

## It's All About Repetition: Maternal Time in Horror from *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) to *The Babadook* (2014)

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**It's All About Repetition: Maternal Time in Horror  
from *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) to *The Babadook* (2014)**

**Qian Zhang**

*The Babadook* (2014), directed by Jennifer Kent, is one of several recent horror films in which female directors use the genre to renegotiate the cultural understandings of maternal subjectivity, especially in context of gender and domesticity. More specifically, these filmmakers draw on the tradition of women's cinema from the 1970s in which feminist filmmakers explored women's subjectivity within enclosed domestic spaces. *The Babadook* develops and intensifies the experience of maternal temporal anxiety associated with reproduction and child-care by providing a distinctive temporal experience for the audience. In this essay, I argue that *The Babadook* uses what I call *feminine repetition*, a temporal mode that emerges from Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) as a gendered manifestation of Gilles Deleuze's "time-image" (1989). *The Babadook* develops the time-image in relation to the repetitions inherent in the maternal, work, and domestic time (Deleuze, 1989). I theorize this concept of cinematic feminine repetition through both a comparison of formal elements between *The Babadook* and *Jeanne Dielman* and critical readings of Claire Johnston's (1999) notion of women's counter-cinema and Lisa Baraitser's concept of maternal time (2008, 2017). Uncovering this key temporal marker in *The Babadook* makes evident the film's important contribution to horror's engagement with representations of the maternal experience, a perspective that is often excluded from the genre but that can be found in the 1970s-to-1980s experiments on the idea of 'women's cinema.' Although *Jeanne Dielman* is usually taken as an art film, and *The Babadook* falls into horror, a more popular or commercial genre, I argue that it is the revelation of gendered repetition that allows us to read this horror film, *The Babadook*, as aligning with the pioneering art film *Jeanne Dielman*.

**A Temporal Critique of *The Babadook***

Sarah Arnold (2013) has traced the centrality of the mother in horror films to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, released in 1960 (1). According to Arnold, maternal horror has become an accepted subgenre in horror studies since then. In this

subgenre, the maternal body is the key figure used to analyze gender roles. Films in this subgenre present a conflict between embodied gendered experiences and the social and affective demands of motherhood. The social assumption that mothers should love their children and take on the roles of social education comes into conflict with, and distorts, the social milieu of the embodied experience of motherhood. As Arnold argues, these films present a dichotomy between the good and bad mothers based on their ability to repress their needs as mothers and to fit into the social consensus of the maternal role. Films such as *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski 1969), *The Omen* (Donner 1976), and *The Brood* (Cornenberg 1979), have become standard films in this subgenre.

A group of contemporary horror films, including *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Ramsay 2011), *Goodnight Mommy* (Fiala and Franz 2014), *The Babadook* (Kent 2014), *Prevenge* (Lowe 2016), *The Nightingale* (Kent 2019), *Relic* (James 2020), *Titane* (Ducournau 2021) and *Umma* (Shim 2022) have contributed fresh insights to this subgenre. Unlike the horror films of the 1960s, in which the mother was often condemned for her failure to live up to her proper social role, films like *The Babadook* and *Prevenge* use images of motherhood as conflicting sites of social negotiation, expressing a tangible, affective 'troubling' experience of gendered domesticity. Most importantly, these films focus on the maternal experience itself, rather than on the child as a figure of evil or corrupted futurity. These films share many similarities: they are directed by women; they center on a single mother whose mother-child relationship replaces the conventional Oedipal family structure; and they problematize the assumption of a clear-cut division of good and bad mothers. These similarities set the films apart from earlier maternal horrors directed by male directors, such as *Rosemary's Baby*, in which the protagonist maintains a 'good' mother role, learning to accept her domestic duties, despite being a socially transgressive woman since her baby is suggested to be a demon. In other words, in Polanski's film, Rosemary plays the role of the good mother, but is also the social vessel for a demonic evil. In this sense, she is both a good and bad mother because her role as a good mother is hijacked by the men around her.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, as I discuss in this essay, *The Babadook* directly confronts and challenges the cultural and moral expectations placed on mothers and thus provokes an awareness of the differences between the mother as a character and the maternal as a social construct. This new trend in horror reformulates the relation of the maternal to the horror genre in at least

