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The Abuser in the Machine: *The Invisible Man* (2020) as Modern Gothic Horror

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Abstract: By modernizing Gothic tropes within a narrative exploring the trauma of intimate partner violence, the latest film adaptation of *The Invisible Man* from Leigh Whannel draws attention to the invisibility of the psychological and societal horrors of abuse. With a blend of psychological and physical horror, this feminist reinterpretation of H.G. Wells' classic novel navigates intersecting genres of horror to facilitate its emotional impact. In a close reading of the cinematic techniques and plot through a Gothic lens, Whannell's version of '*The Invisible Man*' reveals its successful reflection of the dangers of technology-enabled control's capacity to reinforce societal compliance in gender-based violence.

Keywords: modern Gothic; *The Invisible Man*; terror; horror; supernatural; intimate partner violence; film studies; adaptations; feminism; gaslighting

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1. Introduction

Perched atop a rocky cliff above a violent sea, a magnificent mansion sits in silhouette, large windows dimly glowing in near-total darkness as foreboding instrumental music rises. The music ends abruptly as the camera cuts to a tight shot of a woman lying in bed with her eyes closed. They suddenly snap open to look directly down the line of the camera. The woman slowly and quietly eases herself from the bed, removing the hand of a sleeping man who clutches her possessively. Shots of a pill bottle and a water glass swirl with the remains of white powder, an indicator she has drugged the man. As she tiptoes through the dimly lit labyrinth of a house, full of sparse furnishings, dark hallways, and cement walls. The near-continuous tracking shot lingers slowly. The only brightly lit space is a modern technology lab where she turns off the cameras and alarm, suggesting her confinement. Having drugged her tormenter and with an escape bag of necessities, she leaps the fence surrounding the property, streaking down a remote hillside to a one-lane road in a dense forest—a Gothic heroine fleeing the oppressive manor keeping her caged. Terrified, she leaps into the car of another woman before the man (not unconscious after all) suddenly slams into the side of the car and punches out the glass. Both women shriek before the car screeches away (Whannell 2020, 00:00:45–10:48).[1]

This is not a modern retelling of "Bluebeard" or an up-to-date interpretation of Isabella's escape in *The Castle of Otranto*[2] but the opening sequence of the 2020 cinematic reinvention of H.G. Wells' science fiction Gothic novel *The Invisible Man*. By focusing on the Gothic setting, applying cinematic techniques familiar to horror fans, and most importantly, centering the events on a female protagonist, Cecilia ("Cee"),[3] writer and director Leigh Whannell immediately informs the audience that this will not be a traditional retelling of Wells' text. Other horror films adopt the Gothic genre to facilitate their investigation into domestic violence, like *The Shining* (1980), *100 Feet* (2008), and *Crimson Peak* (2015).[4] Whannell is also no stranger to the technique, having investigated domestic violence in previous cinematic work, including *Insidious: The Last Key* (2018). However, none have been as deliberate in emphasizing how emerging technology and science fiction like *The Invisible Man*, whose establishing scene's Gothic trappings are alluded to not by framing the "*haunted house*" in seemingly innocuous daylight vignettes or with funerary imagery[5]

as in the other films, but with a woman's hurried nighttime escape as she tries to evade the monster tethering her to the domestic space.

This essay evaluates the most recent film adaptation of *The Invisible Man* (2020)[6] as a Gothic text that pays homage to the genre while also exploring the realities of intimate partner violence in the digital age. The formulaic nature of early Gothic texts, featuring decaying castles and remote spaces filled with various terrifying entities—ranging from would-be rapists and specters to demonic forces and monstrous forms—creates a pervasive sense of dread and 'evil' that helps define the boundaries of the genre. However, those boundary lines are often broken, both literally and metaphorically, by authors who are in turn pushing against the confines of tradition in revolutionary ways. This is still true in contemporary Gothic texts. If we read the Gothic as historically representative of cultural attitudes, traditions, and current events at the time of their creation (Smith 2013, p. 7), then *The Invisible Man* offers a glimpse into the anxieties of 21st-century life. The film serves as an exploration of intimate partner violence aided by technology and facilitated by still-existing patriarchal structures that would feel not altogether unfamiliar to the Gothic heroines of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The "hermeneutic circle" of genre and reception suggests that audiences approach a text from a framework of cultural understanding (Münderlein 2021, p. 2). Texts with long literary and cinematic histories that permeate generations, like *The Invisible Man*, are even more susceptible to audience expectation. Whannell consciously adapts the assumed framework of the titular character and positions a modern Gothic heroine at its center. The central female character of the Gothic novel has always been a political figure. From the genre's origins in the late 18th century, the female characters manage to survive the hardships of their circumstances, which are at least in part a result of their gender. They serve as inspirational figures of physical and psychological resilience (Münderlein 2021, pp. 126–28).

