

GENRE AND FANTASY:
MELODRAMA, HORROR, AND THE GOTHIC IN
MARTIN SCORSESE'S *CAPE FEAR* (1991)

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Postmodern approaches to genre have, in the last two decades, deeply changed our way of conceptualising film genre. Earlier intrinsic perspectives, such as structuralist and psychoanalytic ones, have been replaced by historicist studies mainly focusing on the role of institutions—the industry and the critical establishment—and audiences. My intention in this paper is to retrieve the psychoanalytic concept of “fantasy” as a valid one to define different genres and also to differentiate among films that apparently belong to the same genre. For that purpose, I will take Scorsese's film *Cape Fear* as a test case and will try to broach *Cape Fear*'s articulation of fantasy scenarios along generic lines. The paper will centre on melodramatic and paranoid horror fantasies, which *Cape Fear* shares with other psycho-thrillers, to finally dwell on a particular gothic fantasy of cultural regression that sets this film apart from other instances of the genre of the psycho-thriller.

KEY WORDS: film studies, genre theory, psychoanalytic fantasy, melodrama, psycho-thriller, gothic.

I

From the moment of its inception, film genre criticism has moved alongside more general trends and fashions in the critical arena.¹ Thus, formal and structural approaches to genre coexisted in the 70s and early 80s with ideological analyses, giving way in the late 80s and 90s to historicist studies.² The concept of genre itself has mutated, and from being a fixed and stable textual property—a notion indebted to classical and neoclassical theories—it is now seen as a postmodern multi-dimensional phenomenon characterised by mutability, flexibility and hybridity. Probably, the most comprehensive theoretical endeavour in contemporary film genre criticism has been Rick Altman's *Film/Genre* (1999), where he adopts a pragmatic view of genre considering it a multi-discursive phenomenon whose diverse meanings derive from the uses it is put to by different instances, mainly the industry, critical institutions and audiences. Approaches such as Altman's are contributing

1. This paper has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology (BFF2001-1775). I would also like to thank Celestino Deleyto for his suggestions and comments.

2. For a more comprehensive summary of film genre theory and criticism, see Altman (1999: 13–29) and Neale (2000: 207–30).

to a rapid change in our way of thinking about film genre. Yet the sheer speed of these changes runs the risk of obliterating earlier perspectives that, while being equally productive, may not have been sufficiently explored and may not deserve to be summarily superseded. In my view, this is the case of psychoanalysis, which still remains central for the theorisation of film genres and for the analysis of individual genre texts.³ My intention here is to take Scorsese's *Cape Fear* as a test case to pursue a conception of genre that will take into account the psychoanalytic notion of "fantasy," defined as a psychical register that represents the reality of the unconscious.

In their seminal article "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality" (1968), Laplanche and Pontalis delineated the concept of fantasy and gave it the function of structuring desire and sexuality, a function carried out through fantasy's ability to stage a perceptual scenario in which the subject participates actively without being assigned any fixed position. In an article entitled "Fantasia" (1984), Elizabeth Cowie applied these arguments to the film text, considered as a form of public fantasy, and she advanced the interesting idea that conventions of representation are the means used to rework a private fantasy for public consumption. In her own words: "Conventions are thus the means by which the structuring of desire is represented in public forms, inasmuch as, following the arguments of Laplanche and Pontalis earlier, fantasy is the *mise-en-scène* of desire. What is necessary for any public forms of fantasy, for their collective consumption, is not universal objects of desire, but a setting of desiring in which we can find our place(s). And these places will devolve, as in the original fantasies, on positions of desire: active or passive, feminine or masculine, mother or son, father or daughter" (87).

