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# Look At Her: The Subversive Spectacle of Grande Dame Guignol Cinema

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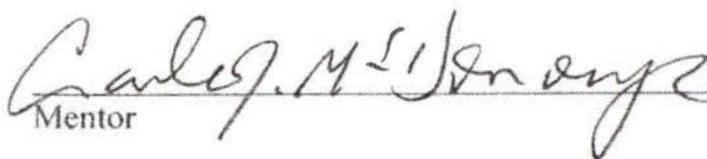
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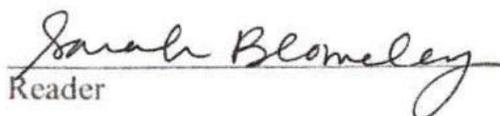
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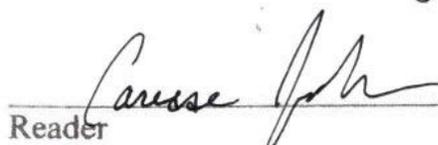
LOOK AT HER:  
THE SUBVERSIVE SPECTACLE  
OF GRANDE DAME GUIGNOL CINEMA  
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A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
in partial fulfillment  
of the  
Requirements of the Degree  
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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Speaking about early American cinema, historian Marjorie Rosen noted that the medium of film served as “potent escapism and a form of popular culture whose scope was so encompassing that it at once altered the way women looked at the world and reflected how men intended to keep it” (19). The camera, a novelty that allowed people to see the world somehow simultaneously in its true form and through an indelible, patriarchal filter, enabled early film artists to entertain and educate the masses while unwittingly reproducing the values of their existent social perspectives. In effect, the subjugation of women that existed in life was reflected in film. This social imbalance not only failed to produce the female perspective in film art, but also created an idealized image of femininity that would persist in art and in popular culture from the turn of the century to the present, namely the It-girl, the icon, and the female star.

In the 1910s and 1920s, American film history witnessed the making of its first female star: silent film actress Mary Pickford. Pickford, who Rosen describes as “the Everyman’s notion of the eternal little girl,” embodied the role of the female star not only in her popularity and industrial success, but in her personal and professional reflection of the shifting American values of her time through the phenomenon of writing these changes upon women’s bodies (34). In her early roles, Pickford was characterized as “the winsome waif, the sweet and sturdy ragamuffin who would not disturb the status quo, flirt with immorality, or exude sexuality. Who would not, in short, emerge a woman” (35). In fact, she often portrayed characters younger than her true age, playing twelve-year-olds in her late twenties and early thirties in films such as *Pollyanna* (dir. Paul Powell, 1920) and *Little Annie Rooney* (dir. William Beaudine, 1925). She was known

popularly as “the Girl with the Curl” and as the original film *ingenue*—exemplifying the American audience’s preoccupation with the intersection of femininity and youthful innocence before it became clear that one type of female star could not satisfy all of society’s values and desires, problematizing this ideal and creating contradictory standards for women.

Concurrent with Pickford’s rising star, an opposite figure arose in the array of female film archetypes: the sexually-charged vamp, realized by actress Theda Bara in films like *A Fool There Was* (dir. Frank Powell, 1915). Rosen writes that Bara “embodied still-primitive but enticing notions of depravity and wanton lust” with “her waist-length black hair, her darkly kohled eyes, and crude, exotic makeup”—a perfect visual and conceptual foil to Mary Pickford’s golden curls and gamine charm (60). Bara—and other on-screen vamps who followed—brought a scandalous thrill to life in the form of the dangerous woman that aroused a conflicting blend of intrigue and ridicule; as Rosen claims, perhaps she is “the mother of the *femmes fatales*, the Mysterious Women, the Impenetrable Bitches of later screen generations” (61). However, neither Pickford’s nor Bara’s polarized images won precedence as American filmmakers perfected their formulaic conventions and composed the ideal woman who would inhabit their subjective screen spaces. The result was a metamorphic blend of the preceding qualities that was impossible to embody in life—a fictitious female that men adored, women envied, and performers had to be molded into.

While the “talkies” of the late 1920s began to take hold as the industrial norm, classical Hollywood cinema found definition in narrative and stylistic techniques that did not merely hyperbolize social truths and dominant values, but replicated them with

intoxicating verisimilitude. This lifelike quality included a problematic insistence that the ideals shown on screen were not only entertaining and pleasurable to watch, but that they were superior. Hollywood cinema during this period—termed the Golden Age—implied that its perfected version of reality either portrayed or investigated the way life should be; it provided a model for how people should look and behave. To mass-produce and polish this superior standard, Hollywood furthered its existing studio and star systems to create the icons of the midcentury.

These icons transcended normalcy to become immortal, crafting images that persisted past their primes and that influence performers and viewers alike into the present. Due to the aforementioned gendered lens that the male-dominated film industry carries, these images differ for men and women. While male film stars also faced certain aesthetic standards, their roles were seemingly timeless; actors never outgrew the guise of the rugged, individualistic hero, of the comedian, of the moral leader. Regardless of age, most male performers were able to step into such roles without question at any point in their careers, evidenced by popular actors like Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart playing lead roles in their late fifties alongside female costars only half their age. For women, the industry standards were harsher and less malleable—problematizing the singular models set by earlier performers, like innocent Pickford or wanton Bara, by proving that the idolization of the female star is far more complex and conditional.

From the 1940s onward, the female star's limited time within the spotlight grew clearer. Studios scouted beautiful and talented young women to act not only in roles on screen, but as figureheads of the aesthetic and social standards that their films promoted. A problem quickly arose when these women proved unable to live indefinitely in a state

of preserved youth and social balance. While these women served as two-dimensional aesthetic icons within the realm of film art, they were also human; as they aged, their images evolved both visually and conceptually—from ingenues and sex symbols to matrons and sterile elders. For these reasons, Hollywood’s veteran female stars struggled against the threat of disposability that affected them more acutely than their male counterparts. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, many of Hollywood’s most glamorous actresses—who enjoyed decades worth of critical and popular acclaim during the height of the Golden Age—were aging out of the ideal, limiting roles that built their careers and iconic statuses and struggled to find work.

It was during this transitory moment that a new subgenre developed that utilized the unique positions of these aging performers: Grande Dame Guignol cinema. Merging the melodramatic woman’s film and the growing success of the horror genre, the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre sought to portray a uniquely feminine horror by casting major film stars as exaggerated figures, often called “psycho-biddies,” who respond in perverse ways to trauma and tragedies related to the female experience. In sharp contrast to these actresses’ earlier roles, Grande Dame Guignol films deglamorize their stars by portraying them as aged women faced with social conflict, mental illness, and violence—often going so far as to transform these poised performers into murderers for a defamiliarizing shock.

In response to the subgenre’s themes and aesthetics, many critics and viewers alike find the Grande Dame Guignol’s transformation of its actresses’ images exploitative and degrading. According to film scholar Tomasz Fisiak, the potential of the subgenre to humanize the ostracized “hags” that it produces is squandered; instead, “the degradation of these women becomes a source of entertainment... Grande Dame Guignol humiliates

not only its characters, but the actresses who impersonate them” (44). Further, in the context of the emergent subgenre’s unforgiving social atmosphere, Fisiak asserts that it is the women’s unrefined appearances that diminish their value: “it should not be surprising that hag horrors, besides their unrestrained camp aesthetic value, reveal a highly sexist image of their female protagonists. The heroines evoke the resentment of the audience because they are repulsive, look withered, fight with insanity, or often live thoroughly submerged in frenzy” (43). Conversely, I would argue that these features are what reveal the Grande Dame Guignol’s subversive value. The performances and perverse appearances of these actresses, along with the socially critical themes at the core of most Grande Dame Guignol films, radically reject the exclusive aesthetic standards that once enabled success for actresses in romanticized roles and later resigned them to obsolescence.

It is the Grande Dame Guignol tradition’s emphasis on the female performer that makes these films inherently socially critical. While the focus on isolated, mentally ill, and even violent women in these films compel viewers and critics to categorize them as sensational psychological horrors, I assert that the horrors explored in these films are defined by public opinion rather than personal conflicts. These socially-defined horrors are even reflected in the subgenre’s naming conventions; these films are more commonly referred to as “psycho-biddy” or “hagsploitation” films, echoing the negative readings of film historians and critics like Fisiak. However, these terms stem from popular responses to the dissonance between the polarizing female images invoked by the subgenre: the glamorous star and her less-than-ideal fictional alter-ego, the grande dame. The relationship between the two female images has less to do with the women inhabiting

those roles than it does with the socially-defined values of the other parties involved in the creation and consumption of popular film. Because traits and qualities like youth, beauty, and poise are valued and feminized, depictions of their opposites—including the effects of aging and the loss of social acceptance—are perceived as unsightly to the audience and insulting to the performers. In truth, it is the ability of the performer to convey social meaning that gives their performance value whether it is pleasant or not.

The “Grande Dame Guignol” title reflects this concept. The name was inspired by a tradition of French drama that developed at a Parisian theatre called Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol. This theatre, translated as “The Theatre of the Great Puppet,” specialized in representing horror in a naturalistic theatrical setting. Film historian Peter Shelley credits actor and playwright Charles Busch for borrowing the “grand guignol” language to connect this oft-dismissed film subgenre with a more substantial and respected artistic movement (1). As a result of this shift in nomenclature, the “psycho-biddy” is reconsidered as a “grande dame,” or an older woman who carries social influence and prestige, and the seemingly exploited performer is represented as a puppet without agency of her own.

Busch’s metaphor likens the role of the actress to that of an inanimate doll, as though she is attached to strings that are controlled by a master and ceases to move or act after the stage curtains are drawn. While this portrayal may be less abrasive than other popular readings of the Grande Dame Guignol, it—like Fisiak’s claims of exploitation—fails to acknowledge the most valuable, humanizing message that its actresses convey: the performative quality of one’s own identity. While the esteemed actresses who took part in the creation of this subgenre may have offered desirable and potent images for

their directors to utilize, the actresses themselves are due the credit for constructing, maintaining, and adapting the on- and off-screen characters that made their careers—and these films—fascinating sites of feminine expression and social exposition.

The very core of stardom is the stylization of the human form; actors and actresses alike strive for an aesthetic, moral, and behavioral standard that both sets them apart from and relates them to others by modeling modes of performing those values. While these performers may seem like larger-than-life figures to their audiences or like movable mannequins to filmmakers, in actuality they are constantly interacting with the social environments of their time like anyone else would, actively manipulating their actions and image to reflect the role that they must portray. In the case of the Grande Dame Guignol, the puppet-strings—representative of an industrial, social expectations for their actresses—are broken, allowing the actresses to express a new range of plausible (if not pleasant) performances of femininity.

This emphasis on individual performance bridges the discussion of the female star's plight to that of the everywoman. Not dissimilar to her on-screen sister, the average woman faces social expectations and limits that flatten her range of self-expression. Just as filmmakers and audiences questioned their favorite actresses' roles as they grew and changed on screen, women are constantly redefining themselves in relation to the influences that they hear and see regarding what "femininity" is, in essence. However, gender studies theorist Judith Butler explained in her writings that gender identity is not essential at all; rather, it is "a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (520). The Grande Dame Guignol, in its active reconstructions of unconventional

gender performances, brings this concept to life. For the sake of illustrating these reconstructions, my analysis will focus on three representative films from this subgenre—*What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (dir. Robert Aldrich, 1962), *Strait-Jacket* (dir. William Castle, 1964), and *Lady in a Cage* (dir. Walter Grauman, 1964)—that feature major Hollywood actresses highlighting their contrived performances and exposing the ways in which people enact the same performative modes in varied social situations.

While it is not the first major Hollywood film to feature a falling-star narrative, Robert Aldrich's 1962 film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* is a definitive example of the Grande Dame Guignol genre.<sup>1</sup> The film, which features real-life rivals Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, depicts two sisters living in discord after a tragic accident inspires a rift between them and ends their respective show business careers. As implied by the gossip-inspired title, this film explores the aftermath of aging, trauma, and social dissonance from the female perspective.<sup>2</sup> Contextually, Davis and Crawford were larger-than-life figures in Hollywood during the Golden Age, earning Academy Awards and general adoration for their earlier roles. However, both women took on the *Baby Jane* project due to a lapse in offers for actresses in their age bracket. Actresses like Davis and Crawford, both of whom were only in their early 50s at the time of the film's production, were effectively shunned from popular film when they were no longer considered marketable as young, desirable romantic doubles for male actors in the same age bracket. In this film and other Grand Dame Guignol features, aging actresses were repositioned as

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier films that portrayed this theme include Billy Wilder's 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard* and Joseph L. Mankiewicz's 1950 film *All About Eve*. The latter film starred Bette Davis as a Broadway star who loses her status to a younger actress.

<sup>2</sup> Many of the successive Grande Dame Guignol films followed this naming convention, borrowing from the traditionally feminine social gossip that is often portrayed as frivolous or petty. In this instance, the stories and outcomes that are gossiped about are explored to encourage viewers to relate to and engage with those questions.

far outside of their established public personas as possible. Despite claims that these women were exploited by this distortion of their images, these alternative roles provide important examples of female performers working outside of the gendered tendencies of Hollywood cinema and exposing the immense critical power of manipulating the expected, pleasurable on-screen image.

Following the popular success of *Baby Jane*, a number of Grande Dame Guignol films were successively released that explored similar themes. In 1964, Joan Crawford appeared in her second “grande dame” role in William Castle’s *Strait-Jacket*, a slasher film that portrayed the *Mildred Pierce* star as an axe murderer.<sup>3</sup> In this film, the concept of performance is further explored through the characters’ construction of their images through physical stylization, portraying mundane personal style choices as evidence of one’s interaction with social values. Further, the film explores the themes of motherhood and familial trauma as components of one’s self-construction. *Strait-Jacket* pairs interestingly with *Baby Jane*’s focus on female relationships, prior horror films’ portrayals of female characters, and with Joan Crawford’s own legacy, marking a fascinating intersection of performative acts that speak to the evolving understanding of the variation of female experience.

Unlike the first two Grande Dame Guignol selections, the final film—Walter Grauman’s 1964 film *Lady in a Cage*—depicts a traumatic event rather than its long-term effects. Olivia de Havilland appears as a wealthy woman who becomes trapped in her private elevator and is terrorized by intruders and looters who take advantage of her

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<sup>3</sup> In both *Mildred Pierce* and *Strait-Jacket*, Crawford plays mother characters who experience conflicts with their young adult daughters. Crawford won an Academy Award for her performance in the former film and received a number of positive critical responses, making her appearance in Castle’s matriarchal slasher film worthy of comparison and analysis.

compromised state. While de Havilland's protagonist is less of a shocking departure from her earlier demure roles, her tumultuous experience reveals underlying social issues that her otherwise cool and comfortable character may never have experienced due to class- and status-related privilege.<sup>4</sup> Due to this film's conflicts between characters, the social influences referenced in the two preceding films can be tied to *Lady in a Cage's* oppositional portrayals of fragile femininity and toxic masculinity. Ultimately, this film represents the Grande Dame Guignol's potential to explore the nuanced social performances that define the range of identities and to explore the problematic relationship between society's binary ideal. Through each of these three films, I intend to represent the subgenre's inspection of individual performances—both on- and off-screen—and the social relationships that define and influence them. Mirroring the social and conceptual components of self-expression and gender performance, I will focus on the ways in which each film's narrative, cinematic style, and reception draw attention to the construction of identity through performance that is highlighted in this subgenre.

To quote feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey on the expected response to the decline of the male-gaze-oriented classical Hollywood tradition, “[w]omen, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this end, cannot view the decline of this film form with anything much more than sentimental regret” (27). However, I would argue that the insurgence of Grand Dame Guignol cinema depicts female performers responding to the decline of the studio system and their precarious positions with self-sufficient zeal and a desire to appropriate film form for their own ends. Rather than accept subservient standing in minor roles, Davis and Crawford campaigned for their

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<sup>4</sup> Olivia de Havilland's most notable roles include her appearances in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *The Heiress* (1949).

own art and set an example in *Baby Jane* for mature actresses to secure their stardom through alternative modes. Trading glamour for its socially-critical counterpart—camp—and trading objectification for ostentatious command of the screen, these roles were infamous for denying the feminine beauty and behavioral standards that these actresses' earlier roles defined. In *Baby Jane* and *Strait-Jacket*, Davis and Crawford highlight problematic features of Hollywood cinema by calling attention to performance *through* performance, prompting viewers to consider what the malleability of the female image expressed through these films is really saying about gender performance and its inherent power. Conversely, *Lady in a Cage* provides a close-up of two opposing gender identities to critique their respective faults and reveal their caustic interactions through the same filmic means that celebrate and even eroticize their imbalanced relationship.

Many viewers and critics, like Fisiak, who revisit these films remark on the tremendous fall that the featured actresses faced from dignified, desirous roles to these grotesque figures; the intersection of Hollywood glamour with B-movie horror is seen as hokey, gratuitous, and vapid. I argue that the explosion of graphic violence and campy inelegance against the Hollywood firmament in these films is, even if produced unwittingly, evidence of the way that the unmaintainable façade of an exclusive social and artistic standard reveals its own insufficiencies. As a result, Grand Dame Guignol cinema achieves precisely what Mulvey claims about the female-oriented closeup: “[o]ne part of the fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative; it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or an icon, rather than verisimilitude to the screen” (20). When one part of the fragmented narrative and stylistic structure of popular film is isolated—the mature actress seeking work past her

industrial prime—it certainly breaks verisimilitude with the oppressive social and artistic standards of classical Hollywood conventions and allows for critique and experimentation. When this same figure is analyzed beyond her fictitious roles (as exalted star and as an on-screen character), the performative nature of gender and of all social functions can be revealed—allowing audiences to see how individuals interact with the social standards that define them. In the following analysis, I aim to prove this point by examining each film’s narrative and stylistic conventions, the context of their castings, and their reception and relevance in popular culture to propose Grand Dame Guignol cinema as a proto-predecessor of the destabilized, deconstructed, subversive art called for by feminist critics of Hollywood’s patriarchal structure.

## CHAPTER TWO: NARRATIVE

While the spectacle of Grande Dame Guignol films is often highlighted in critical and popular responses, the subgenre's critical perspective on gender first appears through its narrative tendencies. Like film art itself, gender performance is constituted by both the narrative and the visual; isolating the narrative—or the sociocultural history from which performative behaviors are drawn—is necessary to contextualize how social expectations are affirmed or questioned—either on a representative, artistic, or individual level. In “Performance Acts and Gender Constitution,” Judith Butler clarifies that gender is neither a stable nor essential identity, but rather a phenomenological tradition in which an individual's gender is “instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which the bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” that requires “a conception of a constituted *social temporality*” (519). While the visual representation and stylized treatment of female bodies is central to the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre, it is the engagement (or disengagement) with timely social standards, gender norms, and coded expectations for individual behavior in the genre's narrative conventions that allows for such subversive performances to be crafted. To accurately assess the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre's commentary on gender performance, each of the selected films' stories must be analyzed to understand how they represent their characters' performances in the context of a larger social narrative.

Butler's concept of social temporality is key to understanding what makes the Grande Dame Guignol film a worthy site for critical gender study. Headlined by eccentric older women, each film is poised to examine how the self is redefined in response to the

passing of time its effects on gender, performance, and self-construction. Outlined by film historian Peter Shelley, the core qualities of a Grande Dame Guignol narrative and its “psycho-biddy” figures emphasize this temporal focus:

The role the actress plays in Grande Dame Guignol either presents her as a mentally unstable antagonist or as the Woman in Peril protagonist. The grande dame as unstable antagonist may pine for a lost youth and glory, or she may be trapped in idealized memories of childhood, with a trauma that haunts her past. She is akin to Mrs. Havisham in Charles Dickens’ novel *Great Expectations*, her adult life wasted as she rots away in her unused wedding dress in her room. Like a ghost, the grande dame cannot rest until the unbalance of the universe is corrected. A refusal to accept reality and the natural process of life exemplifies the fear of aging and death, and implicitly a fear of women.

That there was no male version of the Grande Dame Guignol tells us that such an idea is less believable to screenwriters and directors. (Shelley 4)

In addition to playing into a reductive, negative view of the grande dame, Shelley’s description proves that the key qualities of the subgenre’s characters and their surrounding plots are, in fact, gendered. While it is clear that aging, loss, trauma, dissatisfaction, and instability are not inherently feminine experiences, these anxieties are feminized in the Grande Dame Guignol and perverted to achieve a thrill befitting of the horror genre. The perversion of the female experience—typically comprised of traditional roles such as wife, mother, and caregiver—highlight the dissonance between the grande dame character and her expected temporal placement.

The “unbalance” that Shelley perceives within these narratives is due to this disconnect between the films’ women and their expected social roles. However, Shelley’s description of normalcy—the “reality and the natural processes of life” that the grande dames supposedly refuse—are evidence of the rigid definition of the gendered experience that Butler aims to rework. The experiences that each grande dame faces are hardly unrealistic, unnatural, or unique to women. Fascinatingly, these films reveal a very real social horror faced by those who are seen as outliers—the same phenomenological system that provides self-definition can deny it when one fails to abide by its unwritten rules.

The feature of these films that make them both thrilling and productively critical is the purposeful abjection of the female figure. Pushed to the outskirts of society by age, trauma, disability, or otherwise socially unacceptable characteristics, the grande dame is faced with what Judith Butler terms precarity, or the expulsion from the safety net of social inclusion. In an essay on performativity and sexual politics, Butler writes that “[p]recarity is, of course, directly linked with gender norms, since we know that those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment and violence. Gender norms have everything to do with how and in what way we can appear in public space; how and in what way the public and the private are distinguished” (ii). For the filmic grande dame, gender performance becomes unintelligible or unrecognizable when she is no longer to fill an expected or appropriate role. Even before the injection of climactic violence into a grande dame plot, her character is contradictory or problematic; she is a cruel caregiver, a hateful sister, an unstable and absent mother, a targeted victim. It is in this precarious state that the grande dame acts out against a

system in which she holds no articulable role, becoming monstrous and fearsome when no other signifiers apply.

Thus, the unbalance observed in the Grande Dame Guignol film is created by the discomfort of being indefinable, or rather, the inability to be positively defined. In each of the three selected Grande Dame Guignol films, the characters attempt to balance themselves within the social sphere and find themselves by some means excluded. Studying how each film represents these precarious positions, the characters' attempts to read and respond to social cues to properly perform their identities, and their ultimate failures point to inadequacies in our larger social narrative and the necessity for institutional (rather than individual) redefinition.

The first of the selected Grande Dame Guignol features, Robert Aldrich's 1962 film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, is perhaps the clearest critique of rigid gender roles, their constricting effects, and the horror of existing outside of the norm. To apply both Shelley's and Butler's language, the film sets up an ongoing unbalance between the two Hudson sisters and the social world beyond their domestic space and explores their respective precarious positions before resolving them in violence. As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the erratic behavior of the antihero, the victimization of the "good" sister, and the context provided by the film's small social circle imply that it is the limiting social stage itself that problematizes performance.

Credited by Shelley as the first true Grande Dame Guignol film, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* encompasses the narrative conventions outlined in his generic overview; however, it also exceeds his limited scope of what the "natural processes of life" mean for women and complicates his concept of the grande dame's unbalance.

Beginning with a flashback to 1917, the Hudson sisters' competitive dynamic is revealed as the titular Baby Jane finds praise as a child star on the vaudeville circuit and her sister, Blanche, must watch from backstage. The girls' mother comforts a jealous, crying Blanche by saying that "someday [Blanche] will be receiving all of the attention" and encourages her to be kinder to her sister and her father than they have been to her (00:06:05-00:06:20). Subsequently, the film jumps forward to 1935 as the sisters pursue film acting careers. Ironically, it is revealed that Jane has no talent for acting—whereas Blanche is a major star. In line with her mother's message, Blanche ensures that Jane is taken care of through a clause in her own contract that keeps both sisters in work. It is during this period that the fateful car accident occurs, leaving Blanche bound to a wheelchair and leaving Jane responsible for her care.

In the narrative present, Jane (Bette Davis) and Blanche (Joan Crawford) are all but removed from the outside world and are visited only by their housekeeper, Elvira Stitt (Maidie Norman) and their neighbor, Mrs. Bates (Anna Lee), in their fraught domestic space. The film finds Jane struggling with her mood and with alcohol, while Blanche is enjoying a television revival of her most famous films. Elvira notes that the celebration of Blanche's success has angered Jane, leading Jane to hide fan mail that arrived to their home. These actions concern Elvira and she urges Blanche to go through with the latter woman's plan to sell the house and institutionalize Jane—a plan that hurts and angers Jane when she finds out.