Increased public attention to the #MeToo movement following President Trump's first term helped produce a growing body of scholarship that critically examines how women are treated in 21st-century horror films and Gothic texts. Todd K. Platts defines MeToo horror films as those that "[use] the elements and aesthetics of horror cinema to dramatize the assault and abuse of women (and some men) brought to light by the movement" (Platts 2024, p. 162). Since the 2010s, "captive woman" films where female characters are trapped by patriarchal figures who threaten rape/death have increased (Keetley 2019, p. 97). There is also a broader shift from relying on jump-scares and audiovisual techniques to evoke horror to instead focusing on the construction of a permeating, invisible sense of dread. Arguably, these changes reflect the continuous fear of sexual abuse and harassment fostered by gender inequity. Likewise, the increased adoption of "gaslighting" as a horror device is uncomfortable because of its familiarity (Church 2021, pp. 103–4). The Gothic genre is full of characters whose experiences with danger and the supernatural (or presumed supernatural) are dismissed by others. The 1944 movie *Gaslight*, which gave this form of abuse its name, used Gothic themes to evoke women's distrust toward the nuclear family and dismissal of their contributions to the workforce following the end of WWII (Church 2021, p. 106). *The Invisible Man* continues the tradition as Cecilia tries (unsuccessfully) to maintain control over her body and her career. Traditionally, horror and the Gothic allow audiences to "engage with highly stylized representations of the (horrific past) from the safety of the present" (McCollum 2019, p. 11); it is hard to view narratives like *The Invisible Man* as nostalgic when misogyny and hate seem to dominate existing cultural, political, and social spaces. Like so many of these post-#MeToo narratives (Keetley 2019, p. 99), however, Whannell's film challenges their stability.

The following pages will explore how Whannell adopts classical Gothic tropes and an enduring monster in the modern day to explore the psychological and social horror of intimate trauma for contemporary audiences. Fictionalized representation of trauma can be cathartic for both the creator and audience, who can confront the experience through the temporary suspension of reality in a controlled narrative that facilitates deeper understand-

ing. When at its most effective, narratives that fictionalize intimate partner violence serve as practical and emotional education while also increasing empathy (and awareness) for audiences outside of these situations in real life (Le Rossignol and Harris 2022, pp. 5–6). In illustrating the insidious nature of abuse facilitated by advanced technology and repressive patriarchal systems, the movie draws attention to an often invisible horror, or at least one society as a whole turns a blind eye to. The Gothic custom of blurred realities affords for the horrors of the physical monster (abuser/the Invisible Man) and the psychological trauma ("gaslighting") to be addressed simultaneously. Valdine Clemens declares, "Not only do Gothic stories convey admonitory, prophetic, and instructional messages, but they also perform a literary (or cinematic) type of psychosocial therapy. That is, in frightening us out of our habitual 'wits,' Gothic fiction can shock us into using them in more viable ways" (Clemens 1999, p. 1). The shock *The Invisible Man* provides is deeply rooted in the physical and emotional violence the antagonist, the "Invisible Man", perpetuates but also in its depiction of the societal tendency to ignore victims of intimate partner violence, specifically women. *The Invisible Man* only attacks male victims during climactic fight scenes when they are aware a physical threat is present; all his other attacks are on female characters. The movie forces the audience to confront the realities of violence against women and the resulting PTSD. The experience of trauma often leads to a fragmentary understanding of reality for the victim, where the fight-or-flight response is so overwhelming it renders any semblance of control impossible (Herman 2015, pp. 33–34). *The Invisible Man* illustrates this for viewers as Cecilia is terrorized by an unseen threat; she cannot escape because she does not even know where her attacker is or if he exists at all. Her experience with domestic violence is shown in its absence. First, it is evident in her forced seclusion from the world and constant monitoring. Then her abuser stalks and gaslights her while invisible. However, finally, and perhaps most sinisterly, with the insistent inability of anyone around her to believe she is still being tormented even if they are also victims.