Cowie's thesis allows for the reading of any film as psychoanalytic fantasy and for the fact that different genres, marked by different conventions, may accommodate particular types or structures of fantasy. Fantasy may then be seen as a defining generic component. Yet the function of fantasy may go further, since generic products trade on preserving a balance between repetition and variation of established formulae. In this sense, not only different genres, but also films belonging to the same genre could be differentiated according to the fantasies they activate from the existing repertoire. As I will show in what follows, *Cape Fear* activates typically melodramatic and paranoid horror fantasies, and in this respect, it is a fairly representative psycho-thriller. But if the film shares this generic identity with many other titles, I will also demonstrate that it nevertheless has a distinctive atmosphere of *fin de siècle* cultural malaise that is unique. My contention will be that the specific fantasy scenarios that the film activates work to establish both generic connections and differences, and that it is a particular gothic fantasy of cultural regression that marks the film off from other examples of the psycho-thriller. In the case of *Cape Fear*, this variation factor, actualised through a gothic fantasy, can also be linked to the fact that this film has a peculiar status, since it is undoubtedly a commercial genre film but its director is an undisputed auteur who left his own authorial mark of distinctiveness on the text. In this sense, Scorsese's choice of the gothic accords with one of his major preoccupations as film-maker: the exploration of the dark side of U. S. American life, myths and human behaviour.

3. Mark in this respect the work carried out by Elsaesser (1972) and Nowell-Smith (1987) on the genre of melodrama, or by Clover (1992) and Creed (1993) on the horror film, just to mention some examples.

Cape Fear was a big budget Spielberg production that represented Martin Scorsese's entry into mainstream Hollywood. In it Scorsese updated John Lee Thompson's noir B-thriller *Cape Fear* (1962), a film based on the novel by John D. MacDonald *The Executioners* (1957). As declared by Scorsese in different interviews, his aim behind the *Cape Fear* project—a commission rather than a personal endeavour—was double: to thank Universal Studios for backing the production of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988)⁴ and to take up the challenge of dealing with the conventions of the thriller, a genre he loves, in order “to see whether it would look like everybody's thriller or if I could give it something extra” (cit. Fuller 1991: 17). This second aim meant that Scorsese had to make the story his own and give it a distinct flavour in terms of treatment of themes and style. For that purpose, and with the help of scriptwriter Wesley Strick, he introduced moral tensions, replacing, for example, the sanitised version of the Bowden family featuring in Thompson's *Cape Fear* by a more contemporary U. S. American nightmare: the dysfunctional family. He also gave the film his characteristic edgy visual style, further reinforcing the thematic and stylistic continuity expected from an auteur with the presence of his then “fetish” actor, Robert De Niro. Yet, in spite of Scorsese's personal appropriation of the staple conventions of the thriller and of his updating of Thompson's version, critics and reviewers were quick to note the film's unstable status, hovering in between the commercial genre film and the auteur creation (see Travers 1991; Schatz 1993: 35; Hinson 1999; Ebert 2002). While in general terms the film was praised as an excellent thriller, many reviewers voiced their disappointment at its being a Scorsese film: more was to be expected from such a celebrated original creator than just a rehashing of conventional formulae.⁵

The focus that Scorsese gave to the story, emphasising the shattering effects on the Bowden family—a suburban middle-class affluent family—of a psychopath's brutal invasion of their intimacy, links the film to a group of Hollywood products portraying criminal actions, structured around suspense and articulating postmodern cultural anxieties about sexuality, femininity, masculinity, parenthood and family life. Some of the most popular titles within this group could be Adrian Lyne's *Nine and a Half Weeks* (1986) and *Fatal Attraction* (1987), John Schlesinger's *Pacific Heights* (1990), Martin Scorsese's *Cape Fear* (1991), Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992), Curtis Hanson's *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992), Barbet Schroeder's *Single White Female* (1992), Alan J. Pakula's *Consenting Adults* (1992) and David Fincher's *Seven* (1995). It was the tremendous commercial success of, and cultural and media controversy originated by Adrian Lyne's films that ensured a steady stock of similar products in the early 1990s. Whether these films constitute a cycle, a sub-genre of the broader category “thriller” or an individual genre, has not been sufficiently theorised.⁶ Yet, in spite of differences in definition and appreciation, most critics

4. See the documentary *The Making of Cape Fear* (2001) in the Universal DVD.

5. The film's critical reception reproduces the characteristically modern incompatibility between the concept of the author and that of genre, while also pointing towards the problematic status of and place occupied by the cinematic author in commercial postclassical cinema, where, for some critics, the author has survived as a marketing strategy rather than a humanist concept (Wyatt 1994: 61; Corrigan 1991: 106), or as a disembodied and fantasised position providing a site of pleasure and identification for audiences (Grant 2000).

