Old Age and Disability as Alterity

Ghosts, (Constructions of) Normalcy and Reliability in *The Others*

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The Others (2001) is not a typical ghost story: while the film creates the sense of an obvious looming threat, the viewing audience doesn't know the truth about the ghosts during most of the film. This is one of the many deliberate uncertainties of the plot, which lead spectators to make assumptions about which characters represent the otherness referred to by the film's title. By first situating the audience within this uncertainty, the film uses societal expectations and biases to mislead its spectators in their attempts to identify the threat. The main force of the film centers on the servants (two older people and one person with a disability), making them the locus of danger by portraying them as potential threats to the nuclear family because they are old and disabled. The final twists of the film expose this ageist and ablest bias by revealing that all the characters are ghosts, making them all the *real* others of the title, haunting a living family that inhabits the house. All these surprises are possible because of the many uncertainties of the plot play with societal biases, alterity, the abject, and narrative reliability.

In this chapter, I argue that the uncertainties of the plot lead viewers to believe that the threat is located in the older and disabled servants because old age and disability are presented as alterities to the able and young bodies of the members of the Stewart family and because these

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alterities are well-known tropes in the film industry often used to elicit fear in horror films. For this purpose, in addition to studying the portrayals of the three servants and the cultural meanings of old age and disability, I will analyze *The Others* in the context of the genre of horror and ghost stories. I will also touch on narrative (un)reliability and how it increases fear in this film. My objective is to understand how the framing of old age and disability as so-called monstrosities successfully distracts Grace from accessing her memory of what she has done to herself and to her children thus obscuring the real horrors that have happened in her house.

The Others tells the story of Grace Stewart, a woman living in a mansion on the island of Jersey with her two children, Anne and Nicholas. The year is 1945, and she is waiting for her husband to return from the war. As the film begins, three servants arrive. They are: Mrs. Bertha Mills, Mr. Edmund Tuttle and Lydia. Grace believes they are answering an advertisement she had placed in a newspaper after her previous servants suddenly disappeared, but she soon realizes that the letter she wrote to the newspaper looking for help was never sent. Then, strange things start to happen in the house, such as locked doors being unexplainably unlocked and Grace hearing voices in empty rooms. While the servants seem harmless at first and Grace initially welcomes them in the house, as the film progresses, she becomes increasingly suspicious of the three servants and their intentions. As the film is framed to Grace's perspective, viewers are led to likewise doubt the benevolence of the newcomers and believe that they may represent a threat to the family and the house. However, in the midst of this chaos, Anne accuses her mother of being mad and seems to be afraid of her, which hints at the unreliableness of Grace's narrative perspective. Finally, the audience learns that Grace, her children, *and* the servants are all ghosts. These revelations are a shocking reversal for both the family and the film's audience, but the real horror lies in the revelation that Grace was the one who killed her children before killing herself.

Scholar Aviva Briefel considers ghost stories to be a subgenre of horror and places the narrative of *The Others* in the subgenre of "spectral incognizance" (2009: 95), because some of the characters lack knowledge about their status as dead people. Briefel's understanding that ghost sto-

ries and horror films have features in common is useful here because the fear and repugnance found in horror films and ghost stories stems from a similar source, that is, the abject. Julia Kristeva classifies the abject as a "threat" (1982: 1), which, in concrete terms, encompasses that which is expelled from the body to protect its boundaries and to, more abstractly, maintain a notion of "identity, system, order" (ibid.: 4). More than something repugnant, the abject disturbs the sense of self exactly because of this ambiguity of its borders in which the self is "in the process of becoming an other" (Kristeva 1982: 3). In other words, the presence of the abject suggests that the body's boundaries are being violated because it is impossible to get rid of its inherent, undesired features.

When it comes to horror films and ghost stories, the abject is linked to the presence of the supernatural because it elicits fear and/or disgust. In *The Others*, particularly, the abject is obvious in the figure of the ghosts that trespass the boundaries of the living and the dead. Moreover, ghosts are "embodied" by dead people and death is the ultimate abject according to Kristeva: "[i]t is death infecting life" (1982: 4). The abjection of ghosts transforms them into an otherness that defies logic (Smajić 2010: 25) and for this reason, creates chaos. In the film, this defiance of logic is obvious in the presence of ghosts, which are not entities most people encounter in their everyday lives. Moreover, the defiance of logic is also apparent in the lack of consistency in the realm of ghosts: Grace has a mirror reflection, but her husband doesn't, for instance. Lastly, the defiance of logic is mirrored in the uncertainties of the plot. Especially of interest here is how the film prompts the audience to resolve all matters of logic by focusing on and magnifying the culturally-sanctioned abjection of bodies of the servants by portraying them as the menace.

The trope of older people as threats is not uncommon. In fact, the use of this trope in cultural productions echoes the belief that the aging of populations is dangerous as seen in the gray tsunami rhetoric and the fear it produces. Similarly, disabled bodies are often used to elicit fear in horror films. These tropes utilize stereotypes that equate old age and disability with a literal embodiment of a deviation from what is considered "normal." These stereotypes are charged with negative connotations in cultural productions, especially in ghost stories and horror

films, which appeal to their audience's feelings of fear and disgust. The horror genre's fascination with so-called physical abnormalities, visible to its audiences, emphasizes the human body as a source of fear (Sutton 2017: 73). The so-called abnormality of these bodies is equated with an exposure of undesirable and fear-inducing inner features, an inner evil or menace that would be otherwise hidden from view (Chivers and Markotić 2010: 2; Davis 2016: 9). In *The Others*, disability and old age are framed by the narrative structure of the film to be read as corroboration that the servants are suspicious and threatening. Their dissimilarities to the nuclear family and their abject status as both a part of the household and from outside of the household exacerbate the already present suspicion linked to the servants. This can be seen in the scene where Mrs. Mills tells Anