

“I See, I See...”:

***Goodnight Mommy* as Austrian Gothic**

When attempting to define the Gothic in “The Gothic on Screen,” Misha Kavka notes that “there is no established genre called *Gothic cinema* or *Gothic film*,” and instead goes on to note that “[t]here are Gothic images and Gothic plots and Gothic characters and even Gothic styles within film, all useful to describe bits and pieces of films that usually fall into the broader category of *horror*.” (209) Nonetheless, in spite of this lack of a clear definition of Gothic cinema, loose from the horror genre, Kavka also notes that “we perfectly well know the Gothic when we see it. There is, in fact, something peculiarly visual about the Gothic.” (209) It is this visual quality – or lack thereof - of the Gothic genre that this chapter will focus on.

The chapter will examine the Austrian film *Goodnight Mommy* (Franz and Fiala, 2014) in the context of the Gothic genre, and will, in doing so, interrogate this “peculiarly visual” element as a necessary condition for a Gothic film, since the film does not, at first sight, appear to carry these specific visual markers frequently associated with the genre. Instead, the chapter will argue that this film – originally titled *Ich Seh, Ich Seh*, or *I See, I See* – is Gothic less because of any visual markers, and more because of what remains visually ambiguous and indeed invisible throughout the film. This very specific brand of Gothic is supported by the film’s status as an Austrian and thus non-Hollywood film; I will argue that this Austrian-ness is expressed less through the film’s specific geographic setting and more through references to Austria’s socio-cultural history, which are used to underline and steer the film’s plot. It, too, is thus present more in the invisible and ambiguous allusions than in the directly and obviously visible elements.

These socio-cultural markers, as I will explore, particularly serve to underline the importance of familial relationships and especially of parenthood/motherhood within the film’s narrative; this chapter will therefore use the evolving status of the eponymous “Mommy” as a guide to the film’s Gothic quality. It will do so by noting especially the transformation of “Mommy” throughout the film, from bad, even monstrous, mother at the beginning to classic Gothic victim-heroine at the end.

Goodnight Mommy focuses on a mother and her ten-year old twin sons Elias and Lukas, who inhabit a large, modern house in the Austrian countryside. At the beginning of the film, the mother has just undergone a mysterious surgery and returns to the house with her face entirely swathed in bandages. Soon after, she begins to display strange behaviour: she expects the children to keep the blinds down, since she cannot handle sunlight, and generally treats her sons in a cold and dismissive way, particularly Lukas, whom she does not serve food to, talk to, or even acknowledge at all. Over the course of the film, then, the children gradually become convinced that the bandaged woman in their home is not, in fact, their beloved “Mommy”, but an impostor, an evil doppelganger whom they must capture, interrogate and, ultimately, kill. At this point, the viewer’s perception of Mommy becomes

destabilised, and we begin to wonder whether she might not, perhaps, have been telling the truth all along.

In spite of the centrality of the characters of mother and sons, however, the film does not open with an image of any of them; instead, it starts with an entirely black screen, accompanied by disembodied voices singing the first line – “Good evening, good night,” – of Brahms’ Lullaby. Only upon the second line – “bedecked with roses” – is the viewer allowed an image to go with the song; this image consists of a minute and a half of grainy, borrowed footage featuring a mother and seven children, singing. The mother is classic German movie star Ruth Leuwerik, and the clip comes from the very end of the 1956 film *Die Trapp-Familie*, a film that would be turned into a Broadway musical in 1959 and into the much more famous Hollywood film *The Sound of Music* in 1965. The scene, filmed in bright technicolor, is the very last one of the original film; the Von Trapps, all dressed in traditional dirndls or lederhosen, are performing in the United States and give a deliberately slow rendition of the lullaby in order to indicate the end of a concert.

I argue that this short clip effectively sets the scene for the remainder of the film in a number of specific ways. Firstly, it establishes motherhood as a central theme of the film; much like *The Sound of Music*, *Die Trapp-Familie* is essentially a story about good and bad parenthood, and especially good and bad motherhood. As the novice Maria enters the dysfunctional Von Trapp home and sets about mending the relationship between father and children, she becomes an iconic figure – in the scene featured here as indeed in the film in general – representing loving and traditional motherhood. In this way, within the film, the character of Maria is contrasted sharply with the “unnatural” lack of motherly feelings displayed by the sophisticated, urban Baroness Schraeder/Princess Yvonne, the original love interest of Captain Von Trapp, who enjoys Viennese society life and believes children belong in boarding schools. In this way, the *Sound of Music* story, perhaps one of most internationally famous narratives popularly associated with Austria, is used here to place the contrast between “good” and “bad” motherhood at the very heart of the narrative of the Austrian horror film that is *Goodnight Mommy*.

