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The Stepford Wives, Trajectories of Dystopia into Gender, Genre, Class and Race – From Novel to Film

Abstract

The Stepford Wives, a novel by Ira Levin published in 1972, describes a micro-dystopian society, which imposes a strict 'traditional' order, by transforming women into compliant wives programmed to serve their husbands. The book has been adapted to screen several times. The present paper will focus on a comparison between the original literary work and the first adaptation of 1975 by British director Bryan Forbes, seen through the notions of genre, gender, class and race.

Key words: genre; dystopia; thriller; horror movie; class; race; gender; patriarchy; gaze; spectacle; feminism; mass culture

Резюме

„Степфордските съпруги", траектории на дистопията през пол, жанр, класа и раса в романа и на екрана

„Степфордските съпруги", роман от Айра Левин публикуван през 1972 г., описва микро-дистопията на общност, в която е наложен „традиционен" ред чрез превръщане на жените в послушни съпруги, програмирани да служат на съпрузите си. Книгата е екранизирана няколко пъти. Настоящият текст ще се съсредоточи върху сравнение между литературния оригинал и първата екранизация от 1975 г. с режисьор Брайън Форбс, видяна през понятията жанр, социален пол, класова принадлежност и раса.

Ключови думи: жанр; дистопия; трилър; филм на ужасите; класова принадлежност; раса; социален пол; патриархат; поглед; спектакъл; феминизъм; масова култура

Plot

The original plot accounts of the plight of a young woman, Joanna, an aspiring photographer, after she moves with her husband and two children from New York to the seemingly perfect Stepford, a paradisiac town spared of heavy traffic, pollution, noise and any

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signs of deviancy. Very soon, she becomes suspicious of the way all women in the area fit into one exact type – they are both completely devoted to housework and looking over-sexualised, always ready to respond to the sexual appetite of their husbands and laud their performance ecstatically. Joanna grows more troubled after realising that the few women who did not comply with this model were mysteriously transformed to suit it, all exactly two months after their arrival at Stepford. She and her best friend, Bobbie, also new in Stepford, first suspect water pollution, then that women are exchanged with robotic doubles. After Bobbie is changed, too, Joanna makes a desperate attempt to escape, but fails and is transformed into a perfect Stepford wife.

Why dystopia

At first sight, the plot is not a classic example of dystopia. However, it shares many essential characteristics and themes with the genre: a negative view or implied criticism of society, a sentiment of anxiety, dominance of technology, futuristic elements like robots, destruction of nature, threat of or actual loss of identity and freedom, totalitarian rule by a group of people, death of the rebellious main character. Feminist writer Carina Chocano remarks, '*The Stepford Wives* movie, which came three years after the novel, had the air of an underwater dream shot behind glass.'[2] The novel is akin to the dystopian genre also in its relation to time. Albeit set in the present day, the women in it, performing repetitive household tasks day after day, are stuck in a kind of timelessness, which is a type of meddling with time peculiar to dystopia. Jane Elliot in her study of *The Stepford Wives*[3] reminds of the following quote from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*:

> Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present.[4]

Feminism

This connection is far from being arbitrary. *The Stepford Wives* itself opens on a quote by Simone de Beauvoir from *The Second Sex*, describing the woes of modern women:

> Today the combat takes a different shape; instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavors to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence. Now the attitude of the males creates a new conflict: it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go.[5]

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[2] Chocano, Carina. *You Play the Girl: On Playboy Bunnies, Stepford Wives, Train Wrecks & Other Man-Made Women*. London, Virago, 2017, p. 19.
[3] Elliot, Jane. 'Stepford U.S.A. Second-wave feminism, domestic labour, and the representation of national time' in *Cultural Critique*, No. 70 (Fall, 2008), pp. 32-62, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25475486.
[4] De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. London, Jonathan Cape, 1956, p. 438.
[5] Levin, Ira. *The Stepford Wives*. London, Bloomsbury, 1998, p. ix.

In this way, the novel states openly a feminist position and inscribes itself in the dystopian subgenre exploring the question of gender. It was written in the heyday of the Women's Liberation movement in the United States, and its references appear throughout the text as household names, such as: Kate Millet, Betty Freidan with '*The Mystique*' (shortened from her influential book *The Feminine Mystique*); different tactics of feminist activism are mentioned as day-to-day activities: petitioning, picket-lining, chaining oneself to a fence; the two friends, Joanna and Bobbie, are members of the National Organisation for Women and speak of 'getting a chapter'; notably, Joanna's husband was also involved actively in the Women's Liberation movement. The subsequent screen adaptations step back from this overtly political feminist position. The film version of 1975, by British director Bryan Forbes, follows most closely the literary original. The subsequent remakes of 2004 and 2022 part in directions that exceed the concerns of this paper, and will be discussed elsewhere.