6. For two divergent views on the generic status of the psycho-thriller, see Luzón (2002) and Grant (1998).

and reviewers usually invoke the thriller and the horror genres—mainly the branch of contemporary horror inaugurated by Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), leading into the horror sub-genre of the "slasher" that emerged in the late 1970s with Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978)—as the basic ones from which the psycho-thriller has developed. My argument is that these approaches tend to ignore the psycho-thriller's indebtedness to melodrama.

II

One of the defining characteristics of these films is precisely their interest in exploring the dissatisfactions latent in the nuclear family and in dramatising culturally repressed psychosexual conflicts within this social institution, an interest which links them in an essential way to domestic melodrama. Consequently, Scorsese's *Cape Fear* and other so-called psycho-thrillers seem to me to be better defined as a combination of melodramatic and horror scenarios than as a combination of thriller and horror, since the effects of suspense and the element of criminality provided by the thriller are equally central components of the horror genre. As a matter of fact, melodrama and horror are two genres that seem to have many points in common. Stage melodrama and the gothic novel, this latter being horror's parent genre, emerged in the same historical period: the second half of the eighteenth century. Peter Brooks has argued that, in a period of profound social and moral changes resulting in the desacralisation of ethics, these genres dramatised the importance of signalling where the new realm of ethical meanings and values now resided. Both genres deal with similar subjects and are preoccupied with evil, yet the main difference would be that melodrama ultimately manages to expel evil from the world and make the new ethical imperatives legible and visible, something that the darker and much more uncertain world of the gothic does not fully achieve (1991: 63–64). In this sense, it seems quite pertinent that a contemporary genre preoccupied with the interplay between identity, sexuality and the family, such as the psycho-thriller, would modulate the relatively simplistic and Manichean stance of melodrama with the ambiguous position of horror in order to produce narratives that are more in keeping with the uncertainties that pervade our postmodern world.

It is precisely *Cape Fear*'s double indebtedness to melodrama and horror—two genres characterised by spectacle and excess—that endows the film with a densely textured narrative in which cinematic language contributes symptomatically to the creation of a visceral atmosphere of claustrophobia and paranoia. The film uses staple horror techniques—subjective camera and significant use of off-screen space—together with unrealistic framing, editing and *mise-en-scène* choices. Some of these are unmotivated high- and low-angle shots, canted and skewed camera angles, obsessive zoom-ins and close-ups, extreme close-ups and detail shots, shock editing or shock cuts, and screen space suffused in blocks of red, green and yellow. With these stylistic devices *Cape Fear* manages to offer a general panorama of progressive degeneration and decline, to emphasise grotesque physicality and to transform the human body into a spectacle of *grand guignol*. In addition, the figure of psychopath Max Cady (Robert De Niro), in its apparent invulnerability, combination of superhuman/infrahuman qualities and punitive actions, recalls the psychopaths Michael Myers, Jason and Freddy Krueger, discussed by Carol Clover in her study of the slasher (1992).

On the other hand, as is the case with melodrama's expressive *mise-en-scène*, in *Cape Fear*, stylistic excess suggests excess of signification, also embodied in Cady's spectacular tattooed body, extreme violence and superhuman nature. Excess in melodrama has been explained as a result of sexual repression and displacement (Elsaesser 1972; Nowell Smith 1987). In *Cape Fear*, it is the highly sexualised figure of Cady that can be seen as the psychoanalytic projection of the culturally censored desires of all the members of the Bowden family, much in the same way as, for example, the drapes in Vincente Minnelli's *The Cobweb* (1955) can be interpreted as a blank text on which the different characters inscribe and project their repressed desires.