At the same time, however, the clip hints at more than this theme of good versus bad motherhood. While, in the context of the earlier film, the scene provides a gentle bookend to the narrative, it can be read entirely differently when removed from its natural habitat and placed at the beginning of this film. Here, the tiredness of the children is transformed into something more sinister than originally meant, and the slowness of the song takes on an almost dirge-like quality. Similarly, the lyrics, simple and innocent in the original film, are here transformed into something quite different, particularly the final, repeated lines, “Tomorrow morning, if God wills it, you will wake up again.” The clip thus lends the beginning of the film an eerie and rather dark quality. This hints at a different and more unsettling side of Mommy’s character; a monstrosity that may, perhaps, touch on the supernatural.

Initially, however, the film shows Mommy to be a bad mother to her sons on the most basic level; as opposed to the aforementioned Maria Von Trapp, she fails to embody acceptable, self-sacrificing and unconditionally loving motherhood. Instead, she is represented as a cold, selfish, emotionally abusive and almost malevolent presence, indeed very much a “non-nurturing, unyielding mother-figure, far from the idealised patriarchal feminine.” (Kaplan, 112)

Her behaviour toward the children, even at the film’s very beginning, is odd at best and both psychologically and physically abusive at worst. Favouring Elias over his brother Lukas, she seemingly ignores the existence of the second child altogether; she is seen preparing breakfast for Elias, but not for Lukas, and when offered two seashells, “One from me and one from Lukas,” she only takes the one from Elias. Later on, her utter dislike of one boy leads her to force Elias to promise not to talk to his brother anymore. While even her maternal feelings toward Elias are depicted as problematic – for example when she physically wrestles with him and almost strangles him - she seemingly entirely loathes his brother’s very existence, for reasons that remain unexplained. Her bad and uncaring motherhood also extends beyond the boys to her behaviour toward their pets; when they find their cat dying, they instantly suspect Mommy of having murdered her, and when they subsequently hide from her, she lures them out of hiding by pouring jars filled with their pet cockroaches into water, drowning them. Her nature is defined as essentially unfeeling and anti-maternal, even toward animals.

The anti-maternal as a way to condemn women also ties into Austrian history on a further level, hinted at and underlined by but not limited to the narrative of *Die Trapp-Familie* or *The Sound of Music*. After all, both films are also set in a particular time period within Austrian history, and while they served primarily to react against this time period, their approach to motherhood is not so very different from the dominant one at this time. After the annexation of Austria in 1938, in fact, Austrian women – at least those considered Volksdeutsche or of ethnic German origin – qualified, like their German counterparts, for the state decoration of the Mother’s Cross (Mutterkreuz).

A parallel decoration to the highest military honour, the Iron Cross, the Mother’s Cross could be awarded in different grades to ethnically German mothers with four or more children, who also demonstrated appropriate “probity” – defined within Nazi Germany along extremely traditional lines. (Stephenson, 31) This was but one of a number of symbolic gestures by the Nazi government in Germany and Austria to honour women primarily as good mothers – and it was also part of a wider promotion of traditional womanhood, which included a rejection of women particularly in higher positions within the workplace, with women tolerated on lower rungs primarily for the benefit of the war effort. (64-5) While the status of working women and especially working mothers was a widely discussed topic in many places throughout the 20th century, therefore, it carries specific historical meaning within a German or Austrian setting, particularly a rural rather than urban one.

This film plays with these historically and geographically specific expectations and restrictions by subtly tying Mommy's bad motherhood to her blond and visibly "Aryan" sons also to her status as a working mother. Indeed, Mommy's professional identity as a semi-famous television presenter is stressed throughout the film, from the guessing game mother and sons play at the beginning to the search results when the twins attempt to Google their Mommy. These search results then also hint at another element of Mommy's background, which is her divorce from the twins' father, further demonstrated by the removal of wedding pictures from the family photo album and the empty spaces among the family pictures on the wall. As such, Mommy is shown as not just a failure as a mother, but also as a wife - most likely, the film implies, because of her excessive focus on her career. The fact that her chosen career is one in the public eye only exacerbates this transgression; much like *Imitation of Life's* Lora, who is an actress, "the career the narrative chooses [...] only supports the charges of narcissism, indulgence and promiscuity brought to bear on [her]. She is condemned for desiring to be desired in the public sphere, instead of confining this desire to the private marital sphere." (Kaplan, 176)

Her surgery, then, while never expressly defined as plastic and purely cosmetic surgery, is automatically assumed to be so by the viewer; the skinny, blonde Mama, who has a dressmaker's dummy in her bedroom, is seen as a vain, cold figure, removing herself from her children for selfish and superficial reasons. She is thus singularly unfit to be a mother. Additionally, this alienation of "Mommy" from the persona of mother is demonstrated through her own inability to see herself as such; during the guessing game at the beginning, when one player gets a post-it note with a name attached to his or her forehead, she is unable to guess that she is, in fact, "Mama" – even after the boys give her a number of hints, including the fact that she is a television presenter, and, more tellingly, that she has two children. If her primary role should be that of a traditionally "good" mother, then Mommy has indeed failed.

Her failure is particularly strongly emphasised here through the contrasts the film offers. A first and obvious contrast is, of course, the image of the traditionally maternal Maria Von Trapp; indeed, Mommy could be identified more usefully with Maria's nemesis, the Princess Yvonne/Baroness Schraeder-figure, who, like Mommy appears to, thrives in public life and in an urban environment much more clearly than she does in a familial and rural one. At the same time, however, this is not the only contrast drawn between Mommy and a "better" mother; throughout the film, we also find traces of an earlier, more caring version of "Mommy", particularly in the recording of her voice as she sings the lullaby "Weißt du wieviel Sternlein stehen?" ("Do you know how many stars there are?") to her children. In this way, Mommy is doubled; she is the Mr Hyde to the Dr Jekyll of her own former self.

Indeed, the narrative of the film takes this doubling further, beyond the psychological doubling of Mommy's "good" (i. e. caring) and "bad" (i. e. selfish) natures. After all, as the twins open a photo album, they find an image of Mommy and another, almost identical woman, who is dressed in exactly the same clothes; at this point, children and viewer alike begin to wonder whether the Mommy who sang the recorded lullaby might not be a different person altogether from the sinister, bandaged figure who now haunts the house. This physical doubling is underlined by the image we see immediately after the discovery in the photo album - here, Mommy, who is crouching down to clean the windows, is reflected in the window and is, as such, shown physically doubled on the screen.



At this point, the second layer of the initial *Trapp Familie*-clip – the fact that the filmmakers deliberately chose a moment with a sinister tone to it – becomes meaningful. After all, this alienation of the supposed "Mommy" in the minds of her children is not just characterised by her attitude to both her sons, but goes beyond that and into the physical, potentially supernatural, realm. When Mommy is first introduced to us and reintroduced to her sons, upon arriving home after the mysterious surgery she has undergone, she is presented to us with her face wrapped in bandages, and only her eyes and mouth left visible. She is a physically confusing, almost repulsive presence and becomes, within this first re-meeting, uncanny in perhaps the most primal way; she is a mother become unrecognisable to her own children, who soon start questioning why she isn't "like our Mommy", and, later, after the discovery of the photograph, even whether she is their real Mommy at all.

The bandages remain in place for the first fifty minutes of the film, and they perform a number of different functions within the narrative. Firstly, they mark Mommy as a barely human, physically monstrous figure, reminiscent of a living mummy or Frankenstein's monster. Milbank notes that "the monstrous, the hybrid and the disgusting are central to the Gothic genre" (75), and in this sense, Mommy fulfils this role beautifully. Indeed, she embodies what Milbank terms the role of the "bleeding nun", conjoining the opposite categories of "death and life, physical and spiritual, natural and supernatural in a monstrous

form” (81), and when the author links this concept to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and particularly to the quote “a shroud enveloped her form and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel” (81), this makes the connection with Mommy even clearer. On the one hand, her bandages serve as a shroud; on the other, when the boys slash open her belly in a dream, cockroaches crawl out. She is simultaneously and uncannily dead and alive.

At the same time, the comparison between Shelley’s words and the character of Mommy also highlights her position as a disgusting, abject figure. In considering the notion of the abject, Creed notes that the “concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film, [and] that which crosses or threatens to cross the border is abject” (10); she then cites as examples of such borders the border between human and inhuman, man and beast, normal and supernatural, as well as the border “which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not.” (11) The career-obsessed, un-maternal, shrouded Mommy is an ideal candidate for each of these borders, and the fact that her presumably maternal body, when cut open by her sons, only produces cockroaches, underlines the notion of her failed motherhood even further.

However, the bandages-as-bandages also serve to demonstrate the border between “the clean and proper body and the abject body, or the body which has lost its form and integrity” (Creed, 11). Because Mommy’s face is hidden, her wounded face behind the bandages becomes a horrifying mystery, a hidden thing which the viewer simultaneously wants and does not want to see – as becomes apparent in the scene, as dreamt by the twins, in which Mommy runs into the forest and strips off her clothes and bandages, when we almost, but not quite, glimpse her bare face. A similar moment occurs earlier in the film, as one of the twins catches a glimpse of Mommy’s unbandaged face in her bedroom mirror – but is confronted instead with an extreme close-up of her bloodshot eye, which underlines the physical horror of her appearance by only giving us a hint, awful but ultimately limited, of what she looks like under her bandages.

This contrast between Mommy’s monstrous, all-seeing eye and the boys’ inability or unwillingness to see, which the viewer shares, also serves, throughout the first half of the film, to highlight the importance and yet ambiguity of visual perception in the context of this film, originally titled *Ich Seh, Ich Seh*. This emphasis on seeing and not seeing will become important, if in a crucially different manner, in the context of the film’s second half, in which Mommy is transformed into a Gothic victim-heroine.

This second half is also heralded, indirectly, through the use of the bandages, since these serve to demonstrate one very particular way in which the border between man and beast discussed by Creed applies to Mommy; after all, perhaps the bandages on her face are reminiscent most of all of the exoskeleton of an insect. This association is supported by Mommy’s sudden and unexplained love of dark places, which even in the midst of summer causes her to remind the children to keep the blinds closed. The insect connection is also underlined by the presence of bugs within the narrative of the film, including the twin boys’

collection of large pet cockroaches. These cockroaches themselves then become a part of the film's horror narrative, firstly as the boys experimentally put a cockroach on their sleeping mother and watch – in horror – as it crawls into her mouth and she eats it, which once more dehumanises her as a monster herself, and secondly as they cut open their mother with an Exacto knife and watch as bugs crawl out of her abdominal cavity.

Just as the *Trapp-Familie* clip set up the film's theme of motherhood at the very beginning, then, the bug comparison is another crucial element of the film-as-Austrian-film which works here again to adjust the direction of the film for its second half. After all, the presence of bugs, specifically cockroaches, echoes the famous Kafka novella *Die Verwandlung*, or *The Metamorphosis*, in which main character Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning, having been transformed into a monstrous, cockroach-like bug, physically repellent to everyone around him and described in the story as an "ungeheures Ungeziefer", or "monstrous vermin." This echoes Mommy's transformation in this film, from the gentle, maternal figure singing lullabies on tape to the disgusting, bug-like monster we find upon her return from the hospital.

What is most important here about the reference to Kafka's story, however, is not so much the apparent monstrosity of the central character, but the fact that it is not Samsa, but his relatives who reveal their monstrous natures over the course of the novella, as his parents and sister insult and neglect him, ultimately injuring him and contributing to his death. Familial relationships break down, but not in the way the reader first expects. This twist, too, is a key element of the plot of *Goodnight Mommy*; about two-thirds into the film, it becomes gradually apparent that it is not Mommy who is a threat to her sons, but her sons who pose a threat to Mommy. In this way, *Goodnight Mommy* develops our sympathy for the character of Mommy as the film goes on.

The transfer of sympathy from the boys to Mommy happens gradually; at the film's beginning, the viewer is firmly allied with the boys and sees Mommy only as a threatening intruder; at this point, we are even allowed a subjective look into the boys' inner world as we see their dream of their monstrous mother almost-but-not-quite revealing her unbandaged face in the woods. Over the course of the film, however, we are gradually allowed further glimpses into Mommy's private life; twice, we see her crying by herself and, as her bandages are removed just past the halfway point of the film, her appearance suddenly becomes mundane rather than monstrous. At this point, our fears about her unbandaged face are proven to be unfounded, and this further encourages a shifting viewpoint on behalf of the viewer.