From this point forward, Jane becomes increasingly cruel toward her sister. She refuses outside help from either Elvira or Mrs. Bates, she mocks Blanche's happiness over her career's revival, and progresses to killing small animals—including Blanche's

own pet bird—and serving them to her sister on platters at dinnertime. It is at this point that Jane’s diversion from the accepted social structure is made clear; already ostracized by age, status, and confinement to the domestic sphere, Jane’s rejection of the outside world leaves her without an intelligible act to perform outside the home. Through her actions, Jane further isolates Blanche and forces her into a precarious state as well. Amidst Jane’s escalating abuse of her sister, Jane begins to exhibit a desire for an acceptable face to bare to the outside world and seeks to reconnect with the version of herself that seemed most complete and socially successful: the vaudevillian “Baby Jane.”

While her sister is confined and otherwise unable to compete within their lifelong battle for the spotlight, Jane seeks to reenact her most positively-received performance and recontextualize her perverse domestic space. In this section of the film, Jane tries on different faces to appear normal to those that she engages with outside her home—she performs a perfect impression of her sister to assure authority over the phone, signs her name on checks, and puts on makeup and a coat to appear dignified in public. While these acts are proven to be tools to move within a world that would not accept her at her own face value, they demonstrate how unstable the appearance of normalcy truly is.

Jane’s most fervent attempt to redefine herself comes when she hires an accompanist, Edwin Flagg (Victor Buono) to take “Daddy’s” role in her vaudeville act. Surprised by Jane’s eccentricity, Edwin agrees to play piano for her “revival” and enables her to act out her memories of social inclusion and acclaim. During their first meeting, Jane states that her father used to say that “[y]ou can never lose your talent... you can lose everything else, but not your talent” (01:12:17-01:12:22). Brought forth by Edwin’s tentative acceptance of her redefined self, Jane reveals this life mantra as a means of

justifying her return to the stage. Moreover, it serves as a metaphor for the film's commentary on social performance and the misguided assumption that it is essential or stable.

Like one's gendered role in society, talent may seem essential—as though a person's ability to act successfully in a certain manner is tied inherently to their being. In truth, talent is again a performance; it is a stylization of skill and behavior that relies on social recognition to gain value. The talent that Jane asserts she maintains from her childhood has less to do with the retained ability to sing, dance, or entertain than it does with the ability to put oneself on the social stage and be recognized for those—or truly, for any—actions. The tragedy revealed in this moment is that Jane believes that her talent is essential, as is her “Baby Jane” persona, when in fact it is tied to social temporality and the whim of an ever-evolving collective consciousness that determines, accepts, denies, and even creates meaning. The inability to return to this state of social acceptance further angers Jane as barriers—her age, her sister, Elvira, the completely dissimilar social scene in which she hopes to revive a dated social and theatrical performance—remind her of the temperamental mode of social definition.

While it is true that the social temporality that Butler observed can be adapted and stylized to fit an individual's mode of expression, *Baby Jane* is an excellent example of how fickle these malleable standards can be. While Blanche was able to supplant Jane's fame in their young adulthood by acquiescing to the collective social interest, Jane is unable to do the same in their later life.<sup>5</sup> She finds that she has missed her narrow

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<sup>5</sup> The theme of usurping a woman's theatrical presence is also present in one of Bette Davis' most iconic classical Hollywood films, *All About Eve*. Bette Davis received the Academy Award for Best Actress in 1951 for this role.

opportunity to innovate or change course. The realization of her stunted fate comes when Elvira—Blanche’s only ally—confronts Jane about her behavior. After being dismissed from work, Elvira enters the Hudson home to confirm her suspicions that Jane is harming Blanche, finding the latter sister’s bedroom door locked. When Jane returns, Elvira cuts through Jane’s delusion with the following statement: “[i]t doesn’t make a bit of difference whose house it is. You’ve got to act like a grown woman the same as everybody else” (01:37:30-01:37:56). After this confrontation, Jane kills Elvira with the hammer that Elvira was using to open the door; this act marks Jane’s first murder and her violent rejection of social responsibility and cohesion.

Elvira’s admonishment of Jane’s behavior is a logical, moral exercise of the confining social standards that Jane had been previously pushing against; however, the filmmaker’s choice to respond to this appropriate warning with an act of violence allows for speculation on the function of violence in the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre amidst these pointed social critiques. Considering the preceding analysis of Jane’s character and the inception of her complicated gender performance, this act is not simply gratuitous. Elvira’s statement is charged with terms relevant to Jane’s struggle to identify and perform in ways that are socially acceptable; Jane’s violence is directed toward other women, namely Blanche and Elvira, who are more successful than Jane is at “acting like grown women” in ways that “everybody else” can recognize, as Elvira noted. Tragically, she wishes to destroy what she cannot be—a perverse reversal of Butler’s note that those in a state of precarity are most likely to experience violence and mistreatment. In effect, the film demonizes the excluded individual to evoke fear of the abnormal, of the slighted woman who cannot face “the reality and natural processes of life” that Shelley accepts as

distinctly tragic in the feminine context. However, the film's resolution complicates this message by troubling the boundary between successful performance, moral correctness, and our ability to assess the difference.

Throughout *Baby Jane*, Blanche faces heinous mistreatment at the hands of her sister. She is starved, mocked, bound, gagged, beaten, and ultimately killed as Jane struggles to accept that she cannot break from her precarious position. Blanche is the Woman in Peril to Jane's unstable, violent grande dame—but Blanche is not the moral figure that the audience assumes her to be. Early in the film, the audience is purposefully misguided by the framing of the 1935 car accident; to save face after the event, Blanche implicates Jane as the drunken aggressor who tried to kill her and left her maimed instead. As Blanche lies on the beach dying, she admits her own guilt:

I made you waste your whole life thinking you'd crippled me... You didn't do it, Jane. I did it myself... You weren't driving, you were too drunk. I wouldn't let you drive. I made you go open the gates. I watched you get out of the car. You'd been so cruel to me at the party, imitating me, making people laugh at me... I wanted to run you down, crush you, but you saw the car coming. I hit the gates. I snapped my spine. (02:08:04-02:09:54)

In truth, both Jane and Blanche struggled with the dissatisfaction of performance and public appearance. Blanche's anger at being mocked and imitated moved her to violence in the narrative past, but the evidence of her cruelty and perverse desires is hidden by her appearance. She was able to assume the role of the victim based on how the situation appeared—to both sisters and to the public. Blanche worked with the narrative that allowed her to ascertain her own innocence, power, and positive

definition—expelling Jane to precarity as a monster wracked with guilt and faced with a lifetime of unwitting obligation. If Jane’s unstable identity throughout the film evokes fear of the abnormal in the audience, Blanche’s masterful performance of normalcy must evoke fear of what gender performance can conceal: a dark, hierarchical system that enables and encourages individuals to assert dominance over others by acting the part of their better.

This unequal system is the driving force behind the Grande Dame Guignol’s perversity. For the Hudson sisters and for grande dames that succeed them, the subgenre proposes their tragic actions as performances of power. As Butler states in her writings on precarity, the gender norms that inform individual performances are not only reflections of “broader relations of power,” but they are “one way that power operates” (ii). Speaking broadly of the sociopolitical factors of gender performance, Butler asserts that “[t]he performativity of gender has everything to do with who counts as a life,” and that precarity—exhibited in *Baby Jane* through social exclusion and discontinuity—represents the risk of existing as an outlier within this system of power (iv). While Shelley asserted that the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre’s thrill is derived from the female lead’s fruitless efforts to correct a subjective “unbalance” or to reject the natural process of the female experience, the true horror within these narratives is the length at which these characters go to be socially accepted—to live a life that is recognized and valued.

While all individuals work within this gendered system of social power, Shelley’s note that the precarious grande dame roles and situations are unique to women is true. Not only does Shelley’s assertion acknowledge the disparate social opportunities afforded

to individuals based on gender, but it also points to the waning range of acceptable modes of performance for women as they age and accept or deny expected feminine roles. The horror of the Grande Dame Guignol resides in the realization that individual power and social value is harder to achieve for some than it is for others, often based in gendered life experiences and trauma that are beyond one's control—including aging past one's social prime, missing opportunities and relationships that are viewed as standard or necessary, or simply being unable to perform normalcy in a social atmosphere that relies on appearance. For women, these personal losses are often reflected in their social value that make them appear lacking, abnormal, or even disturbing in the case of an exaggerated figure like the grande dame. In *Baby Jane* and succeeding Grande Dame Guignol films, the fickle nature of female social freedom is the unbalance that the grande dame sees and attempts, wittingly or unwittingly, to resolve—calling attention to the inherent social power in gender performance and the women's perverse, tragic, and unsuccessful attempts to fit within a system that pushes them to the margins.

In William Castle's 1964 film *Strait-Jacket*, perverted applications of gender performance reveal a conflict between enacting femininity outwardly, dealing with gendered trauma inwardly, and reconciling both facets to achieve social power. Joan Crawford embodies another grande dame role as *Strait-Jacket*'s Lucy Harbin, a woman who murders her sleeping husband and his mistress while her daughter looks on in horror. After her initial criminal act, Lucy is dubbed criminally insane, committed to an asylum, and released after twenty years to rejoin her now grown daughter, Carol (Diane Baker), in regular society. While the reunion appears happy for both women, the effects of Lucy's and Carol's past trauma is evident; axe murders begin cropping up around

Lucy's brother's farm and her rehabilitation is called into question. At the end of the film, it is revealed that Carol had been committing the new crimes dressed as her mother—a clear representation of the film's commentary on the legacy of violence and the effect that trauma has on personal behavior in a gendered context.

*Strait-Jacket's* female leads are reminiscent of many mother-daughter pairs in earlier Hollywood melodramas, but this film provides a new perspective on the potential horror of mother-child relationships by peering through a feminine lens.<sup>6</sup> Based on the core features of the film's plot, *Strait-Jacket* is similar to Alfred Hitchcock's iconic 1960 thriller *Psycho* and both films share the same head writer, Robert Bloch; however, both films explore the mother-child dynamic to different ends.<sup>7</sup> As Barbara Creed states in *The Monstrous-Feminine*, *Psycho* provides “an exemplary study of the horror that ensues when the son feels threatened, physically and psychically, by the maternal figure. Norman Bates' desire to become the mother is motivated not by love but by fear; he wants to become the mother to prevent his own castration—to castrate rather than be castrated” (163-164). Creed implicates that the castrating mother as she appears in *Psycho* is “associated with eyes that stare and appraise,” demonizing what Creed terms “the maternal gaze” (165). In *Strait-Jacket*, these themes are transformed by the change of the child's gender; for the young woman, this maternal or feminine gaze is not unilateral; it is a dynamic relationship in which both individuals look to one another for guidance and redefinition.

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<sup>6</sup> Joan Crawford herself appeared in one of the most poignant mother-daughter melodramas, *Mildred Pierce*, for which she won the Academy Award for Best Actress in 1946.

<sup>7</sup> According to Shelley, classical Hollywood films like *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *The Star* (1952, starring Bette Davis) addressed theme of aging women in the spotlight, but “*Psycho* [added] the low budget, the house setting, the contrast between the brightly lit outside world and the darkness of the interiors, the invalid woman, and the grande guignol” that made the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre possible. (17)

Much like the sisters' competitive dynamic in *Baby Jane*, the women of *Strait-Jacket* are always watching one another to define themselves in relation to one another. As *Strait-Jacket*'s introductory scene states, a crucial mistake in this narrative is that both Lucy and her husband “[thought] that the child was asleep” and would remain untouched and uninfluenced by her parents' actions (00:02:25). This film's preoccupation with the construction of gender performance emphasizes both the creative aspect of social identity and the lasting effects of trauma and parental teachings on the performances that they craft as they begin to construct their own selves in the social sphere. While Creed's interpretation of Norman Bates' desire to become his mother to avoid castration is one interpretation of his motive, another is simply that his mother's values were instilled in him and became an integral, recognizable influence on his own social performance. The same is true for the dynamic between Lucy and Carol Harbin. In both films, the children take on their mothers' likenesses to illustrate the effect that their mothers' teachings—intentionally or unintentionally given—had on their children's behaviors. However, *Psycho* further villainizes the mother figure by keeping her in the shadows, disallowing any self-expression to defend her from her son's interpretation. *Strait-Jacket* amends this injustice, representing the unbalanced social performance crafted by Carol in light of Lucy's true character in an attempt to retrieve Lucy from precarity.