In the film, melodramatic fantasies, such as the Freudian family romance and the seduction fantasy,⁷ are stereotypically inscribed through the female characters of Danny (Juliette Lewis) and Leigh (Jessica Lange). In fact, it could be said that Danny in the initial moments of the film, and her mother Leigh, after the only lovemaking scene with her husband later on, summon Cady from the past out of hostility against Sam (Nick Nolte) and out of their own sense of loss. Danny's scene of invocation signals from the start the unstable ontological and temporal status of the story told in *Cape Fear*, that is, its fantasy nature. The oneiric credit sequence, which connects Danny narratively and visually to Cady, introduces the story as Danny's flashback. This is a framing device that activates the narrative as Danny's literary reminiscence, but is it a reminiscence of real past events or of imagined past events? In other words, could this story be the memory that, we are told, Danny has to write about for homework? And, since it is conjured up in her mind, is it real or fictional? This ambiguity parallels that of the primal fantasies, whose status hovers between that of being supposedly historical past occurrences and present imaginary re-enactments of such occurrences. Danny's words in this initial narrative frame—her reminiscence—mystify the past by presenting it as a golden age of innocent childhood. This is quite ironic, since the picture that the spectator is offered of the Bowden family even before Cady irrupts into their lives is far from idyllic. In this sense, Danny's reminiscence may account for an ideal model of childhood and family life, as much cultural as private, which is forever lost or has never really existed.

Leigh's invocation of Cady takes place some time later, quite significantly after the only lovemaking scene between husband and wife in the whole film. The photographic negatives used to visualise their lovemaking, together with Leigh's action of walking as if mesmerised to her boudoir while Sam sleeps soundly, connote lack in the Bowden's married life and Leigh's sexual dissatisfaction. The moment when she puts on red lipstick in front of the mirror suggests that she is unconsciously preparing herself for a more exciting encounter.

7. I refer to these fantasies as melodramatic since they centre on the domestic sphere of childhood relationships and traumas linked to Oedipality. Laplanche and Pontalis described the seduction fantasy—summarised as “a father seduces a daughter”—as an original fantasy that attempts to provide a representation of the origin and upsurge of sexuality (1968: 11). On the other hand, Freud explained the family romance fantasy in his essay “Family Romances” (1909 [1908]). According to Freud, the child needs to separate himself from his earlier identification with his parents and to liberate himself from their authority. In this attempt he is helped by impulses of sexual rivalry and feelings of emotional disaffection resulting in the child's fantasy of replacement of his parents by surrogate ones who appear to fulfil the child's wishes in a more satisfactory way (1977: 221–25).

She walks to the window, looks through the blinds and is startled to see Cady, whom she has not met so far, nonchalantly sitting on the wall that bounds the Bowden's property. Although the narrative naturalises Leigh's bitterness and anger as deriving from Sam's extramarital affairs, there is also the feeling in the film that what she really resents is the lack of excitement, the predictability, responsibility and routine of family life. In this sense, this scene stages her desire to walk on the wild side and her secret fantasy of adultery. The *mise-en-scène*, cinematography and editing of this scene recall, in their hallucinatory effects, the opening moments of the film: again we have the photographic negatives, the screen suffused in blocks of green and red, the emphasis on vision and subjectivity, and the atmosphere of phantasmagoria and instability created by the reflections of the fireworks.

Danny's and Leigh's summoning scenes are represented in the text as symbolic moments of pure emotion and sensuality, as if the screen were offering the symptomatic reflection of the repressed wishes of the female protagonists. This is a style that can be related to the hysterical expressiveness of melodrama, in the same way as Danny's and Leigh's fantasies can also be said to pertain to this genre and to be fully grounded in the family. It could be said that, in general, family life, family relationships and their constraining influence on gender and sexuality appear as originating the sense of loss that each member of the Bowdens feels according to his/her respective position within the institution. Danny, for example, is the paradigmatic female teenager, troubled by her burgeoning sexuality, discontented with her parents' childish treatment of her and sensitive to the undercurrents of hatred between Sam and Leigh. Danny's bonds with her parents are fraught with uneasiness, and it appears that she feels so miserable as to want to punish them and replace them with more caring ones, parents that represent the irretrievable past idealised in her reminiscence: the Cuban maid Graciela and Cady.

This Freudian family romance fantasy combines with Danny's seduction fantasy in one of the most climactic and most celebrated moments of the film: the school drama theatre scene, where Danny's desire is literally staged in a fairy tale setting. The two tales alluded to—"Hansen and Gretel" and "Little Red Riding Hood"—are cautionary tales, but this does not prevent Danny from feeling dangerously attracted towards the seductive Cady, who poses throughout the scene as a suave and understanding composite of bohemian, confessor, therapist and pederast, that is, as the perfect figure to fill in the sexual and affective gaps in Danny's life. The style in this scene—and De Niro's performance—departs from the edginess and histrionics of the rest of the film and appears controlled and intimate, matching De Niro's ominously delicate approach to the girl so as not to frighten her. Yet tension builds up until the fairy tale scenario, with its conventional associations of childhood and innocence, is finally on the verge of becoming the site of a pornographic encounter.

In *Cape Fear*, melodramatic fantasies interact with a paranoid horror fantasy articulating male desires and castration anxieties around a *doppelgänger* plot that presents Max Cady as the perverse mirror in which Sam sees himself. Contrasting with the symbolic world of pure connotation, emotion and sensuality that stylistically marks Danny's and Leigh's first contact with Cady, for Sam the psychopath has nothing of this unconscious aura but becomes an all-too factual presence. What the *doppelgänger* dialectic usually dramatises is the interdependence between otherness and sameness, or perversion and normality, pointing to the fact that otherness does not lie beyond a remote boundary but close within, being constructed as otherness only through strategies of displacement. Thus, in *Cape Fear*

perversion clearly irrupts from the fissures among the members of the family, fissures whose responsibility seems to lie mainly with Sam, since Cady embodies Sam's perversion as a lawyer, a father and a husband. What is unsettling about Cady is precisely the fact that his attacks on the Bowdens are made possible because of Sam's own violation of moral, legal and social codes: he has subverted legal procedures, has been—and without Cady's intervention would probably again be—unfaithful to his wife and is disturbed by his daughter's sexuality. Cady, then, does not actually signify an alien threat, the threat of the absolute "other" or absolute difference, but a much more disturbing menace that discloses the inherent weaknesses and deficiencies of the institution of the family and of the legal system. The conclusion to be drawn is that the foundations on which society has been built are only too weak and vulnerable, that individual pleasures are frequently at odds with social demands and that morality—or equity—and legality do not always walk hand in hand. In this respect, while the viewer may consider that Sam's decision to hide some evidence that could have exonerated Cady is ethically justified, the decision itself is undoubtedly illegal.

The scene that best conveys the fluidity that characterises the subject's position in a fantasy scenario, as well as the *doppelgänger* dialectic, is the full body strip-search scene. This is a scene in which the instincts at play are mainly scopophilia (pleasure in looking) and exhibitionism (pleasure in being looked at), with Cady apparently placed in the exhibitionistic, passive and feminine position. However, by the end of the scene Cady will have managed to turn the tables and be in total control of the situation. The sense of fluidity and disorientation at the respective spatial positions occupied by the different participants in the scene, that is, the collapse of demarcating lines between outside/inside, activity/passivity, scopophilia/exhibitionism and masculinity/femininity, is visually articulated "by the use of circular tracking shots and two-way mirrors, which make it nearly impossible to discern at any given moment who is looking at whom and whose point of view the spectator is being given" (Stoddart 1995: 198). Furthermore, by locating this crucial confusing moment inside a police station, the boundary between law and criminality also dissolves.

To the melodramatic and paranoid horror components discussed so far, *Cape Fear* adds the activation of a peculiar gothic fantasy of regression to a primordial condition prior to civilisation, a fantasy that is absent from other examples of the psycho-thriller.