In the 1972 movie, Joanna and her husband Walter are more polarised as a couple in comparison with their literary equivalents. In the beginning of the film, when we become acquainted with the young family as they are moving from their New York apartment, at one point, while waiting for her husband, the female protagonist sees an uncanny sight – a man carrying a female mannequin, with its face covered, as if blindfolded. Mesmerised by the sight, she instantly grabs her camera and takes a series of pictures. When the husband returns, one of the children says: '*Daddy, I just saw a man carrying a naked lady*.' His immediate response is: '*That's why we are moving to Stepford*.' While she finds inspiration in the awkward occurrences, generated by the city dynamics, he sees in them a reason to leave. In an earlier scene, we see her, obviously reluctant to leave, lingering in the apartment, even forgetting the family dog there – an omission revealing her desire to stay. In addition, later we learn that moving to Stepford was her husband's idea. Significantly, the film opens on a *detail shot* of a pseudo-Secession patterned yellow-green wallpaper. With a *swish pan* the camera moves on Joanna's face looking at herself in a mirror, this time the wallpaper is reflected behind her. Carina Chocano sees in this shot a parallel between the destiny of the female character in *The Stepford Wives* and the one of 'The Yellow Newspaper,' an 1892 semi-autobiographical story by Charlotte Perking Gilman, and also a staple of feminist fiction:

> '*You can't start a movie about a woman who is about to be murdered and replaced by a robot with a shot of yellow newspaper and not invite comparisons to* The Yellow Wallpaper.'[6]

The Yellow Wallpaper is the story of a young woman who suffers a severe postpartum depression, and is sent to the countryside in order to rest. She is being ordered by her husband, a doctor, not to meet people, and not to exercise her profession of a writer. This advice is supported by her brother, a doctor, too. From the outset, she has misgivings about the house. In addition, she is to stay in a room adorned with a yellow wallpaper, the pattern of which causes her to experience a most violent feeling of aesthetic revulsion. Soon her desire to write wanes. Despite her pleas to her husband to have it changed, he refuses. In the final chapter, as he returns home, he finds her crawling on the floor, mimicking the lizard-like shapes of the wallpaper. At the sight, he collapses on the floor. This makes no impression on his wife, nor interrupts her movement, and she crawls over his body out of the room. This Victorian story offers a rather grim alternative to a joyful embrace of motherhood and housebound role for women – madness, self-alienation, and a monstruous version of mimicry of the environment. Joanna of the 1970's also is isolated, has trouble working on her photography due to housework, her mental health is being questioned, including by herself, finally – her fate is in the hands of men.

A Female Gaze

Let's return to this first shot of the movie. It is a rather complex shot in terms of looking. It shows the female protagonist for the first time. We see her reflection in the mirror, as if through her eyes, the infamous wallpaper in the background. We are looking at her, looking at herself. We are allowed to come between her and her image in a moment of self-appraisal, of existential questioning. As she lowers her eyes, then looks at herself, then closes her eyes, we understand that her refusal to look is a sign of surrender, and that she acknowledges that.

[6] Chocano, Carina. *You Play the Girl: On Playboy Bunnies, Stepford Wives, Train Wrecks & Other Man-Made Women*. London, Virago, 2017, p. 29.

From this shot we also learn that she operates an active *gaze*, but her relationship to it is problematic. She possesses enough awareness to know that she is entering a prison, but she lacks the tenacity to sustain her fight. Her incapability to either withstand her own *gaze* or to stop looking will bring on her demise. Notably, it is silent, accompanied only by realistic location sounds; the music appears as the couple leave New York, to denote entering middle-class utopia and dystopia. This whole sequence is non-existent in the novel. It is director Bryan Forbes's way to translate the quotation by Simone de Beauvoir into cinematic language. The *gaze*, of course, is crucial to power relations.