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Creed uses Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection to argue that the monstrous-feminine is associated with the maternal body in horror films, such as *Rosemary's Baby*. See Creed (1993).

two ways. First, it challenges the social consensus on the mother's unconditional love for children. Second, it features women as film auteurs recreating the ways of representing mothers and expressing gendered experience of domesticity in the horror genre.

A number of critical and theoretical interpretations of *The Babadook* unsurprisingly center on the mother-son relationship between Amelia and her son Samuel in the narrative. Most of the literature on *The Babadook* focuses on the ways in which the film challenges the conventional mother-son relationship. For example, Aviva Briefel (2017) focuses on maternal authority as a form of reassurance and argues that by “exploring reassurance as a fraught motherly act” (3), Kent's film creates fear out of the failure of maternal reassurances and promises. With a similar focus on the maternal role in the narrative, Shelley Buerger (2017) uses Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject as well as Barbara Creed's idea of the monstrous-feminine to argue that Amelia's “dispassionate reactions to her son” (39), rather than her love, is the source of maternal abjection. In a recent essay, Greg Burris (2019) uses Robin Wood's framework to engage with the filmic text in *The Babadook* from a political perspective. By contrasting *The Babadook* with another film, *Under the Shadow* (2016), Burris argues that *The Babadook* reveals a political dead end, while *Under the Shadow* energizes the struggles for political liberation. Although *The Babadook* negotiates the boundary between the normal and the Other by suggesting that Amelia is herself the monstrous Babadook, according to Burris, the coexistence with the Babadook while living a make-believe peaceful life at the end of the film renders a pessimist view of political change, or its impossibility. These scholars recognize the problematic social position of the mother in *The Babadook*, but their narrative analyses continue to focus on Amelia's role as caregiver to her child from the perspective of the child. What is not acknowledged is the maternal temporality centered on Amelia's embodied sensations, allowing maternal subjectivity to unfold as a haptic and affective experience, and reframing her child as the Other. This essay therefore shifts the attention from *The Babadook*'s narrative structure to the formal elements that contribute to unfolding maternal time and thus revealing maternal subjectivity.

### **Repetition and Maternal Time in *Jeanne Dielman***

The formal features used in *The Babadook* bring to the horror film characteristics that were central to the work of many feminist filmmakers of the 1970s. In particular, *The Babadook* has a number of surprising formal affinities with

Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*. This formal continuity points to contemporary horror's interest in depicting the gendered experience of domestic time, a critical theme of Akerman's film as well as of numerous other feminist films of the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> By tracing and re-examining Akerman's unconventional uses of formal techniques, such as long takes, repetition, and spatial discontinuity, I develop a distinction between *feminine repetition* and *masculine repetition* to rethink the cinematic revelation of a gendered experience of time. *Jeanne Dielman* encourages a gendered approach of an affective gendered experience of temporality that has been taken up in recent horror cinema. *Jeanne Dielman* was released in 1975, around the same time as Laura Mulvey's (1975) "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Due to the explicit investigation of women's gender roles and female subjectivity in art cinema, *Jeanne Dielman* is usually treated as a feminist film made under the influence of the second wave of feminism, which aimed to reshape the relationship between women and cinema (Margulies 1996). *Jeanne Dielman* depicts a single mother, primarily in her role as a homemaker, but who also relies on sex work to help cover the costs of raising her teenage son. Akerman spends three hours and twenty minutes showing the mother's daily experience across three consecutive days. The length of the film, as well as of the long individual shots, confronts the viewers with the mother's mundane experience of time in post-war capitalist societies.

The use of extended duration in *Jeanne Dielman* is key both to the film's deconstruction of classical and mainstream narrative codes, and to its creation of affective experiences beyond the limitation of onscreen representation. The film's use of what some scholars have called "real time" is often understood as at once a realistic and experimental gesture.<sup>3</sup> Akerman's use of the long take confronts the viewer with an experience of the affective duration involved in the mundane tasks of domestic labor. This is an experience that is often excluded from mainstream narrative cinema due to the latter's prioritization of eventful action over slow time. Akerman claims that she wanted to make the audience *feel* real time (Poglajen 2016). The use of real time thus challenges the classical narrative codes and editing conventions that are designed to seduce the audiences into giving up their experience of durational time in the theater.

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<sup>2</sup> Interpreting *The Babadook* through a parallel reading of Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* also suggests a collapse of the binary between high-culture / art cinema and low-culture / horror cinema. See Williams (1991) and Hawkins (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Many essays mention this point. See Kinder (1977), Rich (1978), De Lauretis (1985), and Kinsman (2007).

Julia Kristeva (1981) posits the notion of women's time to address the lack of discussion of temporality as constitutive of women's experience. According to Kristeva, "when evoking the name and destiny of women, one thinks more of the *space* generating and forming the human species than of time, becoming, or history" (1981, 15). Kristeva highlights female subjectivity within a temporal dimension (1981, 17). She further introduces two facets of women's time—*repetition* and *eternity*.<sup>4</sup> The first refers to "the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm," and the latter indicates "the massive presence of a monumental temporality" (Kristeva 1981, 16). However, it is worth noting that Kristeva's concept of women's time, although shedding some light on my understanding of gendered time images in cinema, presents women's time as an opposition to the dominant male time, and thus obscures the specificity of maternal time under the category of women's time. The notion of maternal time, as Lisa Baraitser (2008) notes, consists of the 'again-and-again' of repetition (58). For Baraitser, "The lived experience of mothering is closer to a seemingly endless series of 'micro-blows' [...] the mother's durational experiences bringing her back 'again and again' into the realm of the immediate, the present, the here-and-now of the child or infant's demand" (2008, 68). As Baraitser suggests, maternal time bears an essential relation to the (child) Other, distinguishing maternal time as a 'time of mattering' from the 'meaningless' implication of women's time. Since both Kent's and Ackerman's films are focalized through the maternal figure and focus on the experience of motherhood, my argument builds on Baraitser's notion of maternal time with an emphasis on temporal repetition.

To rethink the notion of repetition through the lens of gender, I want to make a distinction between onscreen representations of feminine and masculine repetition. I find that the notion of feminine repetition is easily ignored and treated as interchangeable with masculine repetition, which is exemplified by the demands of Fordism and standardized production. In cinema, masculine repetition can be visualized within the linear and progressive framework of the filmstrip, which is often allegorized in films themselves. Like the assembly line in a factory, masculine repetition can visually create a product line, which is usually taken as the major spatial dimension onscreen. Normally, commodities in an assembly line are presented with the help of a horizontal dimension within the frame. The same product is visualized in a line with repeating breaks or

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<sup>4</sup> As Kristeva writes, "As for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations." See Kristeva, Jardine, and Blake (1981, 16).

intervals (Figure 1). However, women's time has no obvious relation to progress and production. Kristeva describes women's time as cyclical and non-progressive. Women's time suspends rather than animates duration. I find this distinction useful to break down the concept of repetition of work. It is not that repetition is only assigned to a single gender. Rather, there are two types of repetition: one is visible and valued, even if it is shown to be alienating (as in Figure 1 below), while the other is invisible and devalued. The latter is what I call *feminine repetition*, since it seems never to produce the kind of progressive temporality that characterizes masculine time. To be clear, I do not intend to use the word 'feminine' to perpetuate a binary understanding of gender. Since I connect the temporal repetition to the notions of production and reproduction, which have been assigned along gender lines, the notion of feminine repetition aims to acknowledge this culturally gendered division in terms of (re)production, rather than perpetuating the biological binary.



