"A little of the horror still loose": *The Stepford Wives'* Negotiated Feminisms

Sarah Potvin

Having stabbed the robot who replaced her best friend with a kitchen knife and bludgeoned her husband with a fire iron, Joanna Eberhart arrives, drenched and desperate, at the darkened castle of the Stepford Men's Association. She still holds the poker, but limply and pleadingly. Her daughters' voices call out to her, echoing across the shadows. But the children aren't there: she's been lured in via a recording. We last see Joanna as her vacant-eyed, animatronic double rises from a vanity, her plastic, perked breasts evident under transparent chiffon, and menacingly approaches, slowly twisting pantyhose into a garrote. In the next scene, Joanna now dispatched, the double glides through the supermarket, calmly greeting the other animatronic wives. The men of Stepford, in pursuit of the suburban dream and revolt against their wives' interest in women's liberation, have succeeded in replacing another unyielding wife with a compliant robot.

The Stepford Wives (Forbes 1975) may be the only American studio feature from the decade most associated with Second Wave Feminism that has a claim to be a consciously intended feminist horror film. Fifty years after its release, the film continues to thematically influence and inspire horror film directors, including, most recently, Jordan Peele (*Get Out* [2017]) and Drew Hancock (*Companion* [2025]).[1] It has also endured in the American popular imagination as a recognizable trope of suburban conformity and garnered new interest as technologies that serve consumer needs are feminized and marketed as "smart

[1] Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, in which a white family conspires to transplant the brains of wealthy white people into the bodies of Black people, relying on violent abduction or seduction, has been called "Stepford Wives for racism." Peele cites *The Stepford Wives* and *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski 1968) as major influences on his film. *Stepford*'s influence is likewise discerned in the suburban conspiracy film *Don't Worry Darling* (Wilde 2022). See Beckman (2017). Remarkably, in an essay critical of *The Stepford Wives*, sociologist Herbert Gans opens with a provocation that anticipates, in many respects, the plot of *Get Out*. He attributes a provocative "racial parallel" to Betty Friedan: "Suppose that in the heyday of the civil rights movement Hollywood had made a film set in a stereotypical Southern town which began by showing Blacks organizing for racial equality with whites but ended with the town' s whites performing lobotomies on the Blacks, who thereupon compliantly and cheerfully returned to their servile roles. The uproar and protest from whites and Blacks alike would have been fantastic; needless to say, no Hollywood producer in his right mind would even have considered making this film." See Gans 1975.

wives" or "lady assistants" (Halberstam 1991; Sweeney 2020; Strengers and Kennedy, 2020; Erscoi et al. 2023; Wosk 2015).

And yet, *The Stepford Wives*' status as a feminist horror film is haunted by feminist rejections of the film. An oft-repeated anecdote, first published in *The New York Times*, features Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, a founder of the National Organization of Women, and a major figure in Second Wave Feminism, storming out of an awareness session after watching the film, declaring it a "rip off of the women's movement" (Klemesrud 1975, 29).

Is *The Stepford Wives*, to draw from Leah Richards's analysis of George Romero's *Jack's Wife* (1973), "more a film about feminism … than a feminist film" (2023, 31)? This article builds on previous scholarly analysis of *The Stepford Wives* in the context of Second Wave feminism (Silver 2002), the Gothic (Williams 2007), as well as feminist film theory (Haskell 1973; Mulvey 1975; Abel 1981; Kuhn 1982; Basinger 1993; Hollinger 1998) to elucidate and interpret the film's production and reception. Drawing on archival research, this article also more closely examines the film's adaptation and its reception by the feminists and feminisms of the 1970s.[2] It begins with the film itself, recapping the plot and reading this work as an adaptation of Ira Levin's 1972 novel. It then examines the feminisms portrayed in the film, as a feature of this process of adaptation, through William Goldman's screenplay and Bryan Forbes's direction. The essay concludes by examining Betty Friedan's reaction, troubling an interpretation that centers Friedan as a standard-bearer of American feminism, and considering how the film, as both a horror film and a "new women's film," resists conclusive categorization as a feminist film.

***Stepford*: A Recap**

The protagonist of *The Stepford Wives*, Joanna Eberhart (Katharine Ross), grapples with feelings of dislocation as she moves with her family from New York City to suburban Connecticut. The film opens with the Eberhart family's departure from Manhattan. Joanna and Walter (Peter Masterson), along with their two young daughters and wiry terrier, say goodbye to their apartment and

[2] An extensive literature examines groupings and schisms in Second Wave American feminisms. Works that directly influenced this article include Lewis 2025; hooks 2000; Echols 1989. Film scholar Karen Hollinger suggests that feminist critics are divided on the topic of the contemporary woman's film, debating "the nature of these films' production, their essential qualities, and their effects on female audiences" (1998, 3). In assessing *The Stepford Wives*' status as a feminist horror film, I loosely adapt Hollinger's emphasis on production, essential qualities, and reception.

doorman, load into their station wagon, and drive out of the city. Arriving in Stepford, the family encounters their neighbors, Carol (Nannette Newsman) and Ted Van Sant (Josef Sommer), and begins to slowly acquaint themselves with the townspeople; the girls ride a school bus of perfectly attired and coiffed children, the family witnesses a fender bender at the local grocery store, and Walter, a lawyer who commutes into the city for work, announces his intention to join the local Men's Association.

When another recent New York transplant, Bobbie Markowe (Paula Prentiss), tracks Joanna down and announces her intention to befriend her, the film's trajectory shifts, and the action splits more definitively into two parts. Joanna and Bobbie's friendship—their commonalities and their twinning—introduces deeper insight into the women, their fractured marriages, and their outsider status in a community of wives without interests beyond the home, firmly dedicated to their work as housewives and mothers. As they work to convene a feminist consciousness-raising group to rival the close-knit Men's Association, Joanna and Bobbie make the rounds of the town's wives, introducing the viewer to the intense devotion of these wives to ironing, baking, and the wonders of spray starch. Joanna and Bobbie befriend the loose, sensual Charmaine (Tina Louise), another recent transplant to Stepford who is delighted to gain a tennis partner. They look on, disgusted and alarmed, when Charmaine transforms into a domestically obsessed wife. Over the course of these adventures, Joanna and Bobbie develop a shorthand form of communication––a raised eyebrow, a surprised or downcast look—and embark on an investigation into what is causing the women of Stepford to change. In this way, their female friendship bends towards detective work. The scenes with Joanna and Bobbie are filmed in soft light, often outdoors or in carefully tended suburban homes. Their gaze often turns towards the other wives, ranging from admiring envy ("What I'd give for her chest!") to unease.

A parallel plot line makes the nefarious intentions of the Stepford men explicit. Walter sits alone in his living room, shaken and gripping a scotch, after his first night out at the Association. The viewer sees inside the mansion that houses the Association, and watches as Association president, Disney animatronics expert Dale "Diz" Coba (Patrick O'Neal) guides Walter's deceptive call home to Joanna. The men—some, married; others, bachelors—convene at the Eberhart house, where their jocular arguments over the merits of hosting a cake walk insufficiently mask their hungry gaze at Joanna. The artist among them, Ike Mazzard, draws her portrait, conspiratorially passing it to the men for their approval before presenting it to Joanna. Diz watches her, expressing his admiration for "women doing little domestic chores." The men

return, individually and collectively, to monitor Joanna and her home; they examine her bedroom and insist that she record a long list of words. Sinister music plays, dark looks are exchanged.