The gaze in photography

Being a photographer is an important way for the female protagonist to assert *agency* both in the book and the movie. Noticeably, the care she devotes to her children and the home impedes her artistic drive. Taking a maid is impossible, because there are none in the area to be found. Since all women are so passionate about scrubbing floors that there is no work left to do for the professional help in the area. By manipulating women into housework, the husbands force their wives into middle-class ideology. Photography is a way to professional fulfilment and independence (the precise amount of the rare checks Joanna is paid is mentioned persistently in the book and the movie). But photography is above all a way of mastering the *gaze*[7]. In the novel, Joanna tries to take a photograph of the Stepford's Men Association, the

[7] Notably, she and the young black woman are the last surviving genuine women in Stepford, both are involved in visual arts, allowing them to master the gaze in the most direct way.

power locus of Stepford, and a police car arrives immediately to prevent her from taking shots. The intervention of the policeman is very polite, but while he is asking his pretend amateur questions on photography, the blinds are pulled on the windows of the building. More importantly, as he arrives, the headlights of his car blind her completely. In the movie, similarly, when her dog walks into the yard of the Men's Association and she follows it, she is warned off by a policeman that this is a private property. As in the novel, she is first blinded by the lights of his car, hurting her eyes.

This blinding is important, since it is in its essence an attempt to block her *gaze*.

Female gaze in narration

Not less important is the gaze as expressed via the choice of narrative approach. The heroine's point of view is shared subtly, by controlling the distribution of information – the readers know of the events only what the heroine sees and feels. The first-person narration is avoided, which in the case of a politically engaged male writer is crucial to save him and the story from a male appropriation of the first-person feminine. Her interjections like '*damn him*'[8] are inserted into the narrator's text, denoting that the narrator sides with her. Furthermore, the narrative is structured like a diary, even if the first-person form is not used. It gives an account of a specific series of events, then informs of the passage of time, before reproducing another series of events. The diary is an intimate genre associated with female writing. (*The Yellow Wallpaper* is also related in this form.) But it is not merely a question of representing a point of view. In these ways, the novel subversively establishes a female gaze. It is undeniably a *gaze*, since it implies an ideological network at play made explicit. The film does not tell the

[8] Levin, Ira. *The Stepford Wives.* London, Bloomsbury, 1998, p. 26.

story exclusively from her perspective, we also witness events that she is unaware of, but they are extensions of her intuitions.

Male Gaze – Female ideal

The male gaze defines the looks and behaviours of women in Stepford. They correspond to a certain ideal of femininity, which is the outcome of mass culture. In a moment of revelation, looking at her neighbour, the heroine reflects:

> Like an actress in a commercial.
> That's what she was, Joanna felt suddenly. That's what they all were, all the Stepford wives: actresses in commercials, pleased with detergents and floor wax, with cleansers, shampoos, and deodorants. Pretty actresses, big in the bosom but small in talent, playing suburban housewives unconvincingly, too nicey-nice to be real.[9]

The Stepford women in the movie are depicted as old-fashioned and of the mother type, which of course reveals a lot of the desires of the men. If the women are constantly preoccupied with domestic work, it is also because this feature indulges a fixation of the man who is the mastermind behind changing the women, an ex-Disney executive, who shares with Joanna '*I like watching women doing little domestic chores'*. When Joanna's husband invites some of the men to his home, she discovers to her amazement and embarrassment that one of them is a famous magazine illustrator, Mazzard, who created an ideal of a girl she was never able to live up to. He is one of the men, creating powerful imagery young girls incorporate to the detriment of their *subjectivity*. The same evening, he draws many pictures of her to serve as a blueprint for her double. Of course, the men in turn are moulded by mass culture.

But what makes this 'perfection'? At first, the two women suspect environmental pollution, caused by the many industries located near Stepford, where most of the men work. If, in cultural terms, women are traditionally associated with nature, as opposed to culture attributed to men, the fear over the destruction of nature reflects anxiety over the safety of women in their social environment. However, the real key to the subversion of women into perfect housewives and sex machines does not lie in aggression against the environment. As it turns out, the answer is in the combined power of high technology and entertainment. The men in Stepford work or have worked in these two areas and this helps them create robots

[9] Ibid., p. 40.

duplicating but 'improving' their wives. Carina Chocano pays special attention to the role of male magazines and especially Playboy, as a soft porn cum life-style men's magazine.[10] As she remarks, 'Playboy pictorials were all culture, no nature.'[11]

In her seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema',[12] Laura Mulvey accuses commercial cinema of operating a *to-be-looked-at-ness* which transforms women into spectacle, depriving them of the capacity to act. This quality is acknowledged in the novel as something that exists and interferes with female *subjectivity*, but it is not purveyed through its agency. We do not really know what Joanna looks like, no description of her is provided. On several occasions however, a description of her making an effort to look good is given, she even asks, albeit jokingly, her husband if she looks smart and beautiful for his friends from the Men's Association. At one point, the heroine even suffers criticism from her husband for not making enough effort to please him with her looks. We can feel the pressure of the male gaze. The book also constantly reminds of the extraordinary attractiveness of the Stepford women, at which Joanna and her friend Bobby marvel.