Masculine repetition. *Modern Times* (Chaplin 1936, 0:14:52)

It is striking, in this context, that *Jeanne Dielman* focuses exclusively on gendered sensations within a series of 'endless' long takes and the affective

experience of repetitions.<sup>5</sup> In a sequence from *Jeanne Dielman*, after the son departs for school, Jeanne starts to clean the apartment. At one point, a long take shows her doing the dishes. Akerman places the camera behind Jeanne, so that the audience sees only her back and arms. Throughout this long take, Jeanne never turns to the camera; her manual activities are shown through the movements of her anonymous body onscreen (Figure 2). In doing so, the film provides the audiences with neither images of her facial expressions, nor images of her hands at work. With this limited visual knowledge, the audience cannot predict the end of this chore and with it, presumably, the end of the shot, as the pressure of *waiting* builds. The audience’s eyes and attention thus frequently drift within the cinematic frame, and they spend their time with Jeanne doing the dishes.



Figure 2. Jeanne doing dishes in *Jeanne Dielman* (Akerman 1975, 01:00:27)

In this long take, the dish rack—which is so carefully placed that it never gets full and only shows one plate onscreen at a time—plays a striking role in revealing *feminine repetition*. Jeanne cooks dinner, cleans the bathtub, sets the dinner table, cleans the dinner table, makes the bed for her son, makes coffee, serves breakfast, polishes shoes, does dishes... A series of chores are easily

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<sup>5</sup> In many mainstream narrative films, such as action movies and thrillers, characters’ emotions are usually emphasized by speeding cuts and close-ups of facial expressions. In doing so, each following shot serves to intensify affects shown in the previous shot.



recognized, but these chores are too “trivial” to count as “real” labor. Because they do not produce value, they are socially unmeasurable. Housework is repetitive and time-consuming, but is not quantifiable. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English (1975) note:

Housework is maintenance and restoration: the daily restocking of the shelves and return of each cleaned and repaired object to its starting point in the family game of disorder. After a day’s work, no matter how tiring, the housewife has produced no tangible object—except, perhaps, dinner; and that will disappear in less than half the time it took to prepare. (6)

It is worth noting that repetitive housework has historically up until the present moment most commonly been assigned to women. As women are conventionally and socially deemed responsible for the (un)productive, repetitive housework, I thus describe this type of repetition as *feminine repetition*.

Returning to the medium shot of Jeanne doing dishes, the cleaned plates are shown in a “singular” form. Within the frame, only one plate faces the camera. The audience can see how the clean plates are placed in the drain basket one by one, each plate marking a bit of repetitive time. However, due to the frontal framing, the audience cannot count the plates, and thus cannot quantify the amount of work that has been done. In this sense the repetition of labor does not produce a new or additional image, the image repeats with almost perfect symmetry, so that each image can be said to replace the previous one from which it nonetheless does not differentiate itself; Jeanne’s time can only be felt, not seen or marked.

Two additional elements contribute to this shot’s experience of gendered time. Akerman’s decision not to center the shot on Jeanne’s face or active hands encourages the audience’s eye to wander, skimming the surface of the screen. This visual wandering exaggerates the anxiety of “nothing to see.” The chores are de-familiarized by de-visualizing Dielman’s *actions*, while depicting a form of pure repetition. The repetition diminishes the depth of temporality. The ‘again and again’ feature, in Baraitser’s words, makes the beginning and the end of the work impossible to define. Due to the lack of traces of progress aligning with the emphasis on the repetition, any prediction, as a temporal consciousness for imagining differentiation, loses its power. That said, the process of prediction and visual tension becomes a mere act of reclaiming something that has happened in the past or at present, without a future. The audience thus also partakes in the domestic labor of repetitive reclamation that characterizes

housework. Moreover, the repetition also makes time sense-able. Prolonging the repetition onscreen via long takes bores the audience with “nothing-new images.” The culturally and socially devalued time of doing dishes here becomes a major barrier in the audience’s desire for narrative pleasure, engagement, and identification. Thus, the boredom of domesticity intensifies across the boundary of the cinematic screen, from image to spectator. This reveals, in a powerful and shared affect, the experience of women’s alienation under capitalism. Jeanne is akin to a machine, which is repeatedly working without any emotional investment, an affective stance that she will repeat across her many chores, including her sexual encounters with the Johns. An anxiety thus arises from a gap between two senses related to time: the awareness of time passing and the awareness of the unpredictable. This anxiety is particularly assigned to women, who are excluded from linear temporal progression.

In addition to the direct investigation into time, Akerman also maintains a sensorial suspension by embracing the recurring empty frames and the offscreen space that defines them. In Gilles Deleuze’s (1989) words, these images are a direct representation of time. Empty frames and offscreen space are not two isolated concepts. According to Noël Burch (2014), the empty frame is often used as a marker for emphasizing offscreen space and offscreen activities. But due to the “nothing happening” in the offscreen space, both empty frames and offscreen space become non-identical “landmarks,” which are recurring but disconnected. So, these empty frames onscreen become what Deleuze calls pure optical and sound images, that is, direct time-images (41). In *Jeanne Dielman*, Akerman’s camera position is carefully chosen, and the camera never moves to track Jeanne’s movements. Thus, Jeanne is not a star, adored and followed by the camera, but a figure for repetitive time and its emptying out of space. Although Jeanne steps offscreen, the camera never stops filming and thus reserves many of the empty frames for a recognizable time. A sense-able slowness becomes tangible to the audience due to the emptied onscreen space. This way of using the camera helps the audience *feel* Jeanne’s existence in the offscreen space, an existence characterized by the anxiety of empty repetition.

### ***The Babadook*: A Revision of Akerman’s Feminine Repetition**

Although *Jeanne Dielman* and *The Babadook* were made in vastly different generic and institutional contexts, their narrative and formal similarities are striking. Both films depict a widowed mother rearing her son alone. Both films show memories while eschewing the flashback structure, thus placing the past within

or as a component of the present image.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these narrative similarities, *The Babadook* also borrows and complicates Akerman's formalist inventions in *Jeanne Dielman*, further negotiating the early idea of women's counter-cinema. This section shifts the focus to Kent's 'horror remake' of *Jeanne Dielman* to interrogate how this contemporary horror film creates an affective gendered temporal experience of the emptiness of domestic time, and how this affective experience created in horror sheds light on women's counter-cinema as well as the subgenre of maternal horror.<sup>7</sup>

*The Babadook* opens with a sequence depicting Amelia's dream that begins with her in a car accident at night. Several scholars read this opening sequence as a narrative clue to account for Amelia's problematic relation to her son (e.g., Ingham 2015). Aoife M. Dempsey (2015) and Paula Quigley (2016) emphasize that the car accident depicted in the opening sequence mirrors the car accident that caused her husband's death on the way to the delivery room. For Amelia, her son's birthday thus becomes a scar reminding her of the loss of her husband. This, it is often claimed, explains Amelia's troubled maternal relationship to her son (Dempsey 2015; Quigley 2016; Pyles 2019; Konkle 2019; Mitchell 2019). Additionally, this opening sequence expands the cinematic exploration of repetition. This sequence immediately raises a question of the relationship between the maternal subject and repetition. The nightmare is a present repetition of the past trauma, opening a new dimension to rethink repetition in a non-chronological way.

The use of a close-up facilitates the audience's recognition of Amelia without delivering any detailed context. Following the imbalanced sensational experience, the audience is abruptly introduced to Amelia, who is *returning* the audience's gaze in a close-up (Figure 3).<sup>8</sup> A woman is presumably sitting in a passenger seat of a car and traveling at night. She tries to control her breathing

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<sup>6</sup> Without any flashback sequences, both films carefully distinguish memories from the past. In other words, no past image is released, the only image is memories haunting the present.

<sup>7</sup> I do not literally mean that *The Babadook* is a horror remake of *Jeanne Dielman*. I use "horror remake" to emphasize that *The Babadook* shares or inherits a gendered concern from an earlier art film made by a female filmmaker.

<sup>8</sup> Here, I intend to echo the discussions on male gaze in two main journals *Screen* and *Cinema Obscura*, since Laura Mulvey's (1975) essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In 1970s and 1980s, many film scholars joined in the arguments on negotiating the potential "female gaze" and female spectatorship in cinema. Although these arguments may be tangent to my argument in this essay, I want to play with the idea of returning women's gaze to mark how those essays influence on me. And, to be clear, I do not mean that Amelia as a female character connecting her eyes to the audiences' would reconstruct the patriarchal structure of male gaze.

but fails immediately after some small glass fragments fall into the frame. A series of narrative questions may linger in the audience's mind without any absolute answer given at this moment: Who is she? Where is she? Why is she there? The lack of clear answers isolates viewers from the character in the film and allows them to recognize their experience of time in the theater.



Figure 3. The opening Shot of *The Babadook* (Kent 2014, 0:01:07)

The close-up shot also challenges cinematic convention, which prefers to build a familiarity gradually between the character and the audience via the structures of “interpellation, imbrication or suture” (Powell 2005). These concepts are used to emphasize a passive spectatorship. That is, the audience is stitched into films and their ideologies. However, in this opening close-up shot, the audience of *The Babadook* must actively confront the protagonist and her gaze. The impossible avoidance of eye contact between the audience and Amelia is further intensified by the first unpredictable close-up shot, which negates any relaxed space for the audience to be comfortable voyeurs of Amelia and her life onscreen. Thus, the close-up of Amelia's face, rather than fetishizing her body for gendered pleasure, creates an uncomfortable communication between the onscreen body and the audience in the theater, encouraging the audience's awareness of time.

This unexpected use of a close-up of the return gaze from Amelia in the opening scene unleashes an anxiety, contributing to a sense of avant-garde self-awareness or self-reflexivity. As Nickolas Rombes (2016) mentions, “The cinematic avant-garde has always been highly self-aware, that is, aware of itself as a counter-narrative” (857). Due to the self-aware nature of *Paranormal Activity*

2, Rombes (2016) regards this low-budget horror film as an “avant-garde” film and its filmmaker Tod Williams as an avant-garde artist (842). This emphasis on a film’s self-awareness can also be linked to Peter Wollen’s (2004) concept of counter-cinema and his emphasis on the self-reflexive in counter-cinema in his essay “Godard and counter cinema: *Vent d’Est*.” According to Wollen (2004), counter-cinema refers to an alternative cinema negating the classical values in Hollywood filmmaking (525). Accordingly, counter-cinema has the following seven characteristics: narrative intransitivity, estrangement, foregrounding, multiple diegesis, aperture, un-pleasure, and reality (Wollen 2004, 525). The self-reflexive spirit strongly supports counter-cinema to wake the audience up and thus subverts the dominant ideology of mainstream cinema. In this sense, the opening sequence in *The Babadook* can be understood as self-aware, reflexive, and drawing from the tradition of counter-cinema within a generic framework.

In addition, drawing on the marginalized *gendered* temporal experience, *The Babadook* directly engages with the notion of “women’s counter-cinema.” Using Peter Wollen’s concept of counter-cinema, Claire Johnston (1999) posits the concept of women’s counter-cinema. Noting that mainstream representations of women serve a patriarchal and sexist ideology, Johnston promotes women’s counter-cinema in filmmaking to subvert the iconography and objectification of women in film, and to “interrogate and demystify the workings of ideology” (1999, 40). The feminine repetition exemplified by the shot of Jeanne washing dishes in *Jeanne Dielman* can be understood as an example of women’s counter-cinema, and Kent remakes Akerman’s shot of Jeanne doing dishes in *The Babadook* to complicate this gendered time-image.