Lucy Harbin's feminine characterization is a clear example of an attempt to secure or challenge social power through gender performance. When Lucy is introduced, Carol's voiceover describes her mother in the following manner: “[she was] born on a farm. Parents, poor. Education, meager. Very much a woman, and very much aware of the fact” (0:02:44-0:02:54). Lucy had been married once before to an older man chosen

by her family, but her current marriage to Carol's father, Frank Harbin (Lee Majors), was on her own accord. Considering this context, Lucy's awareness of her status as a woman and the social weight that it incurs is essential to understanding the film's plot. However, In contrast to Lucy's description, Carol's omniscient voiceover claims that Frank "married [Lucy] because she owned property, but she didn't own him" (0:01:01-0:01:02). In this instance, the narrative presents Lucy—aware of the benefits and limitations of her gender—and Frank in different corners of a power struggle. For Frank, Lucy's value is tied to her assets rather than her person; for Lucy, love—and ultimately anger—motivates her actions and she attempts to regain power through violence. Her crime is directly tied to a power dynamic between her and her husband that Lucy brashly corrects, addressing the film's first instance of unbalance. Fascinatingly, the narrative punishes this act and recognizes its immorality. While Lucy recognizes that her mode of securing social power was unjust, it is her daughter, Carol, who mistakenly learns to manipulate her performance of gender to achieve power through the same perverse means.

After Lucy completes her sentence, Carol hopes to return her mother to her "old self;" retrospectively, this effort is selfish and perverse, but in the narrative present it plays a significant part in Lucy's recognition of the active construction of one's gender performance. In *Strait-Jacket*, the intensity and range of feminine emotion is dramatized and tied to visual, violent swings. In one instance, Lucy—dressed in the clothes, wig, and accessories purchased by Carol to mimic Lucy's old style—flirts with Carol's fiancé, Michael (John Anthony Hayes). It is evident that she is uncomfortable with her role as mother after being separated from her child for twenty years and she reverts back to the "awareness" of her womanhood and its transactional value noted in film's introduction.

The ensuing performance is one that switches from a sanitized, matronly figure trained by rehabilitation to control and constrain emotion to an inappropriate demonstration of sexual viability. As in life, the film depicts the multiplicity of feminine identity—specifically when complicated by age, motherhood, and stigmatization—as difficult to reconcile and understand.

In Grande Dame Guignol fashion, the complexity of identity and performance is simplified through the metaphor of violence. Carol, like all women and girls, inherits her mother's mode of feminine expression as her primary example. In this exaggerated case, Carol is conditioned to react to inequities through violence just as her mother had. At the end of the film, Carol's reenactment of her mother's violent performance is in response to a similar conflict. Michael's parents deem her unworthy of their son, partially due to Lucy's past, and Carol acts out against them. Carol faced the same fear of inadequacy, usurpation, and loss that Lucy felt during her initial act and responded similarly; further, she hoped to blame her mother. Rather than promote a threatening anxiety between genders like Creed's "castrating mother" reading of *Psycho*, *Strait-Jacket* proposes its perverse outcome—only one of many—as a metaphor for the impact of social influence on self definition and performance.

While *Strait-Jacket* aimed to redirect the conversation surrounding gender from its typical combative mode, the next Grande Dame Guignol selection—Walter Grauman's 1964 film *Lady in a Cage*—purposefully contrasts femininity and masculinity to depict the potential ills of the gendered power structure and its binary division. In this atypical Grande Dame Guignol, Mrs. Hilyard (Olivia de Havilland) is a true Woman in Peril. A wealthy, happy woman, she has yet to realize social dissonance until a terrible

event—entrapment and home invasion—forces her to interact with others who vary in status, character, and intent. Alone in her home after her son leaves for a trip, Mrs. Hilyard’s home elevator stops moving midair—locking her behind its grated door and unable to reach the ground. She repeatedly tries to ring the alarm bell, but it goes unanswered by anyone other than a drunken man, George (Jeff Corey), who enters her home to steal her valuables rather than to help her out of her cage. Overhearing George’s rantings about Mrs. Hilyard’s unprotected assets, a young man named Randall Simpson O’Connell (James Caan) leads his friends to loot the home and antagonize Mrs. Hilyard, opening a hostile dialogue about class and morality.

It is in *Lady in a Cage* that the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre shifts from its focus on unstable, striving female antiheroes to more closely follow its critical motive: exploring imbalanced gender dynamics and the potential horrors that they create. While *Strait-Jacket* shared a writer with an iconic horror film and drew from similar themes to further contextualize its narrative, the writer and producer of *Lady in a Cage*, Luther Davis, drew from real life crises. As Shelley touched on in his initial review of the Grande Dame Guignol’s major themes, reality is often daunting to accept for women or for anyone in a precarious social position because the system of social power is naturally stacked against them. *Lady in a Cage* is a uniquely poignant horror because at its core, it is a film about the elements of reality worth raging against. In an article for the *Los Angeles Times* titled “*Lady in a Cage*: Sick, or Does It Reflect Sickness of Our Society?,” Davis himself wrote about a woman he knew who was trapped in an elevator during a blackout in New York City in 1959: “[s]uffering somewhat from claustrophobia, she called for help for almost five hours; finally two boys found her and

got flashlights and helped her crawl out of the top of the cage. Then they raped her. The expression in that woman's eyes when she told about it was on my mind when I wrote *Lady in a Cage*." In another article written for *The New York Times* about the film's production, reporter Murray Schumach reports Davis as noting that he was inspired by his own sensation of claustrophobia, but had to shift the film's location out of New York City because all such elevators are required by law to be equipped with a telephone ("*Lady in a Cage*: Filming is Unique"). In both of these anecdotes, it is clear that this story sprang from an understanding that there are many naturally occurring situations—including an unsuspected electrical blackout, an elevator unequipped with a working telephone, an emergency call to which only the wrong people responded—that are truly horrific for individuals in precarious social states, especially in the context of gender. Knowing exactly how to craft such scenarios is part of the social horror; inhabiting this scene with the complex figures to play out a fearsome, multi-faceted dialogue is this film's unnerving critical strength.

With its inspiration in mind, the film's plot is a clear commentary on the gendered horrors of everyday life and a realization of many women's common fears. The film opens with Mrs. Hilyard's son, Malcolm (William Swan), writing a letter before he departs for a trip. After he leaves, Mrs. Hilyard gets into her personal elevator and becomes trapped midway between levels. As time passes and her options for release appear limited, Mrs. Hilyard grows more frustrated and frantic amid her own musings, snippets of crime stories playing on her radio, and unsuccessful attempts to call for help with the elevator's alarm bell. While she awaits assistance, intruders begin coming in and out of the home in search of valuables—including a hustler named Sade (Ann Sothern)

who is brought in by George on his second visit and Randall's crew, which includes Elaine (Jennifer Billingsley) and Essie (Rafael Campos).

In her compromised position, Mrs. Hilyard is a captive audience to her intruders' judgment and mistreatment—much of which is comprised of a clash between figures who embody different versions of social power. Despite Mrs. Hilyard's sympathetic situation, her character holds complicated social influence based on the intersecting facets of her identity: her wealth, her gender, and her role as a mother. In a noteworthy contradiction of typical power dynamics, Mrs. Hilyard's wealth is the primary reason for her trauma. She is trapped within an elevator afforded to her by her own privilege and victimized by circumstance. The fact that she is female adds implicit danger due to the social realities noted by Davis in his background on the film's story, but it is her class and her status as a mother that inspires conflict between her and the intruders.

In fact, it is Mrs. Hilyard's classist debates with Randall that provide the most fascinating commentary on gender roles and power. While the intruders rifle through Mrs. Hilyard's belongings upstairs, she begs for them to take anything they want as long as they let her out of her cage—calling them “monsters” and accusing them of having less compassion than animals (0:49:18-0:49:31). As Randall watches amusedly from the staircase, he asks if “she ain't no animal” herself and bangs on the roof of her elevator cage (0:49:38-40). Mrs. Hilyard retorts that she is “a human being, a thinking, feeling creature,” and when she learns that Randall has been incarcerated, she snidely replies that he is “one of the many bits of offal produced by the welfare state” that her “tax dollars go for the care and feeding of” (0:50:39-48). While Mrs. Hilyard's anger is justified in her situation, her dehumanizing language emphasizes the divide she perceives between

herself and the individuals ransacking her home. From this point forward, the narrative expands to characterize the intruders individually and in contrast with Mrs. Hilyard, revealing exaggerated gender performances that the film seeks to critique.

Amid Randall's conflict with Mrs. Hilyard, he becomes increasingly aggressive toward the other intruders. He is violent and dismissive toward Elaine, who serves as a sexual object that Randall interacts with as he pleases, and with Essie. Both Randall and Elaine mock Essie for his attraction to Elaine, haze him by holding his head under bathwater, and attempt to emasculate and embarrass him by drawing lipstick on his face and body while calling him "a pretty girl" (1:02:05). As the film progresses, Randall becomes increasingly dominant with the other intruders; most notably, he orders Essie to kill George in front of Sade and Mrs. Hilyard, all the while referring to the latter woman as "the human being in the cage" (1:08:02-1:12:05). After this point, Sade is locked in a closet and Randall moves to invade Mrs. Hilyard's space and exhibit his power over her situation.

After witnessing the group's violence, Mrs. Hilyard offers Randall and his companions money to leave in order to reassert power over them with what she perceives as her remaining asset. While Essie and Elaine are eager to accept her offer, a noise outside interrupts the group's discussion and Randall jumps up and enters Mrs. Hilyard's elevator cage with the intention of keeping her from reporting their crimes (1:13:40-1:16:10). While he is in the elevator with her with his back turned, Mrs. Hilyard attempts to stab and kill Randall with two pieces of metal that she pulled from the elevator grate; however, they bend upon hitting his back and he laughs at her (1:17:07). While Randall and Elaine laugh, Essie appears with the note that Malcolm had been writing before he

left for his trip and remarks that Malcolm seems “gay,” inciting Randall to make joke about how long Mrs. Hilyard breastfed her son (1:18:50). In response, Mrs. Hilyard slaps him and he begins to strangle her before being prompted to read Malcolm’s letter aloud to figure out where the safe he references could be.

In the letter, Randall reads that Malcolm feels smothered by his mother and demands half of the money in the living room safe to begin a life without her, ending with the threat of suicide if Mrs. Hilyard fails to give him what he wants (1:18:30-1:21:10). Amid all of the violence and verbal conflict that Mrs. Hilyard faced during her confinement in the elevator, it appears that this is the final straw to break her spirit and her heart. It is after this emotional blow that Mrs. Hilyard is finally removed from the elevator and the remainder of the film follows her as she crawls around her home to find a phone and call for help, escape through the front door, or otherwise evade her tormenters. When she initially makes it out the front door, Randall follows her and she blinds him with the bent metal sticks he shoved into her dress after her first attempt to kill him. Ultimately, Randall is crushed by a car in front of her home and a crowd surrounds his body and Mrs. Hilyard while Essie and Elaine attempt to escape. By the film’s resolution, Mrs. Hilyard is traumatized and power has been restored to her home—restoring the setting to its original state.

While *Lady in a Cage* does not follow an unstable grande dame enacting violence or drastically redefining her image, the *Woman in Peril*’s narrative is equally tragic. Rather than explore the aftermath of past trauma accumulated through the inequity of gendered experience, *Lady in a Cage* depicts a critical moment of trauma that is undoubtedly gendered. Existing in some state of social precarity due to perceived

vulnerability and the perpetuation of male dominance, women are conditioned to fear situations like Mrs. Hilyard's; her narrative can be simplified as a series of realistic feminine fears: being home alone, having one's personal space invaded, being sexually harassed and threatened, being accused of being a bad mother. In all of these instances, Mrs. Hilyard's personal power is diminished and countered by a figure who represents the harmful extreme of male dominance and abusive power. As a representative of Grande Dame Guignol cinema, Mrs. Hilyard's character and the film itself represent the active unbalance that the preceding film examples hint at through personal strife. Of the three, this film is the most salient portrayal of the real, dangerous imbalances that exist and are created in our existent social structure.