The movie, on the other hand, while making a claim of taking woman's position, betrays this intention. It reproduces the *to-be-looked-at-ness.* Cinema suffers the flaw of specificity compared to other art forms that have the capacity to bear abstraction. Stanley Cavell precises, 'for film there is in acting a natural ascendancy of actor over character.'[13] At the time of *The Stepford Wives*, Katharine Ross had established herself as a leading actress in staples of The New Hollywood such as *The Graduate* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, where she is the epitome of the new free women. The filmmaker lauds the fashionably athletic androgynous figure of the actress, associated with the hippie movement, and the new ideal of the female body. In fact, Joanna and her friend Bobbie are shown to be the most attractive women in Stepford. The small difference lies in the type of beauty acclaimed, but the spectacle is still there. At the finale, when a distressed, rain-drenched Joanna confronts her doppelganger, its body is obviously sexualised to suit a male phantasy shaped by men's magazines. The actress's girlishly flat chest is replaced by a full bosom. Since it is dressed in a semi-transparent night gown, it is visible that the pubic hair is non-existent, in accordance

[10] Chocano, Carina. *You Play the Girl: On Playboy Bunnies, Stepford Wives, Train Wrecks & Other Man-Made Women.* London, Virago, 2017, pp. 3-17.
[11] Ibid., p. 5.
[12] Mulvey, Laura. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In: *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds.: Mast, Cohen &Braudy. Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 746-757.
[13] Cavell, Stanley. *Pursuits of Happiness. The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Harvard University Press, 1981 p. 53.

with standards imposed by the porn industry. In this scene, the *to-be-looked-at-ness* is transferred from the heroine to her double.

Genre

The dystopian genre both in literature and cinema often merges with the sci-fi, the thriller and the horror[14].

Thriller

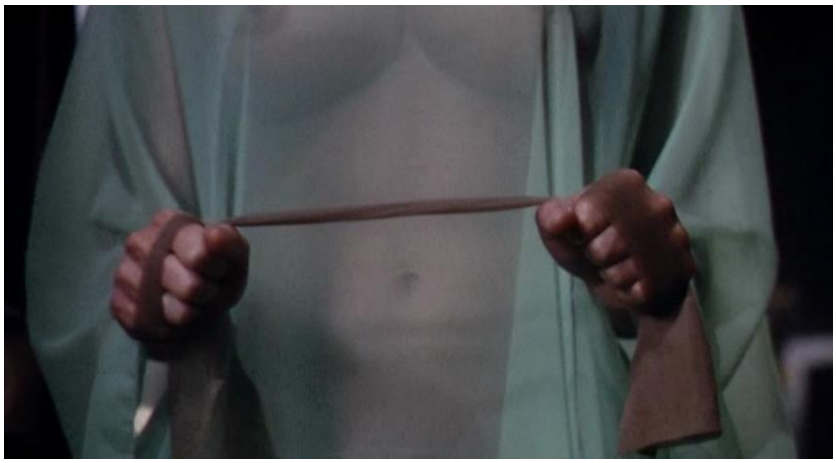
As the plot develops, elements of thriller become more and more perceptible. While it is difficult to delimit the cinematic genre thriller, it was described by Martin Rubin as follows: 'The thriller works primarily to evoke such feelings as suspense, fright, mystery, exhilaration, excitement, speed, movement.'[15] Conspiracy, maze like environment, partial vision and *protraction* are among the elements of the thriller, and they all can be identified in *The Stepford Wives.* The central character may first be swept by the events, but she/he always gains the upper hand, and this is the lure of the genre. Joanna and her friend Bobbie investigate the mysterious events in Stepford. The thriller element in the movie gives the female protagonist agency – she is more active and more violent. After her children are being taken from her, she hits her husband with a club at the back of his neck, which causes him to collapse, a streak of blood visible on the side of his head. At this moment, the genre veers to horror.

[14] It is needs to be noted that the cinematic genres do not correspond entirely with the literary genres of the same name, and their definitions are rather fluid.
[15] Rubin, Martin. *Thrillers*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 5.

The blurring of the shot denotes a shift into the horror genre, where it typically represents the victim's point of view. Suddenly, a woman is the villain, and a man the victim. In the book there is no explicit violence.

Horror

What further completes the shift to horror is an alteration in cinematic vernacular: dramatic expressionist lighting, variation of high and low angles and creepy music appear. In the climatic scene, however, the most terrifying element is the eyes – completely taken by a shiny blackness, like an insect's. The new creature is all but human – a monster. Notably, her husband has similar eyes, in the dark after returning from his first meeting at the Men's Association – a sign of his loss of humanity. Again, the issue of the *gaze* reappears. The odious insect eyes do not see the world through a human perspective.