Jumino Suhadi et al. approach Wells' novel as evocative of "science abuse", a term that refers not only to how scientific advancement can be irresponsible but also to how its intentionally misused and selfish application damages both scientists and society (Suhadi et al. 2022). The 2020 film raises the stakes by showing science as facilitating literal abuse. The social impact of the film's themes would be less effective without evoking an emotional response in the viewer. By utilizing horror tropes, including those of haunting and poltergeist narratives, alongside a culturally familiar monster, the audience is meant to experience fear, confusion, and suspicion. In eliciting in the viewer, a similar visceral fear that Cecilia experiences, the film makes what may be an intangible experience tangible. The *Invisible Man's* feminist recontextualization has been explored by Alice Payne, who argues that Whannell's interpretation of Wells' text can be read as a modern take on the Cassandra Myth intended to motivate society to listen to survivors rather than dismiss them. Payne argues that the social doubt surrounding accusations of abuse can be as damaging as psychological abuse and is indicative of the pervasiveness of patriarchal society's predisposition to discredit women's experiences. In a post-#MeToo era where more open conversations about the misogyny and sexism's roles in silencing women are disseminated in popular culture, Cecilia's inability to escape her abusive ex-boyfriend feels not only poignant but intentional (Payne 2022, p. 5). As Jerrold Hogle astutely notes, "The regressive *and* progressive nature of the Gothic has been *and remains* necessary to deal with the social unconsciousness of modern humanity in all its extreme contradictions spawned by its looking backward and forward so much of the time, even today" (Hogle 2014, p. 5). As sexual harassment and rape culture are questioned more openly and more honestly in the public sphere, glancing into the past requires an examination of how systematic sexual misconduct permeates even when its elimination is demanded. Through the evocation of Gothic tropes and unflinching visualization of technological, emotional, sexual, and physical abuse, *The Invisible Man* reveals more than it obscures.

2. Adaptation and the Abject in *The Invisible Man*

Wells' original 1897 plot follows a scientist named Griffin who stumbles upon a chemical concoction that renders him invisible to the naked eye. Renting a room at a rural inn, he desperately tries to recreate the experiment that forces him to cover his body with prosthetics and clothing, not to reverse the process but to ensure that he can use the formula to terrorize the country. After using his invisibility to commit various crimes, including murder, he is eventually beaten to death by a mob. Wells' text conforms to the "mad scientist" tradition and comments on how the recent discovery of X-rays broke down the perceived physical borders that defined interiority and exteriority (Kumar 2023, pp. 186–87). Themes of greed, the illusion of morality, and alienation are also explored. The 1933 film loosely follows Wells' original plot, as Dr. Jack Griffin goes on a killing spree as various attempts are made to capture him. His motivations are in part explained by the chemical experimentation that led to his invisibility; the inclusion of the fictional drug 'monocaine' in the potion drives him insane. Police shoot him and he dies in a hospital, his final words declaring his regret. The science behind the "invisibly" of Adrian Griffin in the 2020 version removes chemical sciences in favor of advanced camera optic technology. What renders a person invisible is not something that can be consumed but something that can be worn—a full-body suit. The change certainly speaks to the modernization of mechanization and development of increasingly powerful computer technology, but it also affords another narrative possibility—anyone can don the suit and become the 'Invisible Man' and then return to their regular form.

While many would classify the novel as science fiction, it is also known by the more antiquated British term "scientific romance" (Suhadi et al. 2022, p. 1215). The irony of this nomenclature becomes profound when applied in consideration to the 2020 adaptation, which bears more resemblance to psychological horror than any kind of romance despite the inclusion of what, to outside appearances, appears to be an ideal romantic relationship between Cecilia and Adrian. In the novel, Griffin is ultimately burdened by his invisibility not only because it is nonreversible, but because it is not complete; the food he consumes makes him grotesquely visible again (Wells 2018). "An invisible man cannot benefit from being invisible so long as he lives within an actual material body, even a transparent one", Tamara Ketabgian notes regarding the biological functions that make Griffin's total invisibility impossible (Ketabgian 2020, p. 298). Yet, in Whannell's version, the material body enables the possibility. Unlike Wells' Griffin, who requires clothing to cover his invisibility when he wants to interact with others, the reverse is true for those who wear the suit in the 2020 film. They must strip naked and erase their features from head to toe. Obscurity is tantamount to the Gothic genre, where narrative tension often relies on the events that occur during a character's search for truth. The enigmatic nature of an object or experience is tantamount to the inspiration of terror, which both the Gothic and horror genres depend. Edmund Burke, whose work influenced early Gothic authors, even says it is necessary: "When we know the full extent of any danger when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes" (Burke 2020, pp. 58–59). The characters in *The Invisible Man* literally cannot accustom their vision to the wearer of the invisibility suit. Even if they do acknowledge that an invisible force is present, the Invisible Man only speaks once, further shrouding their identity.[7] The lack of perception allows the 'Invisible Man' to inspire terror, but it also accentuates another lack of discernment—the abuse Cecilia faced and continues to endure.

One of the tenets of the psychological horror subgenre is the protagonist's seemingly unfounded paranoia or perceived "insanity", with the ultimate fear located in madness rather than death (Blake and Bailey 2013). *The Invisible Man* rejects such a distinction. Cecilia is facing death at the hands of her abuser, but because it cannot be seen, because *he* cannot be seen, her mental safety is made paramount in the eyes of the other characters who believe her biggest threat is herself. When the other characters reject the reality of her abuse, she is silenced like so many Gothic heroines before. The over-sentimentality and imagination of women in Gothic texts are often cited as the reason for their experience with

supernatural events but also the cause of the literal violence and manipulation they are subject to. Everyone around her dismisses Cecilia's claims: her sister, Emily; the friend and police officer she takes shelter with, James; and a slew of doctors and guards. After Cecilia insists to James that Adrian is alive and stalking her, he responds, "Adrian will haunt you if you let him".[8] The dismissal of her trauma not only places blame on Cecilia but also reflects a common misconception about domestic violence—that the victim can leave and stop the abuse at any time. The opposite is often true given the social systems in place.

3. The Horror of Disbelief

Whannell's attempt to promote a better understanding of the deceptive dynamics of intimate partner violence and the cultural ideas that support its continued prevalence draws on the audience's familiarity with horror-adjacent genres, including the Gothic, domestic noir, and the paranormal. Not only do these allusions contribute to psychological and thematic impact, but they also position the domestic space as the ultimate site of terror. Even when Cecilia is outside of the home, she is tethered to the horrific events that took place in the supposedly "safe spaces" she is meant to reside in. The metaphor of inhabitation, of the house, and of the roles society prescribes to the women inside them, crystalizes in the Gothic where the threat of "possession" is fluid (Wallace 2016, pp. 74–75). A similar premise presents itself in domestic noir and paranormal texts, which likewise critique the pervasive nature of control and oppression alongside the complexities of victimhood and survival.

If, as Charlotte Beyer claims, domestic noir relies on "illustrating the invisibility of the female experience" (Beyer 2020, p. 71), the visual removal of the physical body of Cecilia's abuser emphasizes this absence. The audience knows something is present and harming her, but they are not always sure what (or rather who) that "thing" is. The absence of the "thing" to the viewer seems obvious, but not for the characters within the film. Horror more broadly, unlike the genre of domestic noir, directly calls upon the audience to experience the "visceral fear" the abuser causes their victims (Hornbeck 2016, p. 691). The physicality of Elizabeth Moss' stunt work and performance as Cecilia contributes to the required visceral quality, but so does the film's reliance on demonstrating a female experience of intimate partner violence.

The paranormal subgenre, with its stories of spectral hauntings and poltergeist activity, fits readily into *The Invisible Man's* narrative. Adrian's first scenes as the reinvented monster reveal the subgenre's intertextuality. In an early, initially mundane scene, Cecilia prepares breakfast for James and his daughter Sydney, chopping mushrooms while bacon and eggs already crackle on the stove. She walks away, but the camera lingers on the kitchen, where the knife she was using shakes before being pulled off the counter. Notably, it does not clatter to the ground. The stove burner's flame rises higher, the food begins to burn, and a fire starts. Cecilia and Sydney laugh off the event as absent-mindedness.[9] Without the title of the film already guiding the audience's interpretation of the scene, it could just as easily fit into a *haunted house* film. A locked door is shown opening and closing by an unseen hand shortly after. Footsteps are heard, but no figure appears on the screen.[10] The house *is* haunted, but the 'ghost' is living. A parallel series of events in Wells' text suggests that Whannell's introduction of Adrian as the 'invisible man' here is intentional. Mrs. Bunting hears footsteps and eventually wakes her husband, the vicar, believing that there is a burglar in the house. She sees a lit candle and an open drawer but no person. A door opens and shuts seemingly on its own. The next morning, innkeeper Mrs. Hall sees clothes and sheets move by an invisible force, and a chair is thrown at her, leading her to declare to her husband that "spirits" are to blame (Wells 2018, pp. 67–71). The similar application of fire in the movie as well as the echoed door scene not only pays homage to the original text, but the absence of any witnesses to these events, unlike in the novel, suggests that the audience is the intended bystander. While this begins as relatively harmless voyeurism, when Adrian begins to use violence, the audience is forced to confront the realities of abuse and question how they would react if Cecilia's situation were real. The terror of the plot

is not just in how Whannell uses horror tropes but in how he positions the audience as a silent witness.

As Elizabeth Jean Hornbeck points out in her article exploring *The Shining* as a Gothic film about intimate partner violence, "Ambiguity regarding the supernatural versus the merely abnormal is embedded in Gothic storytelling in that the two are frequently conflated" (Hornbeck 2016, p. 692). Such ambiguity is absent in *The Invisible Man*. The movie makes it a point to show that the entity stalking her is human very early on. Adrian's breath is seen in the cold night air just over 30 min into the film.[11] Immediately following this revelation, the viewer is reminded of just how dangerous a physical tormenter could be. As Cecilia and James' daughter Sydney sleeps in their shared bed, the covers are slowly pulled off, revealing their vulnerable bodies.[12] In addition to evoking yet another paranormal trope, the penetration of an unseen but very real male presence in the sanctity of the bedroom seems intentional, especially when a repeated camera flash begins to illuminate the scene. Adrian is taking pictures of the two women sleeping. In a digital age where smartphones are used every day to distribute revenge porn and reputations can be ruined online in seconds, Whannell reminds the audience of the dangers of the technologies in their own lives without having to say a word.

In the female Gothic tradition in particular, the heroine is often persecuted by a male villain, who begins as a protector and becomes a sexual aggressor. Not all of these women are sexually assaulted, but the threat of such violence is constantly present (Münderlein 2021, p. 128). Cecilia and Adrian's relationship evokes this trope. The technology that affords his continued abuse also makes him additionally sexually threatening. The risk of an unseen attacker finds horrific poignancy when Cecilia discovers she is pregnant with Adrian's child. The camera focuses on Cecilia's face in a quarter profile in bright, direct light. She slowly turns her head to the nurse, away from the nurse, toward the camera, and further into shadow as she is informed of her pregnancy. Cecilia insists that there must be a mistake, but the nurse says the pregnancy is recent: "It must have been sometime in the last month".[13] Cecilia's shocked stare reaches the conclusion just before the audience as eerie music begins to swell—Adrian may have raped her as the 'invisible man' while she was unconscious. Earlier in the film, Cecilia learns that Adrian was secretly drugging her after she passes out at a job interview and is informed by hospital staff that she had diazepam in her system,[14] which is frightening enough, but presumably, he also could have done so to facilitate his sexual assault. Even if this is not the case, his brother, Tom, reveals to Cecilia that Adrian knew that she was secretly taking birth control and replaced the pills with placebos.

The exploration of the complexities of female identity and agency, especially against systemic oppression and the domestic space, is a hallmark of the Gothic genre. Reproductive coercion, which removes reproductive autonomy, is a well-documented (Grace and Anderson 2018, pp. 317–472) form of abuse inside and outside of intimate partner relationships. While changing opinions on abortion and reproductive freedom are reflected in the Gothic genre today (Valerius 2013, pp. 27–29), a conversation *The Invisible Man* joins, confrontational examination of female embodiment and maternal abjection haunts the Gothic as a whole. Much of the horror of the female experience in the Gothic is about lack of control, but it is also concerned with how male bodies are inherently afraid of being feminine (Kamm 2023, pp. 173–74). Women's reproductive role is thus a frequent theme. Cecilia's pregnancy allows for reflection on both rape and reproductive coercion. Her experience emphasizes the tenuous control women maintain over their bodies in societies dominated by patriarchal systems. If the Gothic's depictions of sexual assault and abuse can be read as a "permeable membrane" that evokes the misogyny women face in the real world every day (Mulvey-Roberts 2016, p. 117), so too might the amniotic sac. The film never reveals what decision Cecilia makes about her baby; presumably, she is still pregnant at its conclusion. The narrative ambiguity calls upon the audience to draw their own conclusion and repress their judgment. With its fragile capacity to nourish life, the amniotic sac also contains and restricts. A space for life located inside the body of another,

the occupied womb is inherently fragile. Her pregnancy is indicative of women's bodies as sites of contested power, a Gothic trope that still holds relevance today.

"Gaslighting" is largely recognized as a form of misogyny. Broadly defined, "gaslighting" is the continued denial of someone's experience through psychological manipulation with the intent to make them doubt their reality (Stark 2019, pp. 221–22). By altering her environment and damaging her relationships, Adrian, as the "invisible man", *is* gaslighting Cecilia (Payne 2022, p. 9). However, he is not the only one. Tom insists that Adrian is dead, despite knowing full well he is not, and makes multiple attempts to discredit Cecilia in the presence of others. He tries to convince Cecilia herself of this fiction. He tells her, "You think about it. He came up with the perfect way to torture you even in death. The only thing more brilliant than inventing something that makes you invisible was not inventing it and making you think he did".[15] Adrian's persecution of Cecilia after "death" is insidious not only because of his machinations but also because he relies on the social systems in place. Every time Cecilia voices her concerns that her abuser is still in her life, they either dismiss her claims or are killed before their voices can join the fray in a sound of protest loud enough that people might listen.

Part of the viewer's discomfort with Cecilia's gaslighting comes from recognition. Cynthia A. Stark identifies this form of collective "gaslighting" as "a mode of psychological oppression" that supports the larger social structure of patriarchal norms capable of being performed even unwittingly (Stark 2019, pp. 222, 230). Adrian sends an email to Emily from Cecilia's account, calling Emily "suffocating", so when Cecilia appears on her doorstep desperate for help, Emily angrily dismisses her. Cecilia is completely baffled and denies it, saying, "Someone is doing this to me; he's doing this to me". Emily's response is to suggest medication and slam the door in her face.[16] The "proof" is logged on their computers, making Cecilia's innocence hard to deny, another poignant reminder of how technology can aid and abet abuse. Emily's reaction also suggests a reliance on the medical system, a space notorious for its historical gender bias. Unlike Wells' text, where the villagers are quick to support one another even when claims of an 'Invisible Man' are made, modern society is individualized to a dangerous degree. Part of the reason for this is the social structures that facilitate gaslighting. As Paige L. Sweet argues, gaslighting is a "sociological rather than psychological phenomenon" that relies on the existence of socially and institutionally promoted inequalities (Sweet 2019, p. 851). In turning the problem outward and away from her doorstep to a regulated collective, Emily avoids the problem and unknowingly contributes to not only Adrian's abuse but the systems of inequity already in place. Systems that she falls victim to as well.

After agreeing to meet Cecilia at a restaurant following a pleading call, Emily sits at the table, arms crossed, clearly irritated. At this point, Cecilia possesses physical proof that Adrian's invisibility is possible, having gone back to his house and discovered the suit in the basement lab. The audience never learns if Emily will believe Cecilia's new claims of proof because just as Cecilia begins to tell her about Adrian's camera suit, she stares in horror at a knife hanging in midair. Her throat is slit before the knife (the same one from the early kitchen "poltergeist" scene) is thrust into Cecilia's hand. A woman screams in horror before the sound begins to muffle, and even Cecilia's scream is silenced as she is tackled to the floor by a male waiter and then handcuffed by a male police officer.[17] Multiple women's voices are silenced in the scene, and Emily's permanently in death. The next scene shows Cecilia dragged into a locked psychiatric cell, screaming, "He killed her!" and "He's right there!" as she begs the doctors and officers to believe her. The camera lingers menacingly on a corner of her cell. The guard locks the door. As Cecilia loses consciousness, Adrian's voice is heard whispering, "Surprise", just as the scene fades to black.[18] Cecilia is trapped, again, with her abuser. This is the first time Adrian has spoken to Cecilia since he began stalking her. It's a calculated choice given that he has made it impossible for her to speak and be listened to anymore.

After pointing out that Cecilia is framed for murder and unable to access the money left to her in Adrian's trust, Tom offers Cecilia her only chance of freedom from criminal

prosecution—have the baby and go back to Adrian. The moment is not only horrific because of what she would have to accept, but it reveals Tom and Adrian have been working together. Tom wasn't just "gaslighting" Cecilia; he was actively contributing to her abuse. Hopeless, she tries to kill herself by slitting her wrists with a stolen pen before Adrian stops her; even this escape is thwarted. In their struggle, she manages to stab him multiple times, damaging the suit so its cloaking technology temporarily fails. Only by carving herself open is Cecilia able to prove her innocence and Adrian's existence; the guard that responds to the commotion sees Adrian's human shape as the camera flickers.[19]

Both Cecilia and Adrian manage to escape the hospital but return to James' house, centering another pivotal event in the domestic space. Adrian attacks Sydney and then James before Cecilia uses a fire extinguisher to expose his physical form before shooting him four times in the chest. However, when she peels back the mask, it's Tom. As previously discussed, the instability of the domestic space in the Gothic literature is well-established. Instead of being a safe space for female characters, the home functions as a cage designed to restrict their intellectual, emotional, and physical movements (Hock-Soon 2015, p. 4). Notably, Cecilia is never shown occupying a home all her own. She lives in Adrian's house, then takes up residence in James' home. She is never seen setting foot inside Emily's apartment either, relegated to the entryway, unable to cross the threshold into the only female-dominated space of the film. The Gothic house is not just a space of restraint. When it facilitates character renewal after trauma, it becomes a place of liberating potential (Hock-Soon 2015, p. 22). Cecilia's redemption requires her to defeat the male presence in these domestic spaces. The brutal beating James takes from Tom renders him helpless and unconscious. His daughter watches in horror as the male figure meant to protect her and their space is beaten down by unseen force. Both of their salvations come from the "madwoman" of the house, whose defeat of Tom not only proves the existence of the suit but metaphorically positions her to seize control of her own life. Nevertheless, redemption and healing are not possible yet; she must assert power over the other looming presence in her life, Adrian, by claiming dominion over the home he used to control her.

A key feature that emerged as the Gothic genre developed was the portrayal of women as restricted or trapped by patriarchal structures. However, these are cages they try to break, or at least rattle (Hogle 2014, p. 4). Cecilia dismantles hers completely. After Adrian is found alive in his home, he spins the narrative that Tom kept him prisoner and faked his death. Cecilia refuses to believe this, "He is not the victim here",[20] and insists Adrian did everything before she shot Tom. Again, no one believes her. Not even her intended ally, James, yet again. She must return to the original traumatic domestic space. Cecilia ultimately gains control by using Adrian's toxic masculinity, technology, and home against him. Under the pretense of reconciliation, she returns to Adrian's house, this time wearing a wire with James listening outside. On her earlier visit, the house's interior is seen largely in shadow with multiple statues covered in white sheets, the ghosts of her former life. Now, the house is bright and inhabited, again serving as a façade meant to disarm her and conceal Adrian's true nature. The two sit down for dinner, and the camera perspective briefly shifts to the grainy footage of a security camera's partially obscured view, a time stamp running in the corner, before returning to eye-level view.[21] After Adrian refuses to confess, Cecilia begins to cry, and he comforts her, insisting he is the only one who can help her. She asks to go clean herself up. The camera does not linger on Cecilia but on Adrian, who holds his fork and knife. The knife is brought to his neck, and after a brief, silent struggle, his throat is slit. The camera returns to the security camera point-of-view to reveal no one else visible in the room. Cecilia returns a few moments later and reacts in shock, dialing 911 and hysterically asking for help. She moves out of the sight of the security camera and immediately stops crying. She stares directly into Adrian's eyes and gives him her final words, "Surprise", as he bleeds out.[22]

4. Conclusions

In weaponizing the very systems that kept her oppressed—the suit, the domestic space, the security camera, and even the police—she forges a new path, presumably to freedom. By using the suit to become 'invisible' herself, Cecilia copies the technique Adrian used to murder her sister to make his death look like a suicide. Her knowledge of the exact locations of the security cameras, the same ones Adrian used to spy on her and control her actions, helps facilitate his downfall this time. Combined with James as an auditory witness, she has a seemingly airtight digital alibi. In using the very methods and technologies that positioned her as "crazy" and a liar earlier in the film, Cecilia regains control of her narrative. Like the suicide she attempted earlier, blood marks her assertion of power. Blood is required for such a story after all; if abuse of women in Gothic texts does indeed serve as a metaphorical "membrane" for the discrimination and harassment their real-world counterparts face (Mulvey-Roberts 2016, p. 117), the thin layer of connective tissue must be severed to promote change. Additionally, it must occur in the physical home that kept her oppressed during her abuse. Adrian's mansion is a cage that becomes an open womb when Cecilia spills blood within its walls.

Adrian's death is a dramatic and significant departure from Wells' text, yet it's a conclusion supported not only by its inherently Gothic trappings but by its creation in a post-#MeToo, 21st-century America. In the 1897 narrative, after being caught by one man, there is a "simultaneous rush upon the struggle" that turns "savage" quickly. No words are spoken by these townsmen, "only a sound of blows and feet and heavy breathing". Even when the angry mob manages to collect themselves and stop their attack on the still-invisible man, the damage is already done. No one knows who gave the wound or blow that caused Griffin's death (Wells 2018, p. 168). While the scene can be read as a critique of mob mentality in its brutality, it acknowledges the potential power of the collective to overcome adversity. Wells asks the reader to consider how they would approach such a villain as the Invisible Man. More broadly, the conclusion is a meditation on human morality. In death Griffin becomes visible again, becoming not a frightening figure but "naked and pitiful", a victim of a horrific crime. A man cries for Griffin's face to be covered, the expression of "anger and dismay" upon it too terrible (Wells 2018, p. 169)—and too accusatory. Killed by a "crowd of ignorant and excited people" and both "betrayed and unpitied", Wells' ending is condemnatory of both parties. While Adrian's death may be silent as well, no sound is heard as his throat is slit. The moment is not one of blind rage but of clearheaded precision. Previously in the film, Cecilia admitted her mind was an unsafe space devoid of autonomy: "[Adrian] controlled how I looked and what I wore and what I ate. Additionally, then it was controlling when I left the house and what I said and eventually what I thought".[23] The conscious decision to kill Adrian alone is not just a practical one—it marks Cecilia's reclamation of her mind.

The mob that destroys Wells' Griffin serves as a commentary on the social approach to the monstrous other. While they attack the invisible figure, they are assaulting the unknown. Only when his body becomes visible again does the true horror of their actions set in. In Whannell's iteration, society turns itself away from the problem rather than confronting it, with similarly violent consequences. As many MeToo horror films dramatize, the social institutions meant to aid victims and support all members of society are ultimately unsuccessful (Platts 2024, p. 167). Cecilia's story is no different. The people and social structures meant to protect her in the past are ineffective and inefficient. She loses her job, her friends, and her family. Police refuse to believe her story and then arrest her, leaving her in the hands of the healthcare system that imprisons her with her abuser. When Cecilia escapes, she becomes a criminal and a social fugitive, identities she embraces to become a powerful force. Her experience with intimate partner violence technologically, physically, and emotionally isolated her. Adrian had access to her phone and computer. He largely kept her in the house to monitor her activities. Even after his assumed death, she is alone in her belief that he is alive. She is the only one who believes in her innocence in Emily's murder. Her singular control of Adrian's death serves as the logical conclusion to the theme

and reiterates that she cannot trust anyone to decide her future. She reaffirms her autonomy by embracing this fact. Cecilia removes the suit after killing Adrian not just to give herself an alibi but to force her abuser to confront that she alone is responsible for his death. As they make relatively unblinking eye contact in their final moments together, seeing each other in totality for the first time, the invisible power dynamic is reversed. Adrian's face does not need to be covered, and Cecilia does not look away from the corpse. His death needs to be seen by both her and the audience because he is still the monster, even if Cecilia is the murderer.

Even before Adrian's use of the tech suit and her sister's death, Cecilia's world seems made up of men who wish to control her and refuse to hear her. The movie's plot is not just about the obvious "toxic patriarchal attitudes that exhibit themselves within male behavior" as explored through intimate partner violence (Payne 2022, p. 9), but also how social structures that appear to be helpful can be equally dangerous. Perhaps this is why at the end of the movie, Cecilia refuses to admit to James that she intentionally planned to kill Adrian. She looks him directly in the eyes, holding a duffle bag with the only working invisibility suit inside, something she does not attempt to conceal, before simply stating, "I just didn't know he was that unstable".[24] The words echo what others said about her after Emily's death. She manages to twist the systems to her advantage, but it is unclear if her victory is a positive one. After all, she decides to steal a key piece of technological advancement for unknown reasons, reinforcing Wells' original theme about the dangers of unchecked scientific progress and the potential negative reception of such technology by the masses. Wells' text explores how scientific invention can corrupt those who wield it, something Whannell's ending also suggests. The final frame shows Cecilia closing her eyes. Up until this point, the lens, and the audience, have predominantly seen them open in an often panicked gaze. With a tech suit of her own that evens the playing field between her and the systems that once repressed her, she finally feels safe enough to close them peacefully, but at what cost? Whannell's *The Invisible Man* asks the audience to consider how technology and social structures empower survivors while simultaneously blurring the lines between victim and victor. Cecilia's transformation encapsulates modern Gothic's focus on ambiguity and the insidiousness of unchecked systems of control.

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Notes

1. The endnotes provide the citation for specific evidence from the film to avoid convoluting the text with the movie's timestamps.
2. The opening scene does hold similarities to the Bluebeard legend and *The Castle of Otranto*. While these evocations speak to the film's intentions as a modern Gothic horror story, they are beyond the scope of this essay.
3. *IMDB* gives the full character's name as Cecilia Kass, and Whannell himself refers to her as Cecilia in interviews, so I have chosen to use that name over the nickname she is more commonly called in the film.
4. *The Shining*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1980) (Los Angeles: Warner Brothers); *100 Feet*, directed by Eric Red (2008) (Voltage Picture and The Asylum); *Crimson Peak*, directed by Guillermo del Toro (2016) (Los Angeles: Universal Pictures).
5. *Insidious: The Last Key*, directed by Adam Robitel (2018) and written by Leigh Whannell (Los Angeles: Universal Pictures). The film explores the abusive upbringing of psychic Elise Rainer and her father's predation of other women.
6. For the sake of clarity, unless otherwise noted, all following references to *The Invisible Man* will indicate a discussion of the 2020 film.
7. The confusion is felt outside the narrative as well. After online debate and speculation about who did what acts while in the suit, director Leigh Whannell went on the record to clarify that Adrian is in the suit for the entire movie—with one exception. He says that Tom is only in the suit when Cecilia discovers him attacking Sydney and James (Nemiroff 2020).
8. *The Invisible Man*, 35:22.
9. *The Invisible Man*, 26:10–26:46.
10. *The Invisible Man*, 27:37–28:18; 30:38.

[11] *The Invisible Man*, 31:32–31:40; 1:27:12–33.
[12] *The Invisible Man*, 32:15–33:00.
[13] *The Invisible Man*, 1:18:02–1:18:22.
[14] *The Invisible Man*, 39:07.
[15] *The Invisible Man*, 42:43–42:57.
[16] *The Invisible Man*, 45:04–46:15.
[17] *The Invisible Man*, 1:11:45–1:12:54
[18] *The Invisible Man*, 1:13:14–1:14:45.
[19] *The Invisible Man*, 1:27:01–1:27:12.
[20] *The Invisible Man*, 1:40:41–1:40:55.
[21] *The Invisible Man*, 1:44:50.
[22] *The Invisible Man*, 1:46:08–1:51:09.
[23] *The Invisible Man*, 16:22–16:48.
[24] *The Invisible Man*, 1:51:27–1:51:51.

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