Ultimately, the narratives of these three Grande Dame Guignol films highlight the varying degrees to which women are evaluated under the expected standards for gender that privilege certain individuals over others based on performance. For Jane and Blanche Hudson, gender performance was a gateway to achieving what you want—in the public sphere and in one's private relationships. While Jane's atrocities are obvious and unexcused, the film's most impactful critique is of Blanche's manipulation of her sister. A telling example of how the performativity of gender and society's strict definitions of successful performances affect interpersonal relationships, the resulting enmity and abuse between the two sisters is evidence of how the gendered power structure is promoted and preserved even amongst those who do not benefit from its values. Similarly, *Strait-Jacket* examines how feminine performance is informed in relation to male influence, yet furthered by women learning from and reacting to one another. While literally stepping

into her mother's previous role, Carol Harbin illustrated the potential dangers of watching and mimicking gender performances that are harmful yet effective.

In each case, the women in these films respond to one true unbalance—the unbalance of power in relation to gender—by tailoring their performances or falling prey to the inequities that others' performances create. In effect, these films do not present these figures as “others” to ridicule or fear, but as individuals responding to their social slight in ways that draw attention to the performativity of gender, of normalcy, and of film art's covert criticism of these problematic ideals.

Most importantly, the preceding analyses of each of the three film's narrative themes supports a reading of the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre not simply as horror, but as legitimate social critique. As Butler's definition proves, gender performance is informed by history and the social narratives that dictate how individuals live and act in society. In each of the three selected films, the “psycho-biddies” that the audiences are meant to fear, like Jane Hudson and Lucy Harbin, are simply individuals who trouble the accepted boundaries of gender roles and social acceptance. The thrill that these films seek to produce to capitalize on the rise of the horror genre, such as Mrs. Hilyard's traumatic confinement, actually reveals the uniquely feminine fears that are tragically produced by our seemingly stable social structure. Ultimately, the narratives of these films—problematized by design to unsettle and entertain their audiences—mirror the problems that exist in the larger social narrative. Through stylized performances and stylistic innovation, these problematic social narratives are delivered to the audience in a way that bridges concept with corporeal action--hopefully calling attention to how their own roles

fit into the larger social narrative and relating their own experiences to the character's stories and their actresses' performances.

### CHAPTER THREE: CINEMATIC STYLE

Narrative—whether it be fiction or a social reality—is only one facet of gender construction and of this subversive subgenre’s social critique. The investigation of gender performance inherent in Grande Dame Guignol films is not only addressed through thematic trends, but also by calling attention to the stylized acts that realize gender performance. The cinematography and visual aspects of these films serve to defamiliarize the social cues that individuals use to reproduce and read gender in everyday life—including speech, attitudes, behaviors, dress, and interactions. As established in the preceding narrative analyses, the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre seeks to critique the system through which gender norms are enforced by highlighting its outliers; thus, the individuals in these films toy with the aforementioned social cues and provide a radically imperfect image of gender that problematizes society’s limited definitions of identity and indicts the patriarchal trends of the American cinematic tradition.

If narrative is the filmic counterpart to Butler’s concept of social temporality, then cinematic style—which creates the film’s sound and image—is representative of the filmmakers’, editors’, and actors’ stylization of the repeated acts that constitute social definition. In the case of the Grande Dame Guignol, a subgenre that revolves around the creation of a female horror icon, this stylization is particularly potent in representing her complicated gender performance. If classical Hollywood cinema sought to reinforce dominant social values and provide representative characters for audiences to relate to and admire, the Grande Dame Guignol utilizes cinematic style to further distance its characters and its narrative from the norm. Because its leading ladies are no longer ingenues, they are not framed, costumed, or represented as such; instead, the film’s visual

cues purposefully contest standing cinematic traditions regarding the on-screen value of the female performer.

This on-screen value was assessed by film critic Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in which she exposes the disparate sexual politics reflected in classical Hollywood film traditions. According to Mulvey, “[a]s an advanced representation system, the cinema poses questions of the ways the unconscious... structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking” and problematizes the image of the woman as the erotic center of popular cinema (59). Further, Mulvey explains how the binary gender system is translated in visual texts:

[I]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (62)

It is precisely this concept—the feminine phenomenon of to-be-looked-at-ness—that the Grande Dame Guignol addresses through its perverse portrayals of gender. While the reversal of their actresses’ glamorous public images is a clear play on aesthetic expectations, these films utilize the stylization of visual and behavioral cues to illustrate the gender imbalance that grounds each film’s narrative. As Shelley noted, the grande dame figure is agitating against her social slight; while each narrative clearly contextualizes the characters’ precarious positions, the nature of film art allows the Grande Dame Guignol to expose how the visual component of gender performance helps

and hinders individuals as they move within the imbalanced social sphere. For figures like the grande dame who exist outside of the accepted range of gender roles, the most desirable feminine image—one coded for “strong visual and erotic impact”—is inaccessible. In each narrative, the inaccessibility of ideal gender performance is a source of both internal and external conflict for the film’s characters.

While Mulvey’s theory and the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre both examine these themes through film, the subgenre proves that artistic performance and social performance are not at all dissimilar. The term “to-be-looked-at-ness” may be most applicable when discussing women’s roles in visual texts, but the same concept applies to women’s experiences in reality. A significant part of “stylizing” the female body in a manner that abides with the social definition of gender refers to certain modes of self-expression that are coded as feminine: applying cosmetics, styling hair, choosing outfits, adding accessories, and presenting “ladylike” behaviors and attitudes. These are cues by which women distinguish themselves and are distinguished by others in public every day, simultaneously responding to and writing the code by which individuals’ performances are measured. In the three selected Grande Dame Guignol films, these facets of the gendered experience are highlighted to illustrate the grande dame’s difference and to expose each character’s construction of their own public image. Using Mulvey’s discussion of objectifying film traditions as a critical lens, further analyses of *Baby Jane*, *Strait-Jacket*, and *Lady in a Cage* will reveal how each one represents the stylization of the body in accordance (or discordance) with gender norms to put the subgenre’s critique of the imbalanced gender system in recognizable, relatable terms for its audience that mirror the coded exchanges they have in real life.

Further, while the gendered power dynamics observed in Grande Dame Guignol narratives are reflected and stylized by the filmmakers, it is the audience that determines their subversive meaning. The “determining male gaze” that Mulvey describes is the product of gendered power informing artistic practice; however, a contemporary reading of the Grande Dame Guignol film relies on the audience’s awareness of gender performance and the evident gender inequity reflected in film art. Thus, the most productive mode of analyzing these films—which do adhere to male-influenced classical Hollywood techniques—is to reveal how the filmmaker’s intended message is reconsidered in the audience’s inclusive perspective. In accordance with this need for recontextualization, Mulvey explains the breakdown of “looks” in film production and reception by noting that there are “three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters as they look at each other within the screen illusion” (68). As Peter Shelley implied when he stated that a male counterpart to the grande dame was inconceivable to (assumedly male) filmmakers and writers, Mulvey confirms that the first two looks are “obsessively subordinated to the neurotic needs of the male ego” and predicts that the only way to correct this imbalance in cinema is to “free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment” (68). While the looks of the camera and of the characters may be motivated by male-driven production and influenced by male directors, writers, and editors, the third look—that of the audience—is free to be influenced by evolving trends and deepening understanding of perspectives outside of the dominant viewpoints that constructed the limiting portrayals of gender presented in now-historical films like the

early Grande Dame Guignol features. To expose how the gender-critical narrative conventions of the Grande Dame Guignol are represented using seemingly sexist stylistic techniques, examples of such conventions must be reevaluated.

Despite being the latest film of the three Grande Dame Guignol selections, *Lady in a Cage* offers a poignant vantage point from which to compare the unwittingly subversive features of the subgenre with the objectifying practices of classical Hollywood that seemed only to reinforce the patriarchal values that created them. The striking image of a woman confined within an on-screen cage is certainly related to the type of screen-confinement that women were afforded in Hollywood films that cast them as romantic objects, yet there is an important difference: the grande dame, or Woman in Peril in this case, is not an object of desire. While Mulvey writes of isolation of the female figure on screen—created through extreme close-ups or through physical exclusion from the story’s action—as a mode of combining the director-led camera gaze with the audience’s to objectify the woman on screen for scopophilic pleasure (64), Mrs. Hilyard’s character is objectified and isolated on screen to evoke fear within the audience and to encourage identification with her character. While the director-led camera, the characters within the story’s diegesis, and the audience gaze at Mrs. Hilyard in her barred elevator, each look provides a different reading of her image.

When filming the onset of Mrs. Hilyard’s elevator plight, director Walter Grauman emphasized her limitation within the story space—likening her character to the objectified women of other classical Hollywood films to achieve a different end. When she first realizes that the elevator will not move or open, an extreme long shot establishes Mrs. Hilyard’s minimized form confined within her large, open foyer (0:11:13). As she

considers her options, the director emphasizes her concern with a closeup of Mrs. Hilyard's face reflected in the elevator's mirrored button panel (0:14:40). Both of these shots serve to set up Mrs. Hilyard's limited position, ultimately presenting her as inactive and objectified. Just as the sexualized female icons that Mulvey describes are employed to further their respective films' emphasis on romance, Mrs. Hilyard's objectification is utilized to evoke horror. Intentionally denying a pleasurable response, the filmmakers intended to highlight Mrs. Hilyard's frightened face, confined body, and diegetic immobility to illustrate the fearsome reversal of women's objectification: the reality of victimization. While the filmmakers utilized the same techniques that transform women from whole individuals to fractured sex objects with the intention to thrill their audience, the result ultimately exposes the social problem behind the subjugated role that allows those in power to write, frame, and code women as recipients of male attention and action. For the remainder of the film, Mrs. Hilyard's position—both narratively and visually—allows viewers to identify for once with the seemingly ineffective object and turn their attention to the characters and creators who position women in such precarious roles.

For Randall, the film's representative male figure, Mrs. Hilyard's confinement signifies the potential to possess her in a way that is not entirely dissimilar to Mulvey's scopophilic reading of the active/male and passive/female dynamic observed in film. Throughout the film, Randall inhabits the active role that Mulvey attributes to Hollywood's classical male protagonist. The camera follows him and his group throughout Mrs. Hilyard's home, motivated by the active role that he and his followers take as they invade Mrs. Hilyard's domestic space, take what they desire from her

possessions, and ultimately threaten her personal safety. Interestingly, the conventions that typically create romantic or erotic connections between male and female characters are mimicked here to a perverse end, depicting the unpleasurable inverse to the sexualizing conventions that Mulvey describes. The gaze that Randall and his group exhibit may not be sexual in nature, but the shared technical modes used to produce this effect urges viewers to consider this form of objectification—one that is not desirous or erotic, but still possessive and dominating all the same—and its likeness to sexual objectification as problematic products of dominant social and cinematic trends.

Thus, while the filmmakers may have intended only to evoke fear by reproducing what they considered a realistic horror scene inhabited by representative characters using the expected stylistic modes, audiences with heightened understanding of the social structure informing these tendencies are able to identify when those techniques are supporting the dominant ideals and when they reveal their inadequacies. *Lady in a Cage* can be read not simply as a situational thriller, but as an artistic reproduction of a larger social problem—the objectification of women that too often leads to victimization and social precarity—that mirrors the images that we find pleasurable, emphasizing their nearness to horror.

Aptly, the male gaze is literally destroyed at the end of the film, leaving Mrs. Hilyard and the audience to consider how the determining male gaze should be countered on an individual and social level. After Mrs. Hilyard is removed from the elevator by Randall and struggles to get away from him, she escapes to her front lawn and attempts to grasp the attention of the policemen and cars driving by. After a few moments, Randall finds her and begins to drag her back inside the house; at this moment, Mrs. Hilyard

reaches into her dress and withdraws two pieces of metal broken off of the elevator door and jams them into Randall's eyes (1:26:45-1:28:05). He is effectively blinded after this point, ordering his companions to drag Mrs. Hilyard back inside to face more abuse and struggling for control despite the loss of his sight. Subsequently, Mrs. Hilyard is able to crawl back out onto the front lawn followed by a stumbling Randall; as cars rush by, Randall removes the hand covering his bloodied face and a woman screams in horror. Randall falls and is hit by a car, causing the constant barrage of traffic to finally halt and encouraging a crowd to form around his body and around Mrs. Hilyard, who screams after Essie and Elaine as they run from the scene (1:31:20-1:33:12). In an ultimate call to the audience's sense of social responsibility, the diegetic audience—the clueless passersby who stumble upon Randall and Mrs. Hilyard and appraise their states without context—serves as their ignorant on-screen equivalent. After viewing the purposeful portrayal of Mrs. Hilyard as the objectified victim and Randall as an active abuser, the witnesses gathering outside of Mrs. Hilyard's home represent the audience's role as the determiners of meaning and as the instigators of change. Although Mrs. Hilyard blinded Randall in an attempt to free herself from his torture and escape, this destruction of gendered power has no lasting effect unless the audience learns from the limiting portrayals provided to them.