The real moment of transformation happens approximately two-thirds into the film, after Mommy has removed her bandages and the boys have been returned to their home by the priest they asked for help. Elias and Lukas run inside the house and hide there; only in the middle of the night, as Mommy has cried herself to sleep, do we see them reappear, as shadows, from their hiding place under her bed. When Mommy awakens, she is tied to her

bed by her hands and feet and finds herself faced with her sons. Just like her face was obscured by bandages throughout the film's first half, their faces are now obscured using a set of identical, diabolical green masks. Soon, it becomes apparent that Mommy is not simply an abusive or disappointing mother, nor is she a bug-like monster: instead, she transforms, I argue, into an incarnation of the Gothic victim-heroine, underlining the film's status as a Gothic film.

At this point, we must return to definitions of the Gothic genre. One particularly useful definition for the purpose of analysis of this film is that cited by Waldman, which summarises the most important Gothic features as "the image of woman-plus-habitation and the plot of mysterious sexual and supernatural threats in an atmosphere of dynastic mysteries within the habitation." (29) All this takes place, then, according to Kavka, in an atmosphere characterised by darkness and a sense of the distant past; the habitation is often a "ruined castle or abandoned house on a hill made hazy by fog", with "high, arched or leaded windows that cast imprisoning shadows", while outside, a "black cloud" passes "across a full moon." (210)

As highlighted at the beginning of this chapter – with Kavka's statement that "we perfectly well know the Gothic when we see it" (209) – these definitions do indeed focus strongly on the visual. As such, they do not, at first sight, support this chapter's suggestion that *Goodnight Mommy* is a Gothic film, and in fact rather underline the different ways in which visually, the film almost deliberately steers clear from any Gothic tropes. Its setting is not, by and large, characterised by darkness; instead, the greater part of the film is set in broad daylight, in a summery, Austrian countryside landscape perfect for *Die Trapp-Familie*, but not so much for a Gothic horror film. There is no fog, and all is bright and easily visible. In fact, the film even seems aware of the contradiction between its setting and the viewer's expectations of a horror film, and often plays with these expectations by visiting and then rejecting particular spaces more typical to its genre.

At the film's beginning, for example, the twins visit both a graveyard and a subterranean crypt at this graveyard, both prime settings for the beginning of a classic horror (or Gothic) story, but these expectations are soon thwarted. The graveyard is simply sunny and unthreatening, and whereas the crypt is covered in bones and skulls, it is only visited once and never reoccurs. Whereas the house does have a cellar – another space potentially associated with the Gothic – it turns out to be simply home to a large freezer filled with pepperoni pizza, and has no greater meaning within the narrative. Again and again, the film touches upon these easily recognizable Gothic settings and then rejects them.

The house itself echoes this sense of thwarted expectations. Rather than an "antiquated or seemingly antiquated space" (Hogle, 2), a ruined castle or a named, ancient mansion or estate, the house is ultra-modern, impersonal and sterile in its appearance, with huge windows, blinds rather than curtains, and sparse, light and neutrally-coloured furniture. It has no dark corners, no hiding places, and, as opposed to houses such as Manderley in

Rebecca, it has no historical ties or ancestral connections to any of the characters involved. The “habitation” featured in this supposedly classic woman-plus-habitation setup appears here disappointingly devoid of meaning.

However, the “woman”, too, is an unlikely Gothic heroine in several ways. Firstly, the Gothic heroine typically tends to be in some sense a prisoner within the house; Milbank notes that “almost all nineteenth-century women were in some sense imprisoned in men’s houses” (155), without the freedom of movement or the financial independence afforded their male counterparts, and even more modern heroines, such as *Rebecca*’s second Mrs De Winter, are, if not physically trapped or trapped by moral convention, still the newcomer in the Gothic house and certainly financially or emotionally dependent. Mommy is not in this position; she is the only adult in the house, which she has presumably chosen, she controls the family’s finances and, since she can drive, their comings and goings. Her dominant persona in the earlier half of the film, as well, is a far cry from the traditional Gothic victim-heroine. Furthermore, the only example of “closeups of mad, staring eyes” (Kavka, 210) we see in this film is the mirrored image of Mommy’s gigantic, bloodshot eye; ostensibly, she is the dominant, sinister figure within the house, rather than its victim.

Nonetheless, both habitation and woman do conform to certain traits associated with the Gothic in certain ways. In terms of the house, for all its clean and blandly modern aesthetic, the bizarre paintings adorning its walls are particularly interesting. Unlike in older films, such as *Rebecca*, *Gaslight* or *The Two Mrs Carrolls*, however, these are not straightforward portraits of a specific character, of a predecessor within the family or an ancestor within the house; instead they include a set of rather amorphous images of women, reminiscent in some sense of the looks of the main character but never shown in enough focus or detail to be positively identified as such.

Two paintings especially are interesting in this regard: one shows a woman with her face averted from the viewer, whereas another shows a woman in frontal view with her face blurred. I argue that these paintings carry a number of different meanings within the narrative, and in a sense provide a clue to the secret running through the film.

Firstly, of course, the fact that the figure on the paintings resembles but is not clearly identifiable as Mommy appears to echo the question about Mommy’s identity; we are not allowed to glimpse the face of the women pictured, just like we are not allowed to glimpse Mommy’s face for the greater part of the film, and just like the question of her true identity remains a conundrum even as she becomes the victim-heroine near the film’s end. This is

the most immediate interpretation of these paintings: they look like Mommy, but they cannot be clearly identified as Mommy.



There is more, however. Secondly, after all, the paintings differ from those in other Gothic films in another key way, because they are at no point interacted with or commented upon, nor do they play a particular role within the film's narrative. Jacobs and Colpaert note that in films of this kind,

the painting itself is usually presented as a character in its own right. Other characters treat the portrait as a real person, looking, talking, shouting, or even throwing things at it. In films, painted portraits invite the same reactions as human beings do. (17)

This is not the case in this particular film, where the paintings are simply a part of the backdrop and are never even noticeably looked at by the characters; as such, the supposed invisibility of the portraits ties into the wider theme of the unreliability of the senses which permeates this film, on a number of levels. The portraits are unseen, yet in plain sight; in this way, they echo the mystery at the heart of the film – the fact that Lukas, one of Mommy's twins, is dead and invisible to her, yet in plain sight to the viewers.

Having concluded that the paintings depict a Mommy-like figure with an unidentifiable face, and that they are never interacted with by any character in the film, we can thus arrive at the third and, I believe, most pertinent interpretation of these paintings. After all, while it is true that the paintings' blurred or invisible faces might signify the horrific unknown of Mommy's face, this also means that Mommy herself cannot see. Her obscured face in both images also means she is unable to see what happens inside her own home, and this ultimately lies at the crux of the film's denouement.

This also highlights the way in which the woman within this habitation might fit into the paradigm of the Gothic victim-heroine after all, particularly when we consider the ways in

which this unlikely victim becomes entrapped just like her other Gothic sisters before her. The entrapment exists on multiple levels, with the most obvious one being the physical one: for the last third of the film, Mommy is restrained to the house and isolated “within the nuclear family” (Waldman, 35); whereas in films such as *Rebecca* or *Gaslight*, this restraint was emotional, financial, or psychological, the restraint here is physical. As she wakes up, Mommy finds herself strapped to the bed and cannot release herself, even as her sons torture her by burning her face with a magnifying glass in order to make her confess she is not their real mother. Her suffering as a trapped victim is physical as well as psychological and utterly complete; she cannot leave the house, and even when she eventually escapes, a trap set by the boys trips her up, and she is once more dragged inside and tied up, this time in the living room.

However, the sense of entrapment goes further than this and is not simply a matter of Mommy’s physical whereabouts: it is also connected to the way her sensory perception and her ability to physically express herself are being curtailed. Her entrapment is directly enacted upon her body, too. This is apparent when, as Mommy manages to remove the tape on her mouth, her twin sons decide to glue her mouth shut to keep her from screaming for help and as, by the film’s end, at least one of her eyes has been similarly glued shut. This distorts her vision, as we can tell when, for the very first time within the film, we are firmly and literally aligned with Mommy’s point of view and we see a set of blurred images as she is dragged across the floor by her children.

The relationship between the senses and Mommy’s status as a trapped Gothic heroine goes even further than this, however, beyond this physical limitation of her sense of vision, and connects with one of the central features of the genre, which is the search of a female protagonist for the solution of a central mystery. Waldman describes this search as follows:

[...] the central feature of the Gothics is ambiguity, the hesitation between two possible interpretations of events by the protagonist and often, in these filmic presentations, by the spectator as well. This it shares with other filmic and literary genres, for example, the horror film and the fantastic. Yet in the Gothic, this hesitation is experienced by a character (and presumably a spectator) who is female. Within a patriarchal culture, then, the resolution of the hesitation carries with it the ideological function of validation or invalidation of feminine experience. (31)

In this film, the ambiguity experienced by Gothic heroine Mommy is connected to the status of her deceased son Lukas – does he, as his brother Elias claims, still exist as a living, ghostly figure within the house, or is he simply a figment of Elias’ guilt-ridden imagination? Because the house is not, however, a dark, ancient Gothic mansion, and because Mommy is not psychologically or financially dependent on her male family members (i. e. her children), she does not wander through darkened hallways with a candelabra; instead, the solution to the mystery – the figure of Lukas – is hidden in plain sight, visible to the spectator but ultimately inaccessible to Mommy’s “feminine experience”, to her eyes. Just like the paintings in her

house are unable to see or interact, so too is Mommy's inability to interact with or see Lukas an example of the "problematic nature of the heroine's perception" (Waldman, 32) typical to many Gothic narratives. The film's original title, *Ich Seh, Ich Seh – I See, I See* – echoes this, since it is a play on the German version of "I spy with my little eye", "I see, I see what you don't see."

This becomes particularly apparent at the very end of the film, when the problematic limitation of Mommy's senses becomes fully clear to the spectators and culminates into a threat to Mommy's life. At this point, when Mommy is tied up on the living room floor and her son prepares to set the house alight, Elias poses his mother the ultimate test as a chance to save her life: she must tell him what Lukas is doing since, as their real Mommy, she should be able to see and hear her son. Mommy cannot, however, and thus the house burns down, killing both Mommy and Elias, who are next seen outside the house, alongside Lukas, singing a lullaby. This final image the film grants us of the characters shows a Mommy with an unbandaged face, wearing an old-fashioned dress; in this sense, this image of a mother and children singing echoes the film's very first images, the borrowed footage from *Die Trapp-Familie*, and effectively bookends the narrative.

The film is thus constructed around two ambiguities, or hesitations "between two possible interpretations of events by the protagonist and often, in these filmic presentations, by the spectator as well." (Waldman, 31) Firstly, the viewer is faced with an ambiguity around the identity of Mommy; is she the twins' real mother, or is she a malicious doppelganger, either physically or in a supernatural sense? Towards the second half of the film, however, another and more crucial ambiguity surfaces; as the viewer identifies more with Mommy, we begin to share her own concerns and join her in questioning, not her own, but her son's identity or even existence. It is this second ambiguity, connected to the ability or lack thereof of Mommy's senses, which ultimately leads to her death at the hands of her – ghostly and living – sons. In this sense, Mommy has been transformed from a potentially monstrous figure to a Gothic victim-heroine, who ultimately dies when the limitations of her perception will not allow her to discover the truth about the film's central mystery.

This sense of perception, of the unreliability or ambiguity of the visual, also applies more broadly to the film's Gothic setting, and is in fact key to the film's very Gothicness. Unlike other Gothic films, whether older films such as *Rebecca* or more recent films such as *Crimson Peak*, this film deliberately steers clear from obvious Gothic visual markers, and even deliberately plays with the viewer's expectations in this regard. Indeed, Mommy's entrapment long predates her physical restriction by her sons, and the true nature of the film's narrative has been under our very eyes, seen but unseen, from the film's very beginning. In terms of physical setting, too, the film plays with our expectations, and it is not the spatial specificity of the Austrian countryside setting that ultimately adds to the film's Gothicness. Instead, the series of "dynastic mysteries", the sense of history that runs through so many Gothic narratives, is present here within the invisible elements of this setting, the socio-cultural markers conveyed throughout this film. It is therefore not the

presence of a large ancestral house, bedecked with portraits of ominous ancestors, but the regionally specific historical references that underlie and steer the plot, that make this film an Austrian Gothic film.

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