III

As discussed above, the film shows the weaknesses inherent in the institution of the nuclear family and parodies the legal system by appropriating it from within and by transforming it into mere farce in the final "horror-trial" in the boathouse.⁸ Yet *Cape Fear* extends its critique to another fundamental pillar of Western societies: religion. There are in *Cape Fear*

8. *Cape Fear's* subversion of the legal system is reinforced by the intertextual game implied in Scorsese's casting. Robert Mitchum, who had played the psychopath Cady in Thompson's *Cape Fear*, appears here as police officer Elgart, while Gregory Peck, a thoroughly upright Sam Bowden in the original version, is cast in the role of murky attorney Lee Heller, a role that also contrasts with Peck's Oscar-winning performance as the high-principled Atticus Finch in Robert Mulligan's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962).

recurrent biblical allusions and iconography, but the film's religious discourse as upheld by Cady is thoroughly sexualised and transformed into an eroticised surface, pure performance and spectacle. Yet, as was the case with the legal system, this subversion of religion would not be possible if religion itself did not provide the conditions for its own transgression. Cady's perversion of familial, legal and religious discourses, as well as his gradual transformation into a monstrous, indestructible, superhuman figure, give the film a *fin de siècle* atmosphere that ultimately signifies not only the fragility of the institution of the family but of the whole of Western culture.

One of the underlying themes of the film is that civilisation is a thin, flimsy veneer. The topic is introduced through a running discourse on the delimitation between humanity and lack of humanity, or civilisation and barbarism, and is fully staged in the final ordeal at the boathouse. In this sense the film can be seen as mapping a collective fantasy, a cultural fantasy in which in order to expel the savage and the animal, in order to become a civilised and socialised human being, one has paradoxically to lapse into savagery.⁹ This lapsarian fantasy of regression to a primordial condition—visualised in the elemental waters and swamp of the final scenes of the film—pertains to the horror genre, but more specifically to the pre-history of the contemporary horror film: the literary tradition of the gothic. In this respect, it may be worth mentioning that for Scorsese himself the general atmosphere of *Cape Fear* had to be gothic, and he ensured that cinematographer Freddie Francis gave the film the feeling of degradation and claustrophobia of a gothic thriller (Morgan 1991: 34).

In his Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, Chris Baldick provided a definition of the gothic, which, I think, captures the essentials of the different historical manifestations of the genre. For Baldick, the gothic effect is achieved through the combination of “a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space” (1992: XIX). As can be seen, the crucial gothic elements are the treatment of space and the dialectic past/present, according to which an archaic and despotic past haunts and visits the present. In spite of *Cape Fear*'s being Scorsese's first widescreen film, the atmosphere of confinement and claustrophobia is forever present, and not only in the scenes shot inside the home and the boathouse. The sense of entrapment derives rather from the handling of the whole of the screen, a surface often taken up by intense close-ups that leave no breathing space. As for the dialectic past/present, David Punter has briefly discussed *Cape Fear* as a gothic national parable offering a version of U. S. American history. Punter mentions the speech on fear uttered in the film by detective Kersek (Joe Don Baker) equating the family's “barbaric” decision to set a trap on Cady, out of their own impotence and terror, with the foundation of the U. S. American South out of fear of the Indians, the slaves and the Union (1996: 153–55). For Punter, this is the despotic and violent past that haunts the present, much in the same way as the sins of the father, Sam, are visited upon his children, and this “fearful sense of inheritance in time” is a staple gothic motif. Max Cady is the contemporary gothic villain, a psychopath that comes from the past to remind contemporary U. S. Southerners that, however hard they may try, they cannot extricate themselves from the very violence that founded their nation.

9. The lapse of the civilised man into savagery in order to cope with the threat of the barbaric is a conventional motif in the western, a genre that explores a specific dimension of the U. S. American myth of (national) origins.