On this note, *Strait-Jacket* similarly re-evaluates the relationship between the camera's gaze and that of the audience through symbolism and misdirection, urging viewers to think more deeply about the way they read and respond to visual gender cues both on and off-screen. Lucy's gender performance is a key element of film's plot as social context for her violence and difficulty adjusting to her evolving role. More

specifically, Lucy's appearance—developed through a key facet of cinematic style, costuming—becomes a device for misleading the audience through clever camera operation and editing techniques. Lucy's original image—a woman who is very much aware of her gender and its social meaning—is distinct: styled hair, a fitted, floral-patterned dress, and bracelets that jingle with movement. It is this image that Lucy's daughter, Carol, associates with her mother and with her mother's act of perverse power. When Carol assumes Lucy's violent ways later in the plot, it is revealed that she also mimics Lucy's appearance—replicating her outfit, accessories, hair, and even her face to attack and kill those who get in her way. In this manner, Lucy's original image becomes a perverse icon, intersecting unexpectedly with Mulvey's observations on the traditional objectified role of the female image in Hollywood film.

While one may assume that a true subversion of patriarchal cinema trends would require filmmakers to provide an entirely opposite example, Lucy Harbin's potent on-screen image is evidence that directors' appropriation of limiting practices sometimes reveal their inadequacies. As Mulvey notes, a series of cinematic conventions function to frame women as objects of male erotic desire rather than as agents within the film's narrative. Mulvey writes that “[o]ne part of a fragmented body,” represented on screen through close-ups of legs or of a woman's face, “disturbs the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative, it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen” (62-63). Lucy's introduction follows this exact mode of representation; from her first appearance, the camera pans up from her legs to her face as she smirks, establishing the iconic image that Lucy's daughter will later recreate for her own perverse purposes (00:02:44-50). Arguably, these objectifying

conventions were employed in this case not to present Lucy as an object of desire, but as an icon of another kind—an anomalous female murderer who appears sane, but acts in the opposite manner.

It is in this duality that Lucy's image carries critical purpose. Shelley's perception that the Grande Dame Guignol emerges from an inherent fear of women is predicated on the idea that women and those subjugated by the gendered power system are easily read and that those who misalign with dominant values are dismissed, finding themselves "imbalanced" with the norms. However, the standards that exist for female representation—a certain aesthetic code marked by traditionally feminine features like cosmetics, hairstyles, and fashion—can also be used to conceal a person's social power. As individuals learn to reproduce or deny these aesthetic codes to craft a desired public image, oppressive gender norms and the imbalanced power structure that they perpetuate are called into question. This powerful appropriation of gendered symbols is not lost on the audience—who learn to assess others by reading their physical form and are shocked and unsettled by a character like Lucy—nor on Lucy's daughter Carol, whose use of these same aesthetic social practices enable the filmmakers' innovative misdirection.

*Strait-Jacket's* thrilling misdirection—referring to the audience's belief that Lucy is relapsing and committing murders in the narrative present, when it is actually Carol in disguise—illustrates how the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre's stylistic tendencies comment on gender performance. In the film's opening, Lucy's double murder defines her character—the image of her standing over her husband and his mistress is designed to haunt the audience through the remainder of the film. Thus, when killings resume in the narrative present, this strong image is invoked and the audience feels as if they know

what role is being performed. However, each of the murders committed by Carol are framed indirectly; the killer is always obscured or shadowed. Only at the film's resolution is Carol unmasked, as Lucy removes a cast of her own face to reveal Carol's underneath (01:27:10-15). In this case, the director purposefully portrays the camera's look as unreliable—as well as the look shared between characters within the diegesis, who are also misled by the characters' performances—which presents the film as an exercise in the insufficiency of visual judgment and the power of the aesthetic factors of performance.

As evidenced by prior discussion of *Strait-Jacket's* themes, the look shared between characters is essential to this film's commentary. Much like Creed's note on the marginalization of the mother figure as a castrating villain in *Strait-Jacket's* related film, *Psycho*, Mulvey connects the sexualization and objectification of the woman in popular film to this fear of castration. According to Mulvey, the woman “can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it... [w]oman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (58). It is by this principal that Mulvey supposes that the female image on screen is irredeemable from its objectification; however, in a film like *Strait-Jacket* that focuses on feminine signification and female-driven creation of social meaning, the implication of the female image transcends this limited reading. Fascinatingly, *Strait-Jacket* offers an example of a female viewer, Carol, actively responding to her mother's objectified female image. Responding to an iconic image of her mother almost as though a film

audience would, Carol becomes a maker of meaning when she relates her mother's stylized body, behavior, and attitude to a desired social end. Differing from *Psycho* and from the films that Mulvey cites in her subsequent analysis of the female's limited role in film art, *Strait-Jacket* employs the woman's image not for the sake of male viewers, male filmmakers, or male characters and their erotic pleasure, but for the sake of providing another female character with a model which she may define herself in relation to or rejection of.

In this way, *Strait-Jacket's* use of classical Hollywood stylistic conventions arrive at a very different end than the male-centric readings provided by Mulvey. While male influence may impact female signification and stylization, women are also in control of the way that they receive and respond to images and ideas produced by their surrounding patriarchal culture. Proven by the filmmakers' portrayal of Carol's reproduction of her mother's iconic image and actions, the creative work surrounding an image is not solely attributed or related to male direction. In this instance, the film relates its characters and their consumption of images with the audience's own reading of star images and with the interpersonal readings that impact their daily lives.

Thus, *Strait-Jacket* initiates a closer connection between the first two cinematic looks—that of the director-led camera and that of the characters—with the look of the audience by providing a filmic example of the signification processes that audiences engage in as they consume screen images and as they interact with others in life. Similar to *Lady in a Cage* in its critically immersive incorporation of the audience, *Strait-Jacket* illustrates the kind of mimetic response that female viewers often have to objectifying images of women in popular film. To reference film historian Marjorie Rosen's remark

on the cultural impact of the Hollywood film star, “I wish I had a dollar for every bottle of peroxide that was sold in the thirties” when the average American woman hoped to redefine her own image in relation to the idealized women shown on screen (147). In a less positive way, *Strait-Jacket* depicts the same phenomenon. As a result of this cultural commentary purported by cinematic technique, the audience is made aware of these influences in an exaggerated manner to highlight how simplistic changes—like dying one’s hair to look like a beautiful movie star—are actually instances of female-centric meaning being ascribed to a reproducible image. While some, like Mulvey, focus on the male influences that enforce these values for their own gain, there are also women creating meaning in relation to one another through the same signs to suit their own desires and purposes. Most interestingly, the filmmakers’ portrayal of Carol’s horrific, stylized appropriation of her mother’s perverse power paints this performative agency as something to be feared.

Similarly, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* employs elements of cinematic style to engage with a series of questions regarding gender performance: how does one craft a socially abiding appearance amid personal turmoil? How do others read and respond to individuals’ contrived performances? And, most importantly, how can a film reveal the discordance between one’s appearance and one’s intentions amid social influence? In this film, gender performance and artistic performance are intrinsically linked; both Jane and Blanche crafted their performances as women while under the literal spotlight. As a result, both women are concerned with image and how they are perceived by others and view their social “acts” as means to achieve their desired ends. For Jane, the sister whose on-screen image is most drastic, the construction of her public

self is explored as a site of delusion; however, this delusion is based in a very real need to present a certain type of normal femininity to be mobile in the larger social sphere.

As Jane pursues a life beyond her home and without her sister, she begins to reconstruct her appearance and attitude; simultaneously, the filmmakers highlight this development as evidence of the inherent and fearsome power of the female image on and off-screen. While much of Jane's character is contextualized by her cruelty toward her sister, there are a series of scenes throughout the film that feature Jane in counsel with herself. In these scenes, the camera serves as a mirror—recording Jane's reflection, reactions, and the gradual shift in her appearance and character as she attempts to alter her image. The first of these mirror scenes is one that sensationalizes Jane's instability, hoping to frame her dissatisfaction as evidence of disorder. Instead, this scene reveals links between her childhood role and her desire for social acceptance that provides an introspective look at the type of signification portrayed in *Strait-Jacket*.

After the present conflict between Jane and Blanche is established, Jane is shown drinking and playing piano; in a clever use of non-diegetic sound, the audience and Jane appear to hear the child "Baby Jane" sing her Vaudeville hit "I've Written a Letter to Daddy." Disturbingly, the camera follows Jane's line of sight to the Baby Jane doll sitting in a rocking chair past the piano before showing Jane walking over to the doll and picking up its hair bow—after which the singing abruptly stops (00:33:07-00:33:57). Jane laughs, nudges the doll playfully, and resumes the song while placing the hair bow on her own head. Jane then steps away from the doll and looks directly into the camera to recite a children's poem about behaving and pleasing your parents. At this point, Jane finishes her rhyme by holding out her arms and stating "[n]ow I wish that you would tell me,

‘cause I’m much too young to know...’ and steps forward into the beam of light flooding from an overhead lamp. Upon seeing her reflection in a full-length mirror under the harsh spotlight, Jane shrieks and covers her face (00:35:29-00:35:41). Meanwhile, this scene is cut with flashes that reveal Blanche’s reaction to her sister’s strange behavior—a look of shock and concern washes over her face as she overhears the nostalgic song and subsequent sobs from downstairs.

In this scene, elements of cinematic style—particularly camera movements, editing, and usage of sound—clearly service the film’s critical perspective on gender performance and the complexity of its construction by investigating Jane’s internal conflicts for the audience to observe and identify with. Portrayed as mentally unstable, one of Shelley’s key grande dame attributes, Jane hears her own childhood performance play back in her head, which prompts her to look to the Baby Jane doll—a relic of her past that represents her most successful social self. When she removes the doll’s bow and the non-diegetic singing ends, Jane places the bow on her own head; this motion leads into an important discussion of how dress—or the costuming of gender performance— aids individuals in looking the part of a particular social role. For Jane, putting on the bow connects her with the social role that “Baby Jane’s” appearance connotes.

As in *Strait-Jacket*, both Jane and Blanche were conditioned as children to derive meaning and craft their own performances based on a particular example. In this instance, one of the sisters—Jane—embodied this ideal image; with this precedent set early in life, both she and her sister Blanche would strive to reach or exceed a similar state of public approval through any necessary means. Much like Carol Harbin, Jane became attached to a problematic image that signified value. Interestingly, the image of “Baby Jane” Hudson

provides a metafilmic reference to the potent female image that shaped Hollywood cinema. Following Rosen's history of the American female film star, Jane's preoccupation with her childhood role is reminiscent of Mary Pickford's girlish charm—desexualized, childlike, and universally adored. The connotative connection between aesthetic features, social meaning, and individual behavior is the root of the Grande Dame Guignol's extra-filmic influence.

It is this connection that proves the active role and relationship between the female star and her audience. Not only is she more than a witless puppet or a passive, sexualized object, she is the maker of meaning through aesthetic and behavioral cues that can be read, mimicked, and redefined in contexts beyond her film's content. In each of the three selected films, the actresses' performances and the filmmakers' stylization and framing pair to present the audience with a snapshot of the embodied acts of gender that they witness and perform themselves. Ultimately, the making of film art and the construction of an individual's public self follow the same social and aesthetic principles. Just as the films' narratives emphasized the individual effects of social judgment and roles, their stylistic choices urge their audiences to recognize the visual evidence of gendered experience and the cues written upon individual bodies. In these three representations of the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre, stylized performance is proven to be part of gendered conflict, self-expression, and extreme redefinition of one's public image—connecting the characters' dramatized horror to real-life issues and the actress' performative function to the everyday experience of constructing a socially-legible self.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PERFORMANCE &amp; CONTEXT

While studying the narrative and stylistic content of these films clearly reveals sharp commentary on gender roles and the unequal social structure that they create, perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Grande Dame Guignol films is the context surrounding the performers whose on- and off-screen actions contribute to our understanding of what a “grande dame” is and what critical questions she poses. Often diminished as mere mouthpieces or poseable puppets at the mercy of writers and directors, actresses—especially those with powerful personalities and star-images of their own, like Davis and Crawford—are not simply “looked-at” as Mulvey notes. Grande Dame Guignol cinema makes use of the exaggerated figures that Hollywood’s star-worship and icon-construction created to highlight the inescapable, performative quality of real life. While theorists and historians, like Mulvey, may view the female star as an inactive object unable to break from the control of the male gaze, Grande Dame Guignol films and the actresses who drove them prove the level of influence and creative control that these same women are able to exact both in and out of the story space.