In the final scenes of *The Stepford Wives*, these two plotlines merge into a definitive sci-fi horror film, bearing the influence of *The Seventh Victim* (Robson 1943), *Village of the Damned* (Rilla 1960), *Seconds* (Frankenheimer 1966), *The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1973), and, most notably, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel 1956). The female friendship storyline ends when Bobbie—or rather, a robot designed to imitate Bobbie, also played by Paula Prentiss—returns from her romantic weekend away and professes a newfound commitment to her home and family. Joanna enters Bobbie's kitchen, seeking a familiar receptive audience, only to find that she has been severed from her twinned friend. The robotized Bobbie responds with pure perk: lifted breasts, fresh coffee, and an exuberant embrace of her changed self. Joanna looks to her imploringly and is met with blank cheerful eyes that look through, not to, her. In a single scene, a female psychiatrist takes on the role of Joanna's confidant and partner in survival. The psychiatrist prescribes sleeping pills and has Joanna promise to escape Stepford, to take her children and get out of harm's way. As Joanna's fears ratchet up, she returns to her home, on a dark and stormy night, to find Walter drunk and accusatory and her children gone. Pursued by the town's men, Joanna flees to Bobbie's house where her worst fears are confirmed: after cutting her own hand, to demonstrate her bleeding humanity, Joanna plunges a knife into "Bobbie's" freshly ironed apron, desperate to confirm that she is human. Bobbie, undeniably robotic, pulls the knife out before mechanically malfunctioning, whirring around the kitchen in a broken loop of shattered coffee cups. Joanna then sneaks back into her own home and strikes Walter with a fire poker.

Until these scenes, *The Stepford Wives* has shown its viewer a slow-moving horror film about feminism that primarily unfolds in soft daylight. Now, characters and viewer are enveloped in a Gothic gloom, moving under the cover of the night and in shadowed houses that conceal and entrap. In the penultimate scene of the film, Joanna is lured to the Men's Association by the promise that her children are held there. Trapped by Diz, Joanna realizes the full scope of the conspiracy and meets her black-eyed, robotic double. As Diz looks on, cradling Joanna's dog, Joanna's robot gazes first at her own reflection and then at her target, advancing towards her with clear intentions. The final scene shifts to the aisles of the Stepford grocery store, where Joanna's robot glides among the other smoothly mechanized Stepford wives. She greets her placid neighbors

and passes by the newly arrived, first Black couple to move to Stepford, whose bickering in the aisles foreshadows Stepford's next victim.

"Men made this film, right?"

The enduring understanding of the reception of *The Stepford Wives* by Second Wave feminists is crystallized in the headline of a *New York Times* article by Judy Klemesrud, "Feminists Recoil at Film Designed to Relate to Them" (1975). The headline pairs succinct claims about both the reaction to and the intended audience of the film; these claims gain further nuance in Klemesrud's reporting on feminists' varied reactions to the film.[3] Klemesrud describes a scene of 100 "wives and other women" convened in New York for a special screening of the film sponsored by Columbia Pictures and followed by an "awareness session": "Friedan … stood and, with a voice quivering with emotion, said 'I think we should all leave here. I don't think we should help publicize this movie. It's a rip-off of the women's movement.' She grabbed her coat and walked out, followed by three other women"' (1975).

In Klemesrud's account, the feminist screenwriter Eleanor Perry, who hosted *The Stepford Wives* screening at the request of Columbia Pictures, rescinded her support after viewing the film among "the frequent hisses, groans and guffaws from the crowd" of the assembled "women opinionmakers." In the awareness session following the screening, criticizing a line about bra-burning, she asks: "Men made this film, right?" (Klemesrud 1975).

Indeed, men made *The Stepford Wives*. Screenwriter William Goldman, best known at the time for his original screenplay for the iconic buddy film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill, 1969), adapted Ira Levin's 1972 novel. Bryan Forbes directed; Edgar J. Scherick produced.

The men who created *The Stepford Wives* professed the belief that the film centered a feminist message and were taken aback by its reception. When writing the screenplay, Goldman considered the feminist movement to be a touchstone for the film. Among his papers at Columbia University are folders of research on women's liberation, including several iconic feminist books and stacks of magazines. Interviews from a short documentary accompanying the 2001 DVD release lend insight into the actors', director's, and producer's perceptions of *The Stepford Wives* and begin to show how open the film was to interpretation. Peter Masterson, the actor who played Walter, described William

[3] For a reading of *The Stepford Wives* in relation to *The Feminine Mystique*, see Silver 2002.

Goldman's screenplay process: "I had been aware of the work he'd been doing on it, because he was interviewing Betty Friedan and all the feminists of the time. That was a hotbed of feminism was [sic] the '70s, and the early '70s. So Bill set out to make this a feminist diatribe, basically. That was his goal" (Gregory 2001). Whether Goldman himself expressed this goal or felt that *Stepford* fulfilled it remains unclear. Certainly, there were tensions between Goldman and director Bryan Forbes. Goldman publicly criticized Forbes's heavy hand with the screenplay and his direction, particularly his decision to dress the robotic wives in long-skirted conservative frocks rather than sexy "tennis whites" (Goldman 1983, 216-224).[4] Forbes, open about his rewriting of Goldman's script and their conflict, though less explicit about his own position on women's liberation, complained that feminists misread the film as anti-feminist: "one really manic Libber hit me over the head at the New York Press show. … I tried to explain to her, far from being anti-women it was really anti-men" (Gregory 2001). As subsequent sections of this article will make clear, Forbes' framing of the film as "anti-men," and so implicitly pro-women, sits uneasily alongside feminist visions of a coalition-based approach to women's liberation that rejected a framing of feminism as "women's work." As Friedan went on to claim, mainstream Second Wave feminism requires both men and women to advocate for collective liberation; being "anti-men" does not make a film "pro-women."

"Finally, a movie that is not about two guys and their adventures"

While made by men, is *The Stepford Wives* a woman's film? In Jeanine Basinger's definition, a woman's film "places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to deal with emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman" (1993, 20). Basinger's work focuses on the woman's films of Hollywood, circa 1930-1960, whose plots invariably center a woman "forced to make some kind of choice between options that are mutually exclusive … visualized as two contradictory paths"

[4] Goldman (1983) attributes this costuming decision to Forbes's casting his wife, the actress Nanette Newman, in the role of Carol Van Sant. Goldman had advocated for younger, sexier, and more scantily-clad actresses like Raquel Welch. Peter Masterson repeats this claim: "The intent was that all the women in Stepford were Playboy Bunnies. And because Nanette wouldn't have looked good in a Playboy Bunny outfit or something like that, they wanted long dresses, which kind of toned down the whole thing" (Gregory 2001).

(1993, 20-21).[5] In her work on female friendship films, which she positions as a subgenre of the woman's film, Karen Hollinger extends Basinger's definition into films from the 1970s and 1980s. Hollinger observes: "The new woman's films of the 1970s significantly altered the contours of the genre [of the woman's film] by dealing with two issues initiated by the growth of the women's movement in this period: the independent woman and female friendships" (1998, 2). Within the narrative of these films, friendships between women offer viewers insight into character formation and change. In her analysis of female friendships in literature and film, Elizabeth Abel argues: "Through the intimacy, which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to an other who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self" (1981, 416). Relational types, Karen Hollinger observes, can describe both the effect of a female friendship film on its viewer and the relationships depicted within the work. Hollinger elaborates: "A filmic female friend can become a mirror, ideal, or twin for another character, and the empathic, nonjudgmental support for self-development found in female friendship can be portrayed as instrumental in structuring the deepest layers of female personality" (1998, 16). While some plots treat female friendships as mere narrative devices to bring out alternative life directions (dramatizing, for example, one friend getting married while another advances in her career), the portrayal of *intimate* female friendships narrativizes identification and draws the malleable female viewer in through spectatorial identification with the depicted characters. Bobbie and Joanna's friendship provides insight into both women that would otherwise go unexpressed among the chilly, inhibitive sheen of Stepford. Their friendship is an intimate site of confession, indulgence, and shared self-effacement, and a refuge from the militant perfectionism of their robotic neighbors. Only with Bobbie do we see Joanna's playfulness and a hint of openness. With Walter, Joanna accuses, cajoles, expresses a sort of resigned or annoyed affection. Meeting the robotic wives, she tenses and withdraws. With Bobbie, and in the presence of Bobbie's cackling sardonic humor, she is looser, confiding, less wary.

Annette Kuhn makes a distinction of audience in defining the "new women's film," arguing that these films address "women, even … women with some degree of feminist consciousness" (1982, 135). With its attention to women's liberation and female friendship, and its desire to reach an audience of women, *The Stepford Wives* can be categorized as a woman's film and, more

[5] Basinger elaborates: "One path will "empower and/or liberate her in some way, however minor, however temporarily," while the other "will provide her with love" (21).

specifically, as a new women's film. But, where the woman's film of Basinger's era often "begin with the rejection of the small town and its limits for a woman" (Basinger 1993, 235), *The Stepford Wives* inverts this arc. It opens with a move from the city to the small town, swapping the densely populated noise of a doorman building for the lush, silent expanse of the well-heeled suburb. The two contradictory paths that Joanna encounters are shaped by the film's converging plotlines and slowly dawning horror. Joanna may have thought she was choosing whether to stay in Stepford and seek camaraderie and reform or move to another town. But her husband and his Men's Association make her choice much starker: escape or capture, estrangement or death.

Despite changes to new women's films prompted by the women's movement, films produced in this genre are not, as both Kuhn and Hollinger remind us, necessarily *feminist* films espousing a message of women's liberation. The New Hollywood Cinema of the 1970s, Kuhn argues, managed the potential controversy of feminism within new women's cinema by cultivating an interpretive "openness" (1982, 139). Attentive to the need to appeal to "a political heterogeneous audience," these films "[sustain] a degree of polysemy – which open up rather than restrict potential readings" (139). Female buddy films of this era, such as Kuhn's example of *Girlfriends* (Weill 1978), succeed by positioning themselves as unthreatening; these films do not "demand a reading as a feminist film" (Kuhn 1982, 139). Building on Kuhn's work, Hollinger's framework for female friendship films reads these films "neither as progressive challenges to the status quo nor as reactionary props of dominant patriarchal ideology, but rather as complex products of an intricate process of negotiation" (1998, 6-7).

This place of negotiated meaning proves fruitful for interpreting and reading *The Stepford Wives*. The film can be read as contiguous with the polysemic approach and tradition Kuhn outlines for new women's cinema, which seeks a degree of openness to interpretation to appeal across polarized audiences. There are no female victories to be found in this film, which enacts a grim fate for its women protagonists. Film scholar Molly Haskell reads the trends towards brutal outcomes for women in films of the late 1960s and early 1970s as a backlash against the women's movement: "The closer women came to claiming their rights and achieving independence in real life, the more loudly and stridently films tell us it's a man's world" (1973, 363). But, as a social satire, psychological thriller, and horror film, *Stepford* also resists an interpretive approach that tallies positive portrayals and victories. The message of *Stepford* is neither loud nor strident. Further, its explicit marketing to feminists, including the dedicated screening Klemesrud reports, suggests that *The Stepford Wives*' producers claimed

it as a feminist film, or at least as a film that would appeal to feminists. But decisions made about the film's production, including its script, casting, and costuming, speak to efforts to reach other audiences.

As a film adaptation of Ira Levin's novel (1972), *The Stepford Wives* also invites comparisons with its less interpretation-resistant source text. The film reads as less overtly feminist than the novel.[6] As Laura Mulvey's influential work suggests, film transforms female protagonists into spectacles and objects of the male gaze (1975). Choices made in adapting Levin's novel deepen this subjugation. The pre-robotized wives in the film—Joanna, Bobbie, and Charmaine—are dressed and draped in sexualized ways, displaying bare midriffs, shoulders, and long legs, while the robotized wives are covered by long skirts and tops, hats, and gloves, as if occasioned by some photosensitivity in their plastic limbs. While Goldman read this costuming as a misstep, necessitated by the casting of older actresses, their conservative costumes might also be understood as occasioned by their husbands' exerting power and control over their bodies. They are designed to be lovely and appealing, tailored to the desires of their husbands. Their voices are altered into a soft, purring compliance, signaling their cheerful servitude. This includes their work as sexually submissive and sexually available dolls. In one scene we hear (but do not see) the moans of a wife crying out in praise for her husband's sexual prowess, mid-coitus. In short, the film appeals both to the male gaze, and the male ear.

It is worthwhile to attend to the relative superficiality of the feminism portrayed in the film. Women's liberation emerges through multiple plot points, including as the perceived threat that precipitated the Men's Association's murderous plot and motivated their desire to create wives whose lives were bent towards pleasant servitude. The film's longest attention to the manifestation of women's liberation in Stepford emerges through the proclamations and plucky

[6] Goldman's adaptation of Levin's novel is largely unexplored in analysis of *The Stepford Wives*. The novel is told entirely from Joanna's perspective, until she is lost as a narrator and appears as a robotic wife. The transformation of the wives in the novel is ambiguous and serves as a broader societal critique, attentive to the many forces that compel women into retrograde roles (with murder-and-replacement-by-robot serving as just one possibility). In a 1992 oral history, Ira Levin commented that the film was not a faithful adaptation of his novel and appeared to support Goldman's complaints about Bryan Forbes's heavy hand: "while the screenplay was good to begin with, I think it sort of got a bit tangled up as things went along and I'm really not crazy about the movie." The interviewer then asks, "I read somewhere that some of the feminists were not happy with *Stepford Wives* and that surprised me in a way because I would think that you actually characterized the life that many feminists complain of." Levin responds, "Yes, I intended it to be sympathetic to feminists and I felt it was, and I think as the years have passed I don't hear objections anymore. You know, feminists now will say that they like the book and they see it as being on the woman's side." See Levin (1992).

actions of Joanna and Bobbie, particularly as they seek to locate like-minded women in the town and disrupt their neighbors' slavish devotion to their homes and families. But Joanna and Bobbie's feminism is lukewarm and hedged. Drafts of the screenplay grapple with Joanna's claims of affiliation with the women's movement, and, even in the shooting script written by Goldman, Joanna expresses some contempt towards "the hostile ladies" of the movement: "I'm still for it, but silently" (Goldman 1974). Joanna's declaration in the screenplay is a sharp deviation from Levin's original novel, which opens with Joanna confidently asserting both her and Walter's commitment to women's liberation. In the film, even Joanna's affirmation "for it, but silently" from the shooting script is omitted. The topic of women's liberation doesn't come up until close to the mid-point of the film, when she suggests to Bobbie that she "messed a little bit with women's lib in New York … I'm not contemplating any Maidenform bonfires, but they could certainly use something around here" (Forbes 1975). When the Stepford wives reject Bobbie and Joanna's attempts to organize, Joanna compels their participation in a consciousness-raising group by pressuring their husbands to require it. Here, Joanna's feminism is opportunistic, deployed only to counteract the regressive Men's Association. She relies on the men's total control over their wife to compel their participation in her gathering.

The feminism of both the film and novel is primarily a wealthy, white, heteronormative effort to "liberate" women from narrow experiences as mothers and housewives—the prototypical white liberal feminism of *The Feminine Mystique* that Audre Lorde termed "racist feminism" (Lorde 1979). But where Ira Levin references Stepford's sprawl as including Jewish and Black families, explicitly extending the racial and religious diversity of women's liberation—and the backlash against it—the film omits or downplays these references, preserving a town that is homogeneous across dimensions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion.

Any potentially radical or liberatory work is further undercut in Joanna and Bobbie's language: consciousness-raising is "bitching" or must be carefully distinguished from the implied radicalism of bra burning. Indeed, in a testament to the muddiness of the film, Joanna and Bobbie appear not to be wearing bras while bristling at bra-burning as overly militant; their robots are tightly corseted. Joanna and Bobbie's feminism, confined largely to self-advocacy, hews more closely to recognizable critiques of white feminism, as it was scrutinized at the time of the film's release. In this way, the film, in contrast to the novel, shifts attention away from the women's movement as politically and socially important, a source of collective liberation, and towards its hedged role in

personal identity formation, particularly among wealthy women seeking privileges equivalent to white men. Contemporary critics recognized that Joanna and Bobbie's feminist commitments were limited and self-serving. Sociologist Herbert Gans, bringing his significant scholarly insight into suburbia to bear, observed in a review of Joanna and Bobbie's consciousness-raising effort that neither "were particularly militant, nor did they contest the male domination of the town or demand equality within the family" (1975, 59). Rather, they were inspired "as much out of isolation as liberationist fervor; it was their way of reestablishing a bit of New York City culture in an alien milieu" (59).

Gans also perhaps best encapsulates *The Stepford Wives*' resistance to interpretation in his critical review. He reads the film—which he identifies as both "the first American film to deal explicitly with women's liberation" and the first to depict suburban pathology—as misogynistic and anti-feminist (59-60). He also asks why there has been "remarkably little protest from feminists other than Betty Friedan"—an extraordinary comment given the tendency now to center the "feminists recoil" reaction as widespread rather than to recognize Friedan as a lonely critic (59). But Gans also allows for the possibility that the film might be read very differently: "Although at one level the film seems to argue that women's liberation is the sole hope against all-powerful technology (which may also explain why it has not received much critical comment from feminists), at another level it paints an uncomplimentary picture of feminism and women" (60). These two positions—reading *Stepford* as an argument for or against women's liberation—demonstrate the film's polysemy as a commercial product operating in a complex swirl of genres, sci-fi, horror, and the buddy film all rolled into one.

It's a Rip-Off of the Women's Movement

Following the screening, Friedan remained preoccupied by *The Stepford Wives*. Among her papers, held at the Arthur & Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard Radcliffe Institute, are correspondence and media coverage that attest to this. Herbert Gans shared a manuscript draft of his column, for which she had provided the opening racial parallel. One correspondent annotated his copy of *The New York Times*' coverage of Friedan's walk-out with a hearty "Yes!" as a scrawl of support (Figure 1).

Ms. Friedan — Good for you! Our insanity these days is caused by this type of false consciousness. Bullshit pollution is our worst problem. Thanks, Robert [illegible] 975

P.S.: Ann Scott was a good person. She spoke the truth, with chutzpah. Her death is awful.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, FEBR

Feminists Recoil At Film Designed To Relate to Them

BY JUDY KLEMESRUD

Gael Greene "loved" the movie. Mrs. Ring Lardner Jr. considered it a "putdown of humanity in general." Betty Friedan called it a "rip-off of the women's movement," and then stomped out of the screening room.

They were among the 100 women "opinionmakers" who gathered the other night, at the invitation of Eleanor Perry, the screenwriter, and her daughter, Ann Bayer, a writer, for what was billed as "an evening for wives and other women."

The event was a special screening of the controversial film, "The Stepford Wives," at the Magno Sound screening room, at 1350 Sixth Avenue. It was followed by an "awareness session," in which the women were invited to air their feelings—gripes, praise or otherwise—about the film and its ideas.

"The Stepford Wives," which stars Katharine Ross and Paula Prentiss, is based on Ira Levin's novel about a group of suburban husbands who learn how to have The Perfect Wife: They kill their real wives and replace them with identical, lifelike automatons who love cooking, housekeeping and the other traditional wifely roles, and abhor anything vaguely related to feminism.

Deals With Feminism

Because the film includes a consciousness-raising session (which deteriorates into a discussion of the wonders of Easy-On spray starch by the wives who have been robotized), and frequent references to the women's movement, "The Stepford Wives" is one of the first films to deal with feminism in any manner.

Its reviews were mixed, and women critics, with the exception of Pauline Kael, generally liked it, while men critics, with the exception of Rex Reed, generally hated it.

And so, Columbia Pictures asked Eleanor Perry, one of the film industry's more vociferous feminists — she was also the screenwriter of "Diary of a Mad Housewife" —to host the screening in the hopes it would drum up interest among other women.

"Finally, a movie that is not about two guys and their adventures," Miss Perry said before the screening began. "I wonder if film makers know they may be shutting off half their audience with that kind of film—women who may not want to go to 'two guy' pictures."

Signs of Disapproval

And then the film began. And before it was over, the frequent hisses, groans and guffaws from the crowd indicated that perhaps Columbia had made a mistake if they thought these women opinionmakers would like "The Stepford Wives."

The audience included Hildy Parks, the writer and wife of Alexander H. Cohen, the theatrical producer; Ruth Ford, the actress; Elizabeth Harris, co-founder of Ms. magazine; Lois Gould and Carol Hill, the authors, and Muriel Resnik, the playwright, and Joan Silver, Amalie Rothschild and Claudia Weill, film directors.

"I think it's completely ridiculous," said Linda Arking, a writer, who was the first to speak up in the "awareness session." "I couldn't believe the film. It dumps on everyone—women, men, suburbia. It confirms every fear we've ever had about the battle of the sexes, and it says there is no way for people to get together and lead human lives."

Miss Perry, who earlier had said she wished she had had something to do with the film, now interjected, "Men made this film, right?" (The producer, director and screenwriter were men.) Then, referring to a line in the film about bra-burning, she said: "If I ever hear that bra-burning thing again. . . . Well, it's just something no woman would have put in as a line."

Urges a Walkout

(The image of women liberationists as bra-burners came from a demonstration at the 1968 Miss America Pageant in which brassieres were tossed into "freedom trash cans." The contents, however, were not set afire.)

About 10 minutes into the "awareness session," Betty Friedan, who had spent the day in Washington attending the funeral of Ann London Scott, a vice president of the National Organization for Women, stood and with a voice quivering with emotion, said: "I think we should all leave here. I don't think we should help publicize this movie. It's a rip-off of the women's movement."

She grabbed her coat and walked out, followed by three other women.

The "awareness session" ended with the remaining women pretty much agreed that the movie was "junk," should not be taken seriously, and that women should write and direct their own movies if they are ever to have any intelligent "women's pictures."

However, a more favorable reaction to the film, or at least to some of its ideas, emerged a bit later at a smaller gathering around Eleanor Perry's fireplace on Central Park South.

"I loved it — those men were like a lot of men I've known in my life," said Gael Greene, the writer. "They really do want wives who are robots."

Eleanor Perry agreed. "The film presses buttons that make you furious—the fact that all the Stepford men wanted [illegible] breasts, big bottoms, a clean house, fresh-perked coffee and sex. I thought sure Betty Friedan would stand up and say, 'Yes, this is just the way that men treat women.'"

Lois Gould, who called the movie "junk," said that it nevertheless had raised several questions in her mind, among them, "When a man has the perfect wife at home, does he still go out and cheat on his wife?"

"But you know something," she added with a smile, "I wouldn't mind having a robot housekeeper."

The New York Times/Larry Morris

Betty Friedan walks out of "awareness session" following screening of "The Stepford Wives."

Figure 1. Annotated clipping in Betty Friedan Papers, 1933-1985; Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Judy Klemesrud, "Feminists Recoil at Film Designed to Relate to Them," *The New York Times* (February 26, 1975).

Note at top reads: "Ms. Friedan, Good for you! Our insanity these days is caused by this type of false consciousness. Bullshit pollution is our worst problem. Thanks, Robert [Fernando?] P.S. Ann Scott was a good person. She spoke the truth, with chutzpah. Her death is awful."

Curiously, and perhaps pettily, William Goldman's papers also include a photocopy of a clipping of Klemesrud's *New York Times* article, with Friedan's head torn out (Figure 2). We cannot know how this tear was made—or why, or

when. But it is strikingly targeted. Someone had to work to tear *only* the head out of the article, leaving headline, byline, and all remaining text intact. There is the suggestion here of something like a personal grudge. A day spent with Goldman's Papers did not turn up any evidence of Peter Masterson's claim that Goldman interviewed Friedan while writing the screenplay for *The Stepford Wives* (Gregory 2001). These potential connections between our protagonists in the drama of *The Stepford Wives*' reception—the frustrated, thwarted adapter of the text and the headline feminist leading the screening's walk-out—remain to be discovered, documented, and confirmed.

Feminists Recoil At Film Designed To Relate to Them

By JUDY KLEMESRUD

Gael Greene "loved" the movie. Mrs. Ring Lardner Jr. considered it a "putdown of humanity in general." Betty Friedan called it a "rip-off of the women's movement," and then stomped out of the screening room.

They were among the 100 women "opinionmakers" who gathered the other night, at the invitation of Eleanor Perry, the screenwriter, and her daughter, Ann Bayer, a writer, for what was billed as "an evening for wives and other women."

The event was a special screening of the controversial film, "The Stepford Wives," at the Magno Sound screening room, at 1350 Sixth Avenue. It was followed by an "awareness session," in which the women were invited to air their feelings—gripes, praise or otherwise—about the film and its ideas.

"The Stepford Wives," which stars Katharine Ross and Paula Prentiss, is based on Ira Levin's novel about a group of suburban husbands who learn how to have The Perfect Wife: They kill their real wives and replace them with identical, lifelike automatons who love cooking, housekeeping and the other traditional wifely roles, and abhor anything vaguely related to feminism.

Deals With Feminism

Because the film includes a consciousness-raising session (which deteriorates into a discussion of the wonders of Easy-On spray starch by the wives who have been robotized), and frequent references to the women's movement, "The Stepford Wives" is one of the first films to deal with feminism in any manner.

Its reviews were mixed, and women critics, with the exception of Pauline Kael, generally liked it, while men critics, with the exception of Rex Reed, generally hated it.

And so, Columbia Pictures asked Eleanor Perry, one of the film industry's more vociferous feminists — she was also the screenwriter of "Diary of a Mad Housewife" —to host the screening in the hopes it would drum up interest among other women.

"Finally, a movie that is not about two guys and their adventures," Miss Perry said before the screening began. "I wonder if film makers know they may be shutting off half their audience with that kind of film—women who may not want to go to 'two guy' pictures."

Signs of Disapproval

And then the film began. And before it was over, the frequent hisses, groans and guffaws from the crowd indicated that perhaps Columbia had made a mistake if they thought these women opinionmakers would like "The Stepford Wives."

The audience included Hildy Parks, the writer and wife of Alexander H. Cohen, the theatrical producer; Ruth Ford, the actress; Elizabeth Harris, co-founder of Ms. magazine; Lois Gould and Carol Hill, the authors, and Muriel Resnik, the playwright, and Joan Silver, Amalie Rothschild and Claudia Weill, film directors.

"I think it's completely ridiculous," said Linda Arking, a writer, who was the first to speak up in the "awareness session." "I couldn't believe the film. It dumps on everyone—women, men, suburbia. It confirms every fear we've ever had about the battle of the sexes, and it says there is no way for people to get together and lead human lives."

Miss Perry, who earlier had said she wished she had had something to do with the film, now interjected, "Men made this film, right?" (The producer, director and screenwriter were men.) Then, referring to a line in the film about bra-burning, she said: "If I ever hear that bra-burning thing again. . . . Well, it's just something no woman would have put in as a line."

Urges a Walkout

(The image of women liberationists as bra-burners came from a demonstration at the 1968 Miss America Pageant in which brassieres were tossed into "freedom trash cans." The contents, however, were not set afire.)

About 10 minutes into the "awareness session," Betty Friedan, who had spent the day in Washington attending the funeral of Ann London Scott, a vice president of the National Organization for Women, stood and with a voice quivering with emotion, said: "I think we should all leave here. I don't think we should help publicize this movie. It's a rip-off of the women's movement."

She grabbed her coat and walked out, followed by three other women.

The "awareness session" ended with the remaining women pretty much agreed that the movie was "junk," should not be taken seriously, and that women should write and direct their own movies if they are ever to have any intelligent "women's pictures."

However, a more favorable reaction to the film, or at least to some of its ideas, emerged a bit later at a smaller gathering around Eleanor Perry's fireplace on Central Park South.

"I loved it — those men were like a lot of men I've known in my life," said Gael Greene, the writer. "They really do want wives who are robots."

Eleanor Perry agreed. "The film presses buttons that make you furious—the fact that all the Stepford men wanted were big breasts, big bottoms, a clean house, fresh-perked coffee and sex. I thought sure Betty Friedan would stand up and say, 'Yes, this is just the way that men treat women.'"

Lois Gould, who called the movie "junk," said that it nevertheless had raised several questions in her mind, among them, "When a man has the perfect wife at home, does he still go out and cheat on his wife?"

"But you know something," she added, with a smile, "I wouldn't mind having a robot housekeeper."

The New York Times/Larry Morris

Betty Friedan walks out of "awareness session" following screening of "The Stepford Wives."

Figure 2. Photocopy of altered clipping in William Goldman Papers, 1949-1997; Judy Klemesrud, "Feminists Recoil at Film Designed to Relate to Them," *The New York Times* (February 26, 1975); Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.

Subsequent news coverage offers insight into Friedan's concerns about the film. A *People* magazine profile published two months after the screening observes Friedan lecturing in her Queens College class on "The Sociology of Sex Roles" (Bayer 1975). The profile reports that Friedan "digressed" from the class's reading for that day "to assail *The Stepford Wives*, a movie she considers dangerous and antihuman. 'In effect,' says Friedan, 'its message is, "Uppity women, watch out. You're going to be murdered; all we want are robots." I don't think *all* men want robots, but I think some men—men who are into the *machismo* thing—feel threatened"' (Bayer 1975).[7]

Friedan's critique must be carefully parsed. Her concerns about the darkness of *The Stepford Wives*—that it is "antihuman" or sends a message to feminists that "You're going to be murdered"—may be partly an issue of genre. Scrutinizing Friedan's antipathy towards the film, which dramatized her own accounts of suburban women's entrapment by patriarchy, scholar Anne Williams asks, "Might Friedan have been angry to see her thesis enacted as a Gothic?" (2007, 88). While Williams locates Friedan's opposition to the film in its violation of her commitment to a mainstream women's movement, as well as its centering of the female body, she posits that Friedan "may also have a blind spot in regard to Gothic in general" (2007, 97). As the next section of this essay will consider, Friedan was taken with speculative fiction's portrayal of possible feminist worlds. Inattentive to *The Stepford Wives*' critique of antifeminism, Friedan interpreted its Gothic horror as a threat to both feminism and feminists, as conveying a message that men would react to the liberation movement with crushing violence.

Friedan also observes that men feel threatened by Second Wave feminism and by women's assertion of their own rights and needs. In her view, *The Stepford Wives* distorts reality by insisting that *all* men—not merely the *machismo* ones—want robots instead of liberated wives. Immediately, this appears to be a misread of the film. The confines of Stepford are that of an enclave; the film does not suggest or extrapolate a universal male desire. Many characters in the film, including its protagonist and her friends who are women professionals (the real estate agent, the psychiatrist), assert Stepford's singularity even among other well-heeled Connecticut suburbs. Indeed, unlike Levin's novel, Forbes's film makes explicit that Walter Eberhart moved his family to Stepford with full knowledge of and commitment to the scheme to replace the

[7] Bayer writes that Friedan digressed from a discussion of *Without Marx or Jesus* to opine on *Stepford Wives*. A syllabus for the course indicates that this text would have been taught March 11-13, 1975, approximately two weeks after Friedan attended the screening. The *People* profile was published six weeks after this class. See Friedan (1975).

town's wives with robots. Characteristic of the new women's film that does not "demand a reading as a feminist film" (Kuhn 1982, 139), *The Stepford Wives* pared down its feminist pitch to attract a broader audience. The negotiated meaning of the film invites questions. Does *The Stepford Wives* lampoon the Men's Association and the desire to replace women with robots? Or, as Friedan suggests, does the film make a broader claim that men prefer robotic housekeepers and sexual partners over women? Why was Friedan concerned about *men* being portrayed negatively in the film?

Observers of Friedan both in the 1970s and today were surprised by her reaction (Klemesrud 1975; Williams 2007). As Klemesrud reports in her *New York Times* story, feminist screenwriter Eleanor Perry, the aforementioned host of the awareness session, takes three distinct positions over the course of the evening, reflecting several potential readings of this polysemic film. She opens the screening by observing the marketability of the film to women at a moment when the male "buddy film" was ascendant—"Finally, a movie that is not about two guys and their adventures" (1975). Following the screening, she critiques the film as clearly the product of an all-male production team—"Men made this film, right?" But Perry ends her night, in Klemesrud's account, by seeming to soften towards *Stepford*, expressing confusion in Friedan's reaction: "The film presses buttons that make you furious—the fact that all the Stepford men wanted were big breasts, big bottoms, a clean house, fresh-perked coffee, and sex. I thought sure Betty Friedan would stand up and say: 'Yes, this is just the way that men treat women'" (1975).

Perry need not have been surprised by Friedan's furious "not all men" reaction. Friedan had been moving towards an embrace of feminist movement's male allies for quite some time, as she pushed to keep feminism as a mainstream movement. In an appearance on William F. Buckley Jr's *Firing Line* in 1971, Friedan is prompted to respond to criticism from New York Radical Feminist member Sally Kempton, who argued that Friedan "misrepresents the case for feminism by making people believe that reform is the answer. The problem is more fundamental." Friedan dismisses what she terms the empty rhetoric of her more radical peers in the women's movement, arguing that the reforms she seeks will remake society without claiming to overthrow it. She elaborates, specifically, on the role of men in the political change suggested by women's liberation: "I don't believe that man is the enemy of this. I think that man will be liberated by it. And as evidence of that, you see more and more men joining our movement, supporting our movement" (Buckley 1971). Referencing "the masculine mystique" and concerns such as men's reduced life expectancy, Friedan aligns men and women's concerns into a collective need to be liberated

from patriarchy (Buckley 1971). Herbert Gans, in his essay on *The Stepford Wives* and influenced by Friedan, expressed concern that the film "paints an uncomplimentary picture of feminism," omitting its "economic and political demands" but positioning it as "setting women against men, thus ignoring the many feminists who have argued that women's liberation cannot be achieved without larger social change that also liberates men" (1975, 60). These reactions help contextualize Friedan's critique of a film that would otherwise potentially align with her own work and argument; by 1975, Friedan's focus was on coalition-building across the sexes. *The Stepford Wives* challenged that delicate truce by reanimating the claims of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and reasserting an antagonism between Stepford's husbands and wives, which Friedan conflated into an overarching social commentary on sex relations and the viability of coalition reform.

Further, as Friedan's papers attest, 1975 saw threats to Friedan's vision and standing as a leading voice of feminism, heightened by the pressure to advance the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) through state legislatures. Friedan, dating back to her work as founding president of NOW in 1966, had situated NOW as a mainstream women's organization. Friedan was concerned that NOW president Karen DeCrow was taking the organization towards "pseudo radical extremism" and linked DeCrow's strategy, which steered NOW towards lesbian rights, civil rights for all, advocacy on behalf of the poor and working class, and the possibility of political endorsement, to the defeat of the ERA (Zyda 1975).

Among the clippings in Friedan's papers are numerous criticisms and barbs aimed at the aging feminist. A student at Governors State University wrote a piece responding to positive coverage of Friedan's visit to campus that opened, "What do you do if you're 50, and white, and think of yourself as liberal, and those radicals, and non-whites and young folks come along and say, 'That was a good idea lady, BUT you need to ask for more!'" Friedan, this student observed, was preoccupied by the problems of "White Middle Class Women" ("Becky" 1975).[8] Friedan continued to receive heartfelt letters expressing the difference her work made to the lives of women, she continued to teach, and she continued to write and speak. But, as the 1975 *People* profile framed it, "the more radical activists of the movement who followed have somewhat left Friedan behind. At 54 she is neither as prettily political as Gloria Steinem, as

[8] An irony of Friedan's critique of *The Stepford Wives* is that the feminism portrayed in the film was precisely what she had been accused of prioritizing: asserting the rights of the Charmaines, Joannas, and Bobbies of the world to play tennis all afternoon, pursue semi-professional creative work, or simply indulge in Ding Dongs and Hi-C.

aggressively rough-tongued as Flo Kennedy, nor as flamboyantly sexy as Germaine Greer" (Bayer 1975). This comparison of her contemporaries in the Women's Movement is, on its face, both offensive and flabbergasting, submitting to an idea that feminists needed to be lined up and assessed on their sexiness and prettiness. *People*'s comparison is also stunningly ageist. But it speaks to a stark reality of the period, when Friedan was increasingly treated as a relic with declining influence, who resorted to hot-tempered pronouncements in the absence of real power.

A recent biography of Friedan suggests that *The Stepford Wives* may also have provoked an idealist aspect to her thinking. Rachel Shteir documents the dizzying chaos of Friedan's commitments and expressions, among them an interest in science fiction (2023). Interpreting the "Open Letter to the Women's Movement" published in Friedan's second book, *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women's Movement* (1976), Shteir writes, "Science fiction, she argues, imagines solutions for the second part of the women's revolution where everything else has failed. … She appeared moved by the wave of science fiction inspired by the women's movement, such as the lesbian writer Joanna Russ's novel *The Female Man* [and] Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 *The Left Hand of Darkness*" (202).

As Anne Williams has detailed, Friedan was not the only viewer critical of *The Stepford Wives* (2007).[9] Paul D. Zimmerman (1975), writing in *Newsweek*, took offense at the film's "glib, gimmicky point" and its portrayal of men's desire, specifically, the "ugly and unsupported things about what kind of women men really want." Zimmerman's critique is also aesthetic: he comments on the attractiveness of the women, signaling that his own preference would have been for both the bodies and spirits of the pre-robot Stepford Wives. In a remarkable review in *The New Yorker*, influential film critic Pauline Kael expresses appreciation for the "shrewd, potentially good movie idea" in Levin's novel, but accuses screenwriter William Goldman and director Bryan Forbes of having "too much contempt for the book to think the film through. The dialogue is gummy, the situations dimly functional; the movie gives the impression of a patchwork script, and it's blah and becalmed" (1975, 110). Kael's criticism goes beyond the portrayal of Joanna by Katharine Ross ("Hardly the actress to make us feel the encroaching horror of suburban blandness"), or the film's lack of "funkiness" ("it's literal in a way that seems a wasting disease") (110-1). She rejects the film's message, its laying of blame for suburban women's entrapment at the feet of men, and, even more forcefully, regrets this message's likely appeal

[9] While building on Williams's work to assemble and interpret reviews, I consulted the original sources and cite them here.

to an audience of women who want to believe that they have been wronged. Kael takes care to explain: "I dislike it for the condescension implicit in its view that educated American women are not responsible for what they become. Women, the abused, are being treated like the innocent young potheads of the late sixties—as a suffering privileged class. This sentimentality is degrading" (1975, 113). Her critique of *Stepford* finds its footing, then, in her anticipation of its positive reception by both men and women sympathetic to the narrative that well-off suburban women are victims—and her aversion to this smug, aggrieved audience drawn in by spectatorial identification. While Zimmerman admired the beauty and spunk of Charmaine, Bobbie, and Joanna, contemporaneous critics joined Kael in observing a void surrounding the film's protagonists. Gans admitted, "As for the other women [except Joanna], I did not notice that some had become robots until the film pointed this out explicitly" (1975, 60). While critical of the wives, both Gans and Kael perceive the "anti-men" intentions of Bryan Forbes' direction, describing the Stepford husbands as "aging, courteous mice, nervously scuttling in and out of the woodwork" (Kael 1975, 112) or "hicks" (Gans 1975, 60). The critical reception of *The Stepford Wives* reveals nuance among positions taken by critics who might all identify as liberal feminists. These critics make detailed and expansive arguments but circle around the kernel of their complaints. Where Friedan is offended by the violence and antihuman stance of the film, a complaint likely magnified by the horror genre, Gans is affronted by its lack of conviction, its portrait of only vaguely feminist protagonists and its reliance on the trope of alienated or conformist suburbia. Kael is infuriated by the film's pandering to an imagined viewer: the smug, wealthy white woman who sees the film as affirming her status as a victim of patriarchy in general and her working husband in particular. Director Bryan Forbes assumed that a feminist viewer would be affirmed by the "anti-men" message of the film; critics such as Pauline Kael and Herbert Gans point to the failure of his binary assumption.

