead transposed to our contemporary world and played out in highly dysfunctional familial and quasi-familial relationships, but rather that the film refuses to cast its characters unequivocally as either victims or perpetrators. Subject positions shift constantly and uncomfortably between the vulnerable, mistreated child and the violent, uncaring adult: Julianne Moore's character Havana Segrand, a famous but fading actress, is haunted by visions of her dead mother who died in a fire and whose youthful and angelic appearance seems to belie not only Havana's narrative of a (sexually) abusive parent but also the verbal cruelties and humiliations with which her ghost berates her distraught daughter. Clarice Taggart (Sarah Gadon), the late Hollywood Star, is haunting her daughter in the guise of her most iconic role - a role Havana is desperate to re-enact in a new remake of the (fictional) 1960s melodrama *Stolen Waters* that marked the pinnacle of her mother's career and cemented her forever-young appearance in public memory, defeating the threat of aging and real-life mortality by which the narcissistically self-hating Havana is plagued.

Havana employs Agatha as her personal assistant (or as she calls it, her 'chore whore'), a relationship in which she takes on both the role of mother and daughter in an uncontained and sexualized dynamic of pure projection, a mimicry of intimacy and familiarity that breeds contempt and ultimately hatred. Agatha, on the other hand, is not simply the victim of abusive parent figures: the child of an incestuous relationship between brother and sister, she carries her burn scars concealed under long black gloves, attracting even more attention to what lies beneath. Highlighting, purging and taking revenge through fire, she is channelling her inner Carrie, evoking the abject female body, uncontained, leaking with blood on the white sofa, triggering Havana's hysterical repudiation of the female body in general and Agatha's in particular, which in turn provokes the defiant Agatha to bludgeon Havana to death with her phallic film-trophy, making her body (which is referred to as 'menopausal' by the child stars) leak with blood, just as the violence of Agatha's father, kicking her abdomen, had made her own body leak. The mother is always also the child, and forces on the child the duty to repair her, to make her whole again. This is experienced by the child as a truly terrifying responsibility that seems to allow for only two responses: either become the mother (exemplified in Havana's desire to play her mother's career-defining film character) or kill her outright, thus ridding yourself of her excessive demands (Agatha's pseudo-matricide).

While scholars have explored all the dark variations of father-daughter struggles being played out in gothic

novels' pivotal figures of villain and damsel-in-distress, the relationship between mothers and daughters in this genre remains under-researched. The dead mother is certainly at the centre of *Maps to the Stars*, both in André Green's sense of the 'dead mother'<sup>1</sup> in the character of Christina who is physically present, yet emotionally absent, depressed and blank, and Clarice who is really dead yet uncannily alive in her films, and whose unresolved relationship with her daughter haunts not only herself but, through the film-within-a film structure, the movie as a whole. We see black-and-white clips from the old melodrama, intra-diegetically motivated as Havana rewinds to watch the scene in which her mother asks the young doctor to save her, over and over again. '[Hollywood is] an industry that thrives by repeating itself, a culture of remakes and cyclical melodrama'<sup>2</sup> mimicking the unresolved trauma that gets acted out again and again and again. There is not only the film-within-a-film structure but the movie also plays with echoes of other films in which Julianne Moore plays disturbed, blank or unresponsive mothers, such as the *Carrie* remake (2013, dir. Kimberly Peirce), films which are referred to by the characters themselves (such as *Mommie Dearest*, 1981, dir. Frank Perry) and films which are evoked through variations of their theme of ghostly mother-daughter interactions such as *Rebecca* (1940, dir. Alfred Hitchcock), in which the young heroine is obsessed with her husband's dead, flamboyant wife, who veers between being a villainous mother figure and a taunting love interest/rival, just as the husband is clearly also

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. André Green, 'The Dead Mother', in *On Private Madness* (London: Karnac 1986), pp.142-173.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.avclub.com/review/david-cronenberg-draws-his-maps-stars-broad-stroke-215711>

a father figure. Rebecca is never really seen in the film and yet she has this powerful presence: she is the one that has been murdered and yet she is cast in the role of the gothic villainess.

And then there is of course the cameo of Carrie Fisher playing herself and the allusions to her own family drama: not only did she write a novel and screenplay *Postcards from the Edge* (1990, dir. Mike Nichols), in which her difficult relationship with her actress mother Debbie Reynolds is played out on screen, but her own daughter Billie Lourd currently channels her mother's most famous role in *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens* (2015, dir. J.J. Abrams) - no melodrama on the face of it, but certainly a film that deals with incestuous and oedipal family dramas.

All characters are haunted by their memories, by malevolent apparitions and a dark past: what are ghosts other than unfinished business? Whereas Havana is stalked by the spectre of her mother, Agatha herself is the menacing revenant, the disturbing presence that returns to the unhomely and uncanny (Freud's 'unheimlich') family home as a stubborn reminder of the repressed and constantly re-enacted incestuous relationship that is at the heart of both the parents 'original' sin (which in Oedipal fashion was committed unawares) and the siblings' relationship: Agatha's obsession of performing a wedding ritual with her brother/cousin Benji which is in fact a suicide pact. Benji himself is haunted by the little girl he visited in hospital but also - more enigmatically - by the drowned son of an actress who was initially meant to

take on Havana's/Clarice's role in *Stolen Waters*. These ghost are in the(ir) elements, fire and water, death by drowning (little Micah, played by Domenic Ricci) and death by fire (Havana's mother, Agatha and Benji); Christina even manages to combine both. The corpse in the pool alludes, of course, to *Sunset Boulevard's* (1950, dir. Billy Wilder) famous opening scene, the floating body who is also the narrator, recounting this story of mental disintegration and social corruption, film noir's equivalent to the Gothic novel's skeleton in the closet or the waxwork of a decaying body behind the veil in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). And just as in Radcliffe's novel, in *Maps to the Stars* we never see the body of the burnt/drowned Christina in the pool. But while Radcliffe gives the reader an indication of the horror by describing Emily's reaction, Cronenberg heightens the horror by refusing to acknowledge it: Stafford, who shoved his burning wife/sister into the pool with a sunlounger to extinguish the flames, lies in a catatonic state on a patio chair, giving his returning son no indication of his mother's horrific suicide by fire/drowning: neither the characters nor the audience are allowed any cathartic release of pity or fear; no grief, no mourning is taking place.

After stealing Stafford's wedding ring, Benji reunites with Agatha, and the siblings/cousins perform an impromptu wedding ceremony culminating in their joint suicide. The end echoes the fatalistic world view of the gothic novel, in which the family guilt is the family curse that will be passed on from one generation to the



next, each damned to repeat that which cannot be remembered or worked through.