In each of these films, the grande dame or Woman-in-Peril figures appear to be crafted with a limiting “imbalance” at the core of their characters and of their stories. In his overview of the subgenre, Shelley asserts that the features of the Grande Dame Guignol film revolve around the inherent social trauma and abjection that these characters experience, making them fearsome, unstable, and vulnerable to judgment from the “normal” audience; in short, the grande dame is read as a hostile figure fighting witlessly against the “natural” processes that constrict her and complicate her life. In actuality, the actresses who portray these characters are fighting against an imbalance as

well. While the Grande Dame Guignol can be traced directly to the lack of acting opportunities afforded to Hollywood's female stars as they aged, this problem ties back to the larger social issue of an imbalance in society's perception of a woman's worth—limited by age, beauty, opportunity, and behavior. In the Hollywood films that Mulvey cites as evidence of sexist film conventions, the narrow window of a woman's worth is immortalized in snapshots of actresses in their primes, isolated from the rest of their work, lives, and experiences. In the case of the Grande Dame Guignol, the actresses ensured that their own wills and sentiments were translated on screen—a testament to the personal element of performance. For these actresses, the quality of being “looked at” was used to their advantage; their bodies and their on-screen images became sites for expressing their own values. Despite the prominent critique of this subgenre as exploitative and demeaning to its female stars, studying instances at which these actresses translate their own ideas on screen and how those acts interplay with each film's critical message implies that the limitations lie not with the performances or with the film's production, but with the audience's reception of those acts.

As Judith Butler described in her essay on performativity, gender is constituted of stylized acts and informed by a sense of social temporality or awareness that gives those acts a gendered meaning; however, even in this definition Butler acknowledges a problematic dependence on social definition to “properly” enact one's gender. Following this explanation, Butler writes:

“Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience,

including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or sub-versive repetition of that style.” (520)

In this description, Butler highlights the entirely creative nature of gendered meaning and initiates potential for individuals to manipulate their performances to reach a desired end. I would argue that each of the actresses featured in the selected Grande Dame Guignol films are doing just that through their participation in and construction of this subgenre. In her simultaneous state of iconization and objectification, the female film star appears to exist as passive figure upon which male agents—in this case, directors, writers, editors, and male audience members—scribe meanings; however, based on Butler’s concept of gender performance and its adaptive quality, female stars are capable of writing their own meaning through action, stylization, and appropriation of the same social cues that perpetuate patriarchal readings of their bodies and characters. While their shift from glamour to horror is subversive in itself, there are several recorded moments in which the Grande Dame Guignol actresses prove their immense influence over the construction of their own images, the films’ final products, and the agency involved in gender performance.

The first of these films, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, is practically a study in actress-domination. Both Bette Davis and Joan Crawford exacted control over elements of production due to their industry experience and their standards for their own

work and working environments, but the real subversive acts arose from their, to use Butler's words, "different sort of repeating" of the very cues that allowed them to be objectified and glamorized in earlier pictures. The most impactful of these adapted acts came from the actresses' rejection of the production team's goals for their makeup, costumes, and hair.

An essential feature of the film's shocking aesthetic, Jane Hudson's makeup and costumes were in part devised by Davis herself. Rather than allow one of the film's makeup artists to craft her character's image in a demure and complimentary manner, Davis insisted on taking control and making a statement with her face in direct contrast to the beautifying, objectifying trends of popular film. Cited by Shaun Considine in a joint biography of Davis and Crawford, Davis explains her vision for Jane's look: "I wanted to look outrageous, like Mary Pickford in decay. It was my idea to wear the ghastly-white base, scads of black eye-shadow, a cupid's-bow mouth, and the beauty mark" (280). Ultimately, Davis' willingness to exaggerate her appearance aided Aldrich in making the film a horror; however, the close-ups of her heavily made-up face achieve more than shock. In his record of Davis' behind-the-scenes decision to do her makeup in this way, Considine notes that a makeup artist on set told Davis about how "[she] had worked with the extras in those Technicolor musicals at M-G-M. [She] would give them these gorgeous faces. They were so in love with the way they looked, they never washed their faces. You would see them days later walking down La Brea Avenue with the original makeup still on. Each day they just added more" (280). Davis loved this concept and chose to add more layers of powder to her face in every scene, modeling Jane's character

after these women who hoped to extend their brief experience with Hollywood glamour for as long as they could.

These connections—between Davis, her portrayal of Jane Hudson, and the real women who inspired her design—deepen the earlier discussion of gender performance explored within the film’s content and relate these more obvious types of performances to those that individuals enact every day. While Davis’ makeup may appear extreme and unsettle the viewers, the social context that it adds to her character perfectly demonstrates the way that women respond to and engage with problematic standards regarding their appearances. For the women who worked as extras on M-G-M movie sets, the makeup that the studio’s professional artists applied connected them to the Hollywood icons that they so admired, transforming them to suit the standards of beauty that made movie stars seem so dissimilar to the general public. While it seems humorous and novel to the artist and to Davis that these women would hope to maintain this state for as long as possible, in reality it speaks to the gender performance that each individual creates in or out of the spotlight.

This example serves as a site to consider how we read and respond to the same social cues in different contexts. In the case of Jane’s character, the excessive makeup reads as unsettling due to her age and temperament. For Davis, it is the contrast between her glamorous public image and this exaggerated form that shocks the audience. But the actress’ reference to the women who want to look like Hollywood stars and maintain such a façade for as long as possible brings the desire of her character and of the average woman to life, revealing one manner in which Butler’s concept of subversive repetition

proves constructively critical of gender norms and their limitations on individual performance.

Ironically, Joan Crawford's influence on her own character's image is more closely related to the average woman's desire to mimic or maintain an image that aligns with society's ideal. While Bette Davis made herself "unattractive" for a critical and referential purpose, Crawford insisted on maintaining her signature look while playing Blanche. Both the director, Robert Aldrich, and Davis argued that Crawford's desire to look glamorous seemed unfitting for Blanche's character, Crawford defended her choice. In a 1973 interview about the actresses' feud and Davis' critique of Crawford's input on her character's look, Crawford made the following statement:

I am aware of how Miss Davis felt about my makeup in *Jane*. But my reasons for appearing somewhat glamorous were just as valid as hers, with all of those layers of rice powder she wore and that ghastly lipstick. But Miss Davis was always partial to covering up her face in motion pictures. She called it 'Art.' Others might call it camouflage—a cover-up for the absence of any real beauty. My character in *Jane* was a bigger star, and more beautiful than her sister. Once you've been as famous as Blanche, you don't slip back and become a freak like Miss Davis preferred to see her character. (Considine 281)

While Crawford's tone is sharp in this excerpt, her message is an interesting acknowledgment of her own dedication to cultivating a very particular image and of the influential power of style. If Davis' rejection of traditional beauty and her satirical reference to a real-life phenomenon is artistically subversive, Crawford's insistence on maintaining her rank in the arbitrary system of gendered meaning and actively

manipulating her image to suit a specific role is in some ways equally as critical. While Davis may have viewed a physical, stylistic transformation as an artistic statement, Crawford insistence on the value of “real beauty” and fame and the necessity to uphold the image of both is yet another performance. In this quote and in all other examples from her public appearances, interviews, and biographic material, Crawford expresses her polished and particular “Joan Crawford” attitude; she holds strong standards for her appearance, on or off screen, and the values that it portrays.

In fact, the iconic Joan Crawford is a role in itself; born as Lucille LeSueur during the early 1900s, the movie star Joan Crawford was created—name, image, and attitude—during her early days working with MGM. Naturally talented, Lucille LeSueur became the girl that MGM could mold into the perfect star—going so far as to allow readers of the magazine *Movie World* to submit suggestions for an ideal screen name that embodied her talent, spirit, and “typically American personality,” with Joan Crawford emerging as the winning selection (Considine 22). As Crawford worked her way up to supreme stardom with the studio’s guidance, her own ambition, and the audience’s growing adoration for the character that she created in the space between fiction and reality that such larger-than-life figures inhabit. As evidenced by her defense of her costume and makeup choices on the set of *Baby Jane*, Crawford believed in the artistic power of creating and sustaining beauty and glamour just as much as others, like Davis, believed in the value of its destruction. In this film, the contrast between both women’s active manipulation of their physical forms prove the range of female-driven aesthetic choices within a seemingly male-dominated industry.

Further, Crawford's insistence on maintaining control over her image affected her professional performance and her future projects, including her role in *Strait-Jacket*. A notoriously demonstrative woman, Crawford took on the role of Lucy Harbin but insisted upon several changes to the film's script, production team, her salary and contract demands, and even her fellow castmates (Considine 304). However, the most interesting utilization of Joan's performative nature was her involvement with the gimmicks that the film's director, William Castle, was known for. Castle, a thriller producer-turned-director, sought to add interest to his own campy horrors by incorporating in-theater events that corresponded to each film's content. For *Strait-Jacket*, Castle asked Joan Crawford to fly across the country to partake in a tour of theaters; at each one, Crawford would run through the crowd with a prop axe to amuse the (mostly teenaged) audience and "to give the press and her public one 'last look at the old tradition of Hollywood hoopla'" (Considine 305). While the image of ever-refined Joan Crawford appearing in one's neighborhood movie theater wielding an axe is certainly uncanny, this anomalous act could be read as a curious production of the evolving definition of the Hollywood star as public opinion shifts from sheer idolization to unbridled critique.

Initially critical of Davis and her willingness to look unattractive on camera, Crawford's choice to partake in Castle's gimmicks may seem discontinuous with her carefully cultivated image; however, I would argue that it is simply evidence of the public's growing awareness of personal performances, social expectations, and the potentially unsettling relationships between the two. As the growing interest in horror cinema proves, both the content and context of Hollywood cinema changed during this period and its stars changed with it. Veteran actresses like Davis, who reveled in the

Grande Dame Guignol's deconstruction of classical beauty and the façade of glamour, and Crawford, who believed wholeheartedly in one's own power to construct and control their image, emerged from the era of studio system grooming with a stronger sense of the performative nature of gender in the public sphere. The "Hollywood hoopla" that Considine cited is the amalgam of every contrived effort for the industry to maintain its relationship with popular culture; while Hollywood filmmakers strove for verisimilitude to make their perfected pictures resemble real life, it was the performers—the agents who existed in both the story space and in the public sphere—whose imitable or even contemptible looks, behaviors, and style exemplified life's resemblance to movie magic. The turning point that the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre represents is that which recognizes the conscious performances behind the images that delight, disturb, and even perplex audiences. While Hollywood's star system and the films it produced sought to shroud the reality of difference in a perfected, performative filter, the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre marks a shift toward representing the range of human identity. Valuing no one mode of performance over the others, these films reveal individuals' ranging desires to craft their own public images, mimic other successful social performances, subversively break from limiting standards, or manipulate them for personal gain. By providing uncanny, unpleasant examples of discontinuous images and acts, the Grande Dame Guignol films and the actresses involved in their development serve to make their audiences aware of the socially-constructed system that connects film art to life in a constant loop.

While the active efforts of strong-willed actresses like Davis and Crawford are well documented by biographers and by the lasting impact of their production influence,

the context surrounding *Lady in a Cage* is quite different due to Olivia de Havilland's softer personality and the public's harsher response to the film's performances and content. Shelley notes that critics found Olivia de Havilland's move from her typical roles—such as wealthy, demure characters like Melanie Hamilton in Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939) or the titular character in William Wyler's 1949 romance film *The Heiress*—to be an uncharacteristic shift, quoting a 1964 *Time* magazine review that framed her as an addition to “the list of cinema actresses who would apparently rather be freaks than be forgotten” (52). However, while Davis and Crawford outwardly described their desires to control their images based on their own preferences, de Havilland represented a different type of star whose image seemed to be influenced by more than her own will.

Unlike Davis or Crawford, de Havilland was born into a noble English family with connections that afforded her the necessary opportunities to pursue her art and her desired status. Interestingly, de Havilland's childhood more closely mirrored that of the competitive Hudson sisters than it did the lives of her fellow actresses; she and her sister Joan, who also rose to stardom in Hollywood under the name Joan Fontaine, had a tumultuous relationship that endured throughout their youth, their respective careers in Hollywood, and their later lives before Joan's death in 2013. While both sisters pursued careers in acting and found success, Olivia sought for Hollywood to remain “[her] domain,” preventing Joan from working at the same studios and even influencing her to choose a different surname for her professional moniker, seemingly disconnecting Joan from their family's social and industrial privilege. Meanwhile, Joan frequently spoke out about her desire to outperform Olivia, while the latter sister insisted on maintaining a

defensive rather than initiative public image (“The Lifelong Feud”). From there, the sisters experienced periods of conflict—competing for roles, men, awards, and achievements—and estrangement, leading the public to view them in direct opposition and painting Olivia as the more reserved (and more advantaged) of the two.