The Future is Fembot

The contemporary reception of *The Stepford Wives* was confused by divergent beliefs about futurism, optimism, and the function of satire and horror. In a 1980 *Dick Cavett Show* interview with "masters of horror" Stephen King, George A. Romero, Ira Levin, and Peter Straub, Levin responds to Cavett's question about where their ideas come from with "I've gotten most of mine from things I've read. Newspaper articles, nonfiction, books … something will spark." He

continues, "well, *The Stepford Wives*, I got the idea for that reading *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler's book. There's a section in there on domestic robots, and he speculates on how … well … they will work." Levin then gestures to his own body, prompting laughter from his panelists familiar with the Stepford Wives as sexbots, before continuing: "I suppose they work very well" (Cavett 1980).

Figure 3. Masters of Horror appear on the Dick Cavett show. October 16, 1980. From left to right: Stephen King, Ira Levin, Dick Cavett, Peter Straub, George A. Romero.

While *The Stepford Wives* appears to be set in the present, the multiples of Joanna invoked in Levin's novel and Bryan Forbes's film suggest alternatives that might be connected both to potential pasts and futures. Levin's reference to the work of futurist Alvin Toffler suggests a vision informed by emergent technologies. As Toffler writes, in a section of *Future Shock* (1970) that influenced *The Stepford Wives*:

> Technicians at Disneyland have created extremely life-like computer-controlled humanoids capable of moving their arms and legs, grimacing, smiling, glowering, simulating fear, joy and a wide range of other emotions. Built of clear plastic that, according to one reporter, "does everything but bleed," the robots chase girls, play music, fire pistols, and so closely resemble human forms that visitors routinely shriek with fear, flinch and otherwise react as though they were dealing with real human beings. (187)

One can imagine how Levin, reading Toffler, would see the horror potential of the spectacle he describes. The humanoids are created as uncanny doubles,

imitating humans, and recalling a long history of horror, dating back to E.T.A. Hoffman's "The Sandman" (1816) and its pre-robotic antecedents in the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea. Like Olympia in "The Sandman," with its indelible link to Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny (1919), Toffler's humanoids are designed to elicit reactions from the encounter.[10] Initially suggesting that these machines might themselves simulate "fear, joy, and a wide range of other emotions," he emphasizes that viewers react with fear (Toffler 1970, 187).

Discussing the morality of horror films on the *Dick Cavett Show*, George Romero observes that "horror is, almost by tradition, highly moral." Straub and Levin chime in that, typically, the monster is destroyed, the intrusive evil is vanquished, the hero or heroine is restored and affirmed. But, as King and Romero admiringly observe, Levin resists this resolution and moral clarity in his work. In *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski 1968), the return to "normality" at the end lodges the devil in a cradle, nurtured by Rosemary. Levin responds: "I do like to keep a little element unreconstructed at the end, a little of the horror still loose, because I think that makes a work sort of stay in the mind more" (Cavett 1980). In Levin's novel, the sense of unresolved horror is even more present than in the film adaptation, as the source of Joanna's transformation remains free-floating and ambiguous.

The persistence of unresolved horror in Levin's work is a source of considerable ambiguity. The monster is not destroyed. Evil is not vanquished. Instead, particularly in the film adaptation of *The Stepford Wives*, crimes are undetected and unpunished, and a trajectory of further monstrosity is laid out. *The Stepford Wives'* reliance on imagined technologies forecast in *Future Shock* makes the film futuristic despite its hyper-contemporary setting. But beyond the automatons, with their simulated voices and plastic breasts, the film concludes as an ongoing nightmare. Protagonists in horror films such as *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) emerge traumatized from terror and seek to regain normalcy. *The Stepford Wives*, however, aligns with the aforementioned *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanksi 1968) and with more extreme films such as Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001) in its suggestion of an unvanquished, unchecked monstrosity. As

[10] While this essay does not focus extensively on the uncanny or doppelgangers, it is deeply informed by those concepts and literatures. Freud's concept of the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, merges the sense of the concealed and the familiar. Quoting psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch's "The Psychology of the Uncanny" (1906), Freud points to "doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate," as observed with dolls and automata, as well as epileptic fits or insanity, which "arouse in the onlooker vague notions of automatic—mechanical—processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person" as a "starting point" for his investigation. See Freud 1919, 135.

Peter Straub argued on the *Cavett* panel (1980), horror, with its capacity to draw the viewer into the fears of its protagonists, is a highly empathic genre. Within horror, the absence of resolution evokes strong reactions in viewers, persisting the threat beyond the framework of the film.

Friedan and *Stepford* author Ira Levin both turned to Alvin Toffler for inspiration. But where Friedan sought ideals and the blueprint for a faltering movement, Levin envisioned dread and entrapment. Despite Friedan's frequent assertions to the contrary, she did not represent the full scope of the women's movement and could not serve as its standard bearer. The reception of *The Stepford Wives* was considerably more polarized and nuanced than Betty Friedan's reported reaction would suggest. Its reception was influenced by the feminisms of the era, and the struggles unfolding between competing visions of a liberated or foreclosed future, achieved through reforms or revolution.

Negotiating *Stepford*

The Stepford Wives casts its story across a patchwork of genres. In its presentation of a futuristic, technological "next stage" for women, it aligns with science fiction and dystopian films. It also functions as a social satire. Joanna and Bobbie, in their quest to discover what is changing the wives of Stepford, populate a buddy or detective movie, veering between drama and congenial comedy. And, most pertinent for the purposes of this article, *The Stepford Wives* operates as a horror film, firmly inhabiting the realm of the uncanny double, or doppelganger, whose appearance serves as a harbinger of death. In both narrative arc and physical setting, the film emerges from the Gothic genre: Joanna inhabits multiple houses that symbolize her entrapment, moving, on the last night of her life, from her suburban home, which we see enshrouded in darkness and peril, to her death in the Men's Association mansion.

This article softens the oft-repeated claim, based almost exclusively on Friedan's reaction, that *The Stepford Wives* is anti-feminist or rejected by all feminists. Certainly, the reception of the film was influenced both by problems or challenges in the film itself, such as uneven pacing, compromised casting and costume design, and its genre-defying interpretive resistance. *The Stepford Wives* clumsily negotiated a complex moment in American *feminisms* as a new women's film designed for broad appeal, seeking a chameleon-like resonance while inhabiting the complex moral universe of horror. Contemporaneous pronouncements over the film's intended meaning and its position as either a rip-off or champion of women's liberation were further muddied by active

struggles within and across the women's movement itself, as a site for coalition-building across or battles between the sexes. Written, adapted, directed, and produced by men, who both believed they were creating a film that would appeal to women and conflated feminism with an "anti-men" stance, *The Stepford Wives* prominently asserts a male gaze. The futuristic horror arc of the story both connects to and inverts themes from the new women's films of the period through its portrayal of identification in a female friendship forged through commonality, animated by tepid commitments to women's liberation and independence, and severed through a retrograde (but technologically advanced) male conspiracy. Definitively a horror film *about* feminism, with a compelling claim to be the only American studio feature from the 1970s to be a *consciously intended* feminist horror film, *The Stepford Wives* must be understood as negotiating its status as a feminist film among the feminisms of its time.

Acknowledgements

This article originated as a seminar paper for Dr. Daniel Humphrey's lively, engaging Fall 2023 Gender and Genre class (Film / Women and Gender Studies) at Texas A&M University. Dr. Humphrey has provided invaluable guidance, support, and generous feedback. Thank you to the archivists and reading room staff at the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University and the Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Columbia University, for assistance with the Betty Friedan and William Goldman Papers. Thank you to Texas A&M University Libraries staff for provisioning books, articles, and chapters; special thanks to Carolina De Leon, whose work in Interlibrary Loans has been indispensable to my research.