Kent’s visual echoing of *Jeanne Dielman* is not simply a formalist homage to Akerman, but further develops the potential for horror modes to create an affective experience of maternal time. As I argued above, the representation of housework in *Jeanne Dielman*, such as doing dishes, exemplifies the notion of feminine repetition, which provides the audience a chance to experience the emptiness of gendered time in the domestic space in cinema. In *The Babadook*, this sense of feminine repetition is recreated. What Kent borrows from *Jeanne Dielman* is the way of *portraying* feminine repetition. While similar camera work expresses a similar experience of gendered temporality within enclosed space, Kent further develops the notion of feminine repetition by repeating Amelia’s dishwashing sequence at her workplace (Figure 4). This repetition continues to interrogate the questions dominated in Marxist-feminist discussions on gender

and division of labor.<sup>9</sup> In *The Babadook*, Amelia appears in the kitchen within a long shot. Like Jeanne, Amelia’s back is turned to the camera throughout the shot. As in *Jeanne Dielman*, Amelia’s facial expressions and hand movements are not visible to the audience, and even the drain basket is similarly placed on her right-hand side. Meanwhile, the camera is also static and shows nothing more than encouraging the audience to “imagine” Amelia doing dishes. As I argued earlier, this image of doing dishes exemplifies non-progressive time—it is an image of feminine repetition.



Figure 4. Amelia doing dishes at her workplace in *The Babadook* (Kent 2014, 0:05:27)

Kent’s film further complicates the cinematic depiction of feminine repetition in *Jeanne Dielman*. Notably, Kent adopts a different shot scale. While Akerman uses a medium shot to demonstrate the claustrophobia of Jeanne’s kitchen space, Kent enlarges the kitchen space onscreen by including a much wider shot of Amelia in the kitchen, situated among its modern appliances. Furthermore, Kent constructs a strict symmetry in the mise-en-scene, a mirroring of the space broken only by the figure of Amelia. Two coffee cups hang on the right, and two picture frames are placed on the left. Even the chairs seem to be doubled around a table. In this context, Amelia becomes a piece of kitchenware which stands out for being unpaired and solitary.

The color tone of this shot is grayish. This cold tone disrupts a stereotype of the kind of warm-colored kitchen that is usually shown in advertisements.

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<sup>9</sup> I would also argue that Kent’s borrowing the idea of filming a woman doing dishes is a kind of feminine repetition in women’s cinema practice. In this sense, *The Babadook* not only illustrates, but advocates for women’s counter-cinema, which is self-aware and rewrites the classical cinematic codes by repeating feminine repetition.

The use of color thus creates an office-like or professional look of this kitchen. As Kent's kitchen becomes an office, the relationship between women and the kitchen becomes clearer: featuring Amelia in a workplace kitchen implies that the kitchen in general is women's workplace, regardless of physical location. In fact, more than one kitchen appears in *The Babadook*. The kitchen at Amelia's home is also repeatedly shown onscreen. By interweaving the images of kitchens both at work and at home, *The Babadook* blurs the boundary between workplace and home, making the notion of "domesticity" more ambiguous. Amelia is like Jeanne, doing dishes repeatedly, endlessly, and "unproductively," but the difference between these two films is crucial: Amelia is not only doing dishes at home but also at work, while Jean is confined within her apartment.<sup>10</sup> As a 'working mother,' Amelia's office space becomes an extension of her home-office, a space that can be intruded upon at any time with calls about her son's troubles at school or with other demands of child-care. Kent translates Akerman's idea of women's social position as domestic labor into a question of gendered social status in contemporary society: has mothers' sense of time changed?