As a result of the public’s knowledge of the sisters’ background and relationship, Olivia de Havilland carried a reputation colored by her family’s prestige, her sister’s envy, and her professional success; seemingly, she had it all. Compared to Davis or Crawford, de Havilland’s involvement in the development of the *Grande Dame Guignol* does not seem to come from a desire to exercise her underutilized skill. Instead, the contrast between de Havilland’s star image and her *Woman-in-Peril* role is less obvious, allowing the film to address the privileges that she shared with her on-screen character in earnest. Originally intended for Joan Crawford, the role of Mrs. Hilyard requires a performer like de Havilland—whose own identity is, in some ways, as uncontested as her character’s at the onset of the film—to allow the audience to see how such performances of seemingly essential value interact with others to reveal the inequities that the film critiques.

In contrast, most of the film’s first reviewers focused not on de Havilland, but on the stylistic choices of the film’s male lead, James Caan, and the evident effort that he put into his performance of the character’s fraught identity. While the *Grande Dame Guignol* subgenre seeks to portray feminine horrors, its strength is in its approach to gender as a performative construction; in effect, Caan’s contested performance of masculinity adds to the film’s commentary on the feminine experience in relation to that of the masculine. In a 1964 review titled “Aimless Brutality,” Caan is described as “a laconic hoodlum that is

crudely aping Marlon Brando, an adequate derelict” and using “his teeth to accentuate villainy, if not acting ability.” Contextualized by her personal and professional background, de Havilland’s performance was described as “a surface, somewhat obvious portrayal” in contrast (A. H. Weiler). For Caan, whose portrayal of Randall in this film marks his first credited film appearance, this role (and his professional status) was far more precarious than de Havilland’s Mrs. Hilyard. Caan’s choices were not only inspired by his character’s social situation as a young ex-convict confronting a woman who embodies his exact social opposite, but also, perhaps, by another actor’s performance of masculinity and its larger social influence.

Just as Davis appropriated the practices of MGM extras and as Lucille LeSueur crafted “Joan Crawford, the movie star” based on the direction of studio executives and the opinions of her popular audience, Caan—like all other viewers who consume Hollywood’s projections of gender and identity ideals and proceed to enact their examples through their own everyday performances—learned from his on-screen models and created a masculine image informed by those successful examples. Not unlike Brando’s popular, celebrated performances of problematic masculine figures like Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1951) or the biker Johnny Strabler in *The Wild One* (dir. Laszlo Benedek, 1953), Caan attempts to counter de Havilland’s performance with the type of loud, aggressive acts that the former characters use to overpower the women in their narratives and lead their companions.

The most fascinating remark made in Weiler’s review of Caan’s performance is that he “crudely apes” or unsuccessfully mimics Brando, as though his choices result in a poor performance because he cannot replicate the other actor’s ease. However, for the

purposes of my analysis, Caan's inability to fluidly reproduce the same brand of masculinity that an actor like Brando brings to the screen aptly illustrates the way that individuals read the performances of those they see—on or off screen—and reproduce or react to those examples to varying degrees of success. Like Jane Hudson unconvincingly reclaiming her childhood role or Carol Harbin tragically mimicking her mother's criminal acts, Caan's performance in this film speaks similarly to the difficulty of successfully reproducing accepted gender performances based on social expectations, examples, and one's own capacity for acting in a way that others deem legible.

Ultimately, these three Grande Dame Guignol films provide examples of performers with established histories of acting on- and off-screen alongside characters (and budding actors, like Caan) who struggle to create or reconstruct socially successful performances. The casting of these films enrich their commentary on performance by emphasizing how each actress influences her image beyond directorial control, while the reception of their respective acts speaks to the public's evolving understanding of the function that Hollywood cinema, its star system, and its effect on its viewers play in influencing the definition, construction, and idealization of gender.

## CHAPTER FIVE: RECEPTION &amp; CONCLUSION

As the examples from *Lady in a Cage* prove, the lasting impact of the Grande Dame Guignol lies in its discussion of the influential, idealistic quality of the Hollywood star, the exposition of its performative purpose, and its likeness to gender performativity on an individual scale. The preceding analysis of each film's narrative, stylistic, and contextual elements seeks to illustrate these qualities, but the subgenre's retained relevance in popular culture furthers the conversation beyond the films' content and proves that, despite great progress, there is still much work to be done to encourage awareness of the social and individual components of gender performance and identity construction. While all of the films in question have not necessarily enjoyed frequent screenings, the actresses who brought them to life continued their professional and personal performances in ways that interact interestingly with the conversations prompted in these films. Further, cultural responses to these films—including scholarship that emphasizes cultural critique over film analysis, a television miniseries detailing the rivalry between Davis and Crawford that dramatizes the production of each of the three selected films, and the actresses' personal conflicts—keep these films and their performers connected to the ever-evolving conversations surrounding gender and performance.

While many scholars and critics dismiss the Grande Dame Guignol, some of the subgenre's features—particularly *Baby Jane*—are considered cult classics for their socially critical narratives and campy tone. In fact, actresses like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford became counterculture icons for their uniquely self-motivated performances on- and off-screen, which are ever more complicated by their dramatic departure from the

social norm marked in these performances. Due to the complex considerations of gender performance noted in the histories of these actresses and the subgenre that they built, these figures and films have special relevance in queer culture as evidence of the social power of performance. Scholar Daniel Harris describes the worship of “Hollywood divas” like Davis and Crawford among gay men in the following excerpt:

[A]t the very heart of gay diva worship... is not the diva but the almost universal homosexual experience of ostracism and insecurity which led to what might be called the aestheticism of maladjustment, the gay man’s exploitation of cinematic visions of Hollywood grandeur to elevate himself above his antagonistic surroundings... In the homosexual’s imagination, Hollywood divas actually become gay men, undergoing a strange sort of sex change operation from which they emerged, not as women, but as drag queens. (168-169)

In Harris’ analysis, actresses like Davis, Crawford, and many other Hollywood icons—like Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, Katharine Hepburn, and Grace Kelly—who had immeasurable influence on the social definition of ideal femininity actually offer a command of the screen space and studio environment that rivals that of their male counterparts, allowing them to transcend boundaries between gender that unnecessarily dictate power, influence, and certain elements of character. Interestingly, however, Harris notes that the queer community’s response to the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre problematized diva worship and necessitated therapeutic ridicule of these exalted figures. Harris remarks that in the 1980s and 1990s, satirized responses to films like *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* demystified the glamour of the Hollywood diva through age and inelegance and the release of biographical exposés like *Mommie Dearest* transmuted

icons like Joan Crawford from a “bewitching siren” to an “axe-wielding, child-beating, lesbian drunk” (180). These critical responses mark a shift in which figures who previously troubled the binary of gender performance and gendered traits were held to a higher standard, necessitating that subversive performances must be matched with social responsibility to be celebrated. In the context of a shifting social atmosphere, the value of these performers’ socially critical work in earlier projects and in the Grande Dame Guignol subgenre may be complicated by new knowledge; however, there is still much to take away from the range of performances that these women provided throughout their careers.

For instance, Harris remarks that “[t]he temple of celebrity worship was pillaged and defiled, and the sacred vestments became dresses for drag shows, with gay men wearing the girlish pony tails and clown-white makeup of Bette Davis [in *Baby Jane*]” as a way to reappropriate the adoration that soured over time (183). While this cathartic response to the evolution of a personal idol may seem solely negative, even the mocking appropriation of her image—especially one like Baby Jane’s, which is humorously unsuccessful to begin with—is a productive acknowledgment of the performer’s social critique and a fitting adaptation of the film’s message. For a problematic figure like Crawford, who shocked fans with the discordance between her performance of perfection and her daughter’s traumatic testimony in her memoir *Mommie Dearest*, the distance between appearance and actuality is even clearer.

While adoration and idolization of these stars serves, as Harris noted in his initial explanation of Hollywood diva worship, to empower fans and reinforce their own values, these star-images must also be assessed without bias. As performers like Davis and

Crawford demonstrated throughout their careers, the social limitations of gender can be breached through performance to even the playing field; however, performance can also conceal and manipulate the social cues that we read to determine morality and social cohesion. Further responses to these actresses and their Grande Dame Guignol roles follow similarly definitive readings of these figures and their art; however, I would argue that the most constructive and positive response to these actresses' work lies in viewing their performances with an unbiased gaze that seeks not to exalt or condemn the performers, but to understand the modes of creating social meaning through actions, attitudes, and appearances.

In 2017, popular writer and television producer Ryan Murphy released a docudrama titled *Feud: Bette and Joan*, featuring Susan Sarandon and Jessica Lange as the titular stars, respectively, that depicted the actresses' real-life feud, documented conflicts from the set of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, and referenced the production of *Strait-Jacket* and *Lady in a Cage* in relation to their stars' declining careers. As a product of a contemporary push for media that provides strong female leads, the television miniseries ironically produces a destructive, competitive narrative that pits the actresses it aims to honor against one another. While much of the narrative is based on recorded facts of the two women's back-and-forth conflicts, the series' tone—and, arguably, the concept of a docudrama based on the actresses' "true" personalities—interestingly combats the social critique provided in its Grande Dame Guignol inspiration and source material by pitting the women against one another. Throughout the series, Sarandon's Bette Davis is quick-witted, sharp, and ultimately gets the upper hand on Jessica Lange's petty Joan Crawford. The narrow characterization of both women

exposes the same problem as the polarizing worship/ridicule dichotomy discussed by Harris; while we may reflect on biographical material and recontextualize our images of these stars, we may only access performances and representations rather than any individual's innermost character. Leaning into a perceived, socially-created "feud" between the two women minimizes and subjects them to a futile comparison of differences perverted by value judgments.

Fascinatingly, *Feud* incorporates Olivia de Havilland—portrayed by Catherine Zeta-Jones—as Bette Davis' close friend and confidante and ascribes traits to her name and likeness that the actress herself contested. In the series, de Havilland takes part in a fictionalized interview discussing the rivalry between Davis and Crawford in which she calls her sister, Joan Fontaine, a bitch. The real Olivia de Havilland, who was 102-years-old at the time of the series' release, took issue with the writers' liberties in writing dialogue that portrays the actress uncharacteristically gossiping, cursing, and critiquing friends and family. In 2019, de Havilland filed a lawsuit against the creators of the series for putting false words in her mouth and, officially, for violating her right to publicity and false light (Gardner). Ultimately, her case was declined and appeals court Justice Anne Egerton wrote that "[w]hether a person portrayed in one of these expressive works is a world-renowned film star—a 'living legend'—or a person no one knows, he or she does not own history. Nor does he or she have the legal right to control, dictate, approve, disapprove, or veto the creator's portrayal of actual people" (Otterson). While the court's decision is based in protecting the creative rights of the writers, de Havilland's issue brings the identity and performance questions proposed in the Grande Dame Guignol films to contemporary relevance. Though the court determined that de Havilland's

request to control her own image—or to respond to someone else’s interpretation of her image—infringed on the latter individual’s creative liberties, the question of one’s ownership over their own likeness, character, and public expression is expanded from objectifying portrayals of women in film to appropriative portrayals of individuals on the actual social stage.

When a person shares his or her self with others—on any scale, small or large—the right to define his or her own character becomes complicated. One’s social performance is derived from social definitions, meaning that its outward expression—its performance—is constantly read, appropriated, and redefined by others. In the case of the female star, male-dominated film art has traditionally appropriated her image for the sake of objectifying, eroticizing, and controlling her idealized form, simultaneously alienating and influencing women to assure adherence to patriarchal social standards.

The Grande Dame Guignol provides an early example of the female performer using the tools gained from looking at the world from this confined perspective, proving her ability to adapt, appropriate, and reject these standards to suit her own needs. As the popular reception of these actresses and their work proves, these performances can still be misunderstood and devalued. However, these films and their actresses’ work proves the capacity for an individual to write one’s own role through performance and assert their own self-definition as a means of combatting the socially-enforced oppression that wrongfully dictates experience.

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