Without disregarding the film's allusions to U. S. American history—let us not forget that the events coincide quite significantly with the celebration of Independence Day—I would argue that there is an even more archaic event encoded in the final scenes of the film, where setting, lighting and natural elements conflate to recall a primordial past previous to history. In the film's violent denouement, Sam is forced to revert to the position of a savage—again fantasy's fluidity and permutation of positions—intent on stoning his opponent to death. The act of killing Cady is meant to eradicate the inhuman, the animal, the barbaric, and to re-set the boundaries of the civilised. This scenario recalls the Ur-fantasy speculated upon by Freud in "Totem and Taboo" (1985 [1913]), an essay in which Freud tried to provide an anthropological-mythical explanation for the origins of religion and morality. For Freud, the foundational act of civilisation would be the sons' killing of the hated and loved violent primal father, a killing which results in the establishment of two taboos through the sense of guilt: not to kill the father (or brothers) again and not to possess the mother (or sisters). Paradoxically, it is an act of violent aggression—parricide—that inaugurates civilisation and the Law. Terry Eagleton has elaborated on the consequences of this paradox, arguing that this primordial violent act reveals the lawlessness of the law and empties it of any constitutional or consensual value. The only function of the law would then be to conceal its own criminal inception, and it is this attempt that renders legality anarchically coercive and tautological: it only answers to its own authority (1995: 43–46). However, the initial outrage cannot be forgotten, "but will persist as a repressed traumatic kernel, since to eradicate this would be to abolish the condition of legality as such" (46). *Cape Fear* re-enacts this "repressed traumatic kernel" in an attempt to, once again, police the boundaries between lawlessness and legality, or barbarism and civilisation. After this foundational act has been performed, the fantasy can again be pushed back to the archaeology of humanity. Yet, as a true gothic text, *Cape Fear* signals the fragility of the demarcations, stemming from the fragility of the law itself, while it also points to the permanent but necessary threat that the return of the archaic past represents.

At the end of the film, Sam has cleansed his hands of sin and guilt and the Bowdens have survived, yet the image of the family shivering and huddling together, covered in mud, does not reassure the viewer that their future will be one of happiness and stability. The Bowdens will have to live with the knowledge of their own vulnerability and of the deficiencies inherent in private and public institutions. Danny's framing discourse closes the narrative with the intimation that Cady and what he represents will not be wiped out, thus leaving the spectator with the disturbing feeling that transgression unavoidably inhabits our psyches and our world. This is quite understandable, for the staple gothic motif of the double signifies the "unnegotiable divide between the true and natural self and society, between nature and culture" (Edmundson 1997: 10).

IV

To conclude, in this paper I have approached *Cape Fear* as a psycho-thriller that articulates melodramatic and paranoid horror conventions and scenarios, structuring them around a suspenseful thriller narrative. I have considered the different psychic fantasies encoded in *Cape Fear*, linking them to the genres they characteristically are associated with. What

derives from such an analysis is that the most important narrative and symbolic function fulfilled by this combination of melodramatic and paranoid horror motifs, conventions and fantasies, is that of conflating the feminine with the masculine, the private—domestic and family life—with the public—the legal system. The interaction of melodrama and horror serves to amplify and expand meanings into ever-widening circles, a process which in the case of *Cape Fear* extends beyond the scope of other psycho-thrillers in order to include a critique to the foundations of Western civilisation. Furthermore, the interaction of horror and gothic fantasies with melodramatic ones approximates the film to the mode of uncertainty and disillusionment that characterises our times.

The fact that the distinctiveness of Scorsese's film results from the activation of a specific apocalyptic gothic fantasy has shown that the psychoanalytic concept of fantasy is a valid one in determining both the general anxieties that underlie the psycho-thriller and the components that differentiate this film from, let us say, *Pacific Heights* or *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*. Further research along these lines could be fruitful as well in establishing connections and differentiations among other genres and among texts belonging to the same genre. Such a perspective would still be interested in individual textual features but would avoid a fixed and essentialist notion of genre, since genre would be seen as a hybrid and flexible category, open to varied permutations and unexpected combinations according to the kind of fantasies inscribed in each text.

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