This blurring of the boundary between home and work cinematically reflects some feminist scholars' discussions on domestic labor. For example, many feminist scholars, including Silvia Federici (2012) and Michele Barrett (2014), focus on women's relation to housework and explore the exploitation of women in the capitalist mode of production. In general, these scholars recognize that under capitalism housework has come to be "naturalized" as women's unwaged labor (Federici 2012; Barrett 2014). Behind the doors of the bourgeois home, housework is further made socially invisible and non-productive. In *The Babadook*, Kent echoes the idea of unpaid and invisible "housework" by providing an image of Amelia being "unseen" in the kitchen at her workplace. Following the shot I analyze above of Amelia doing dishes alone, a shallow-focused close-up of Amelia's face makes a space for introducing her male colleague. He "intrudes" on the enclosed kitchen through the door in the blurred background. Once he steps into the kitchen, the camera shifts focus to the male colleague in the background, leaving Amelia's face out of focus in the foreground. Kent relies on this racking focus to undercut any primacy of place for Amelia in the scene, further articulating the naturalized relation of women and housework in Amelia's conversation with her male colleague. He says, "[j]ust where a woman should be, in the kitchen." Although the words are

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<sup>10</sup> Leopoldina Fortunati argues in her book *The Arcane of Reproduction* that reproductive work, including housework, is productive. See Fortunati, Creek, and Fleming (1995, 105-112).

expressed as a joke, they explicitly, ironically render Amelia's labor invisible. As Silvia Federici (2012) notes, "The second job not only increases our exploitation, but simply reproduces our role in different forms," and thus women "become nurses, maids, teachers, secretaries—all functions for which we are well trained in the home" (20). Federici' helps us to make connections between the kitchens shown in *The Babadook*. These kitchens cannot be separated from each other. Rather, they contribute to demonstrate women's exploitation *repeatedly*. From this perspective, the feminine repetition is replicated beyond the confines of home. Thus, feminine repetition, which is essentially located in empty time, goes beyond the boundary of "domesticity" in *The Babadook*.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I examine the formal elements that construct a repetitive maternal time in *The Babadook*. Shifting away from an exclusive focus on the film's narrative, helps us to recognize that *The Babadook* provides an affective experience of maternal time, a gendered time ignored in the cinema outside of women's counter-cinema. I read *The Babadook* with reference to *Jeanne Dielman*, as against the binary view that identifies art-film by its relation to so-called high culture, and horror as "trash," or low culture. Similar to what Joan Hawkins (2000) points out, the boundaries between art cinema and body genres are blurred here; *The Babadook* cannot be confined within a single category of taste or aesthetic.<sup>11</sup> Comparing *The Babadook* with *Jeanne Dielman* also allows us to see how women's counter-cinema subverts some of the dominant aspects of genre, and how the cinematic exploration of maternal time evokes the unfolding of maternal subjectivity.

Blending the formal aesthetics of art cinema with the building-up of affective experience in the horror genre, and highlighting the excesses in style shared by both, *The Babadook* inherits *Jeanne Dielman*'s thematic experiment of gendered experience and expands it to a consideration of maternal horror. This inheritance echoes what David Church (2021) defines as "post-horror" (also known as "smart horror," "elevated horror," "slow horror," and "prestige horror," among other terms), which refers to a self-conscious contemporary horror film cycle that can be traced back to the art-horror in the 1970s-1980s

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<sup>11</sup> Some scholars argue that *The Babadook* can be situated between high culture and low culture. See Balanzategui (2017) and Howell (2017).



and that is characterized by its stylistic and thematic ambiguity between art and genre (3). Through an unfolding maternal temporal experience, *The Babadook* does not take a conventional approach to notions of ‘mother as the Other’ in horror cinema; instead, it takes its mother to be the maternal subject who *encounters* the Other. Conversely, through the retrospective lens of horror, the subtle perturbations in *Jeanne Dielman* with respect to maternal experience come closer to terror than tedium.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> As part of our commitment to developing scholars doing original work in horror studies, *Monstrum* is pleased to collaborate with the Horror Studies Scholarly Interest Group (SIG), part of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), in the selection and publication of this annual prize-winning graduate student essay for 2022, selected by a jury of SCMS-SIG scholars and members of the *Monstrum* editorial team.

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