The scene ends with the robot approaching to kill the real woman, suffocating her with a silk stocking. Notably, in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the heroine feels that the pattern 'strangles so'[16]. The scene doubles the opening scene. The heroine sees herself in a mirror; this time, on the other side of the mirror is her double. The scenes are constructed in clear reference to the Lacanian mirror stage, and as if to hint at that – there is a mirror in the background in which

[16] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. New York, Feminist Press, 1973, p. 42.

the double is looking at herself, when Joanna enters the room. She sees herself like she would after being overtaken by the Other. The horror is also in the heroine seeing her own death. She is certain of it, does not shout '*No*!' She asks the essential question '*Why*?' and receives the only possible true answer, '*Because we can*.', revealing the nature of power as violence. Joanna in the novel gives up out of tiredness, she lets herself be convinced by the men that everything is normal. Her white privileged position, of which she had earlier reproached herself, has not prepared her to fight. After Joanna vanishes, she is replaced by a new female protagonist – the young black woman, whom she has befriended. In the last scene, a 'she' appears, and the writer leaves us to believe at first that it refers to Joanna unchanged. Soon, however, we learn that the woman who is grumpy and unhappy at having to shop at the supermarket, and whose thoughts we can read, is the black woman. She is the new heroine, and notably the novel ends with a conversation between her and her husband. It is rather ambivalent as to whether she will be able to resist the impending transformation and if there is transformation planned. She is the author of a children's book called *Penny Has a Plan*, where girls are proactive, '*Subtle propaganda*' as she puts it in a joke. Her work as an illustrator gives her the power to create images to counter those created by men. Moreover, in an earlier conversation with Joanna, she admits that she has never heard of the influential illustrator living at Stepford, which denotes her as free from the impact of culture structured by patriarchy. Recently, however, she has been unable to work. Her husband is fairly tolerant of her late hours and neglect of housework, like all husbands before the transformation of their wives, and before the weekend trip, after which women return not as themselves. The trip, too, comes up in the conversation. He is reading *Men in Groups*, an exemplary text of 70s male chauvinism. Whether he is being brainwashed (he mentions he has joined the Men's Association) or he is getting acquainted with it for his academic work, the book does not make clear. Still, he is wearing blue socks, mending his glasses with Sellotape, and offering to take the kids to McDonald's or a pizza – clear indicators of his working-class origin and cultural tastes. In the film, the whole scene is reduced to a shot of a black couple bickering in the background, while Joanna is shopping after her transformation.

Conclusion:

Significantly, the story is not transposed in time or space, which would create a safe distance. Instead, the burning issues are brought near to home. The dystopia in *The Stepford Wives* derives from the realities of mass culture and the ideology of patriarchy seething through

them, realities which are rendered in extreme forms in both the literary and the cinematic oeuvres.

The plot addresses dystopian fears like the merging of a human with an insect or a robot, the fear of destruction of nature. They are all linked to underlying fears of the impact on society of technological advancement in the post-modern age.

If women were so easily replaced, it is because they are needed by their husbands for the functions they perform: child-bearing, child-rearing, cooking, cleaning, shopping, and sex. In fact, it is what 50s and 60s advertising reduces women to. If there is any hope for the last genuine woman standing, and a grain of optimism in the dystopian micro-universe described, it resides in her race and class origin, relating her to an alternative culture.

Dystopia is merged with the neighbouring and often overlapping genres of thriller and horror to make a more powerful claim in a book that is overtly political. The movie gives more agency to the female protagonist through thriller elements, and makes the suffering of women forced to comply under patriarchy visible through the use of the horror genre. The novel spares us the violence of the transformation, even leaves place for a doubt as to whether any transformation of violent nature has taken place, or indeed the heroine has changed on her own accord. In the cinematic version, there is no doubt as to what is to happen to the heroine. The film chooses the 'softer' approach in the horror genre, whereby the horrific is left to be imagined. In both the movie and the book, the introduction of the horror genre victimises the female protagonist, in this way weakening her agency. However, since the graphic details of her annihilation are spared, her suffering is not turned into sheer *spectacle*. The text of the 70s movie is pro-feminist, but in certain instances the discourse still falls prey to sadistic, patriarchal controlling impulse.

The main issues which motivated the original *Stepford Wives* have moved to the present, and this explains the longevity of the plot, even though modulated through the prism of new social realities.

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