Sarah Potvin is a PhD student at Texas A&M University in the Department of English, also pursuing a graduate certificate in Women's and Gender Studies. She teaches in Digital Humanities and has published in venues such as *Digital Humanities Quarterly* and *portal: Libraries and the Academy*.

References

Abel, Elizabeth. 1981. "(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women." *Signs* 6 (3): 413–35.

Basinger, Jeanine. 1993. *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Bayer, Ann. 1975. "Teacher: Professor Betty Friedan Carries the Feminist Battle into the Classroom." *People*, April 28. Clipping. Betty Friedan Papers, 1933-1985. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

Beckman, Brittany Levine. 2017. "Jordan Peele's chilling new thriller 'Get Out' is the 'Stepford Wives' of racism." *Mashable*, January 25. https://mashable.com/article/get-out-jordan-peele.

"Becky." 1975. "How it started out Betty." *Innovator* 4 (25), December 2, 1975. Clipping. Betty Friedan Papers, 1933-1985; Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/sch00059/catalog.

Buckley, William F., Jr., host. Betty Friedan, guest. 1971. "Women's Lib, Guest Betty Friedan." *Firing Line with William F. Buckley*, Episode 235, January 11, 1971. Hoover Institution Archives. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7BJyQmqo_Q.

Cavett, Dick, host. 1980. "The Masters of Horror: George Romero, Stephen King, Peter Straub, and Ira Levin." *The Dick Cavett Show*, October 16. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJFQQY2BJDs; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uY3STaOz6EU; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3Haw0TwuYM.

Denis, Claire, dir. 2001. *Trouble Every Day*. Produced by arte France Cinema, Canal+, Centre national de la cinematographie, Dacia Films, Messaouda Films, and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen. Distributed by Rezo Films (France).

DePalma, Brian, dir. 1976. *Carrie*. Produced by Red Bank Films. Distributed by United Artists.

Echols, Alice. 1989. *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975*. University of Minnesota Press.

Erscoi, Lelia, Annelies V. Kleinherenbrink, and Olivia Guest. 2023. "Pygmalion Displacement: When Humanising AI Dehumanises Women." *SocArXiv*. February 11. doi:10.31235/osf.io/jqxb6.

Forbes, Bryan, dir. 1975. *The Stepford Wives*. Produced by Palomar Pictures. Distributed by Columbia Pictures.

Frankenheimer, John, dir. 1966. *Seconds*. Produced by Joel Productions, John Frankheimer Productions, and Gibraltar Productions. Distributed by Paramount Pictures.

Freud, Sigmund. 1919. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David Mclintock, 2003. Penguin Books.

Friedan, Betty. Papers, 1933-1985. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

Friedan, Betty. 1975. "The Sex Role Revolution: Stage II." Sociology, Queens College syllabus, Spring 1975. Betty Friedan Papers, 1933-1985; Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/sch00059/catalog.

Friedkin, William, dir. 1973. *The Exorcist*. Produced by Hoya Productions. Distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures.

Gans, Herbert J. 1975. "'The Stepford Wives': Killing Off Women's Liberation." *Social Policy* 6, May/June:59-60.

Goldman, William. 1974. "The Stepford Wives," Screenplay by William Goldman. Shooting Script. March 27, 1974. William Goldman Papers, 1949-1997. Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.

Goldman, William. 1983. *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting*. Warner Books.

Goldman, William. Papers, 1949-1997. Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.

Gregory, David, dir. 2001. *The Stepford Life*. Produced by Blue Underground. Featuring interviews with Bryan Forbes, Peter Masterson, Nanette Newman, Paula Prestiss, Katharine Ross, and Edgar J. Scherick. Included with *The Stepford Wives* 2001 Anchor Bay Silver Anniversary Edition DVD reissue. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsWzsMzotpI.

Halberstam, Jack. 1991. "Automating Gender: Postmodern Feminism in the Age of the Intelligent Machine." *Feminist Studies* 17 (3): 439-60. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178281.

Hancock, Drew, dir. 2025. *Companion*. New Line Cinema and BoulderLight Pictures. Distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures.

Hardy, Robin, dir. 1973. *The Wicker Man*. Produced and distributed by British Lion Films.

Haskell, Molly. 1973. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Hoffman, E. T. A. 1816. "The Sandman." In *Tales of Hoffman*. Selected and translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Penguin, 1982.

Hill, George Ray, dir. 1969. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Produced by Campanile Productions and Newman-Foreman Company. Distributed by 20th Century-Fox.

Hollinger, Karen. 1998. *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films*. University of Minnesota Press.

hooks, bell. 2000. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press.

Kael, Pauline. 1975. "Male Revenge." *The New Yorker* 51, February 24, 1975: 110-113.

Klemesrud, Judy. 1975. "Feminists Recoil at Film Designed to Relate to Them." *The New York Times*, February 26. p. 29. Altered clippings of Klemesrud's article can be found in the Papers of both Betty Friedan and William Goldman.

Kuhn, Annette. 1982. *Women's Pictures: Feminism and* Cinema. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Levin, Ira. 1992. "Oral History Memoir." Interviewed by Suki Sandler, March 1992. William E. Wiener Oral History Library of the American Jewish Committee at New York Public Library. Transcript available: https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/598950c0-02e1-0131-cf99-58d385a7b928.

Lewis, Sophie. 2025. *Enemy Feminisms: Terfs, Policewomen & Girlbosses Against Liberation*. Haymarket Books.

Lorde, Audre. 1979. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Crossing Press, 1984: 110-113.

Mulvey, Laura. 1975. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16 (3) Autumn 1975: 6-18.

Peele, Jordan, dir. 2017. *Get Out*. Produced by Blumhouse Productions, QC Entertainment, and Monkeypaw Productions. Distributed by Universal Pictures.

Polanski, Roman, dir. 1968. *Rosemary's Baby*. Produced by William Castle Enterprises. Distributed by Paramount Pictures.

Richards, Leah. 2023. "'You've really got to get with it. Mrs. Mitchell': Freud, Friedan, and *Jack's Wife*." In *Not of the Living Dead: The Non-Zombie Films of George A. Romero*. Edited by Noah Simon Jampol, Cain Miller, Leah Richards, and John R. Ziegler. McFarland & Company: 30-46.

Rilla, Wolf, dir. 1960. *Village of the Damned*. Produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Distributed by Loew's.

Robson, Mark, dir. 1943. *The Seventh Victim*. Distributed by RKO Radio Pictures.

Shteir, Rachel. 2023. *Betty Friedan: Magnificent Disrupter*. Yale University Press.

Siegel, Don, dir. 1956. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Produced by Walter Wanger Productions. Distributed by Allied Artists Pictures.

Silver, Anna Krugovoy. 2002. "The Cyborg Mystique: 'The Stepford Wives' and Second Wave Feminism." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30 (1/2): 60–76.

Sweeney, Miriam E. 2020. "The Stepford Wife Gets Smart." *Science* 369 (6508), September 4: 1169–1169. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abd2192

Toffler, Alvin. 1970. *Future Shock*. Random House.

Weill, Claudia, dir. 1978. *Girlfriends*. Produced by Cyclops Films. Distributed by Warner Bros.

Wilde, Olivia, dir. 2022. *Don't Worry Darling*. Produced by New Line Cinema and Vertigo Entertainment. Distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures.

Williams, Anne. 2007. "*The Stepford Wives*: What's a Living Doll to Do in a Postfeminist World?" In *Postfeminist Gothic*, edited by Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz. Palgrave Macmillan UK: 75–98. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230801301.

Wosk, Julie. 2015. *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves*. Rutgers University Press.

Zimmerman, Paul D. 1975. "Suburban Gothic." *Newsweek*, 85, March 3.

Zyda, Joan. 1975. "Internal Struggle Jeopardizes NOW." *Chicago Tribune*, November 20. Clipping. Betty Friedan Papers, 1933-1985. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

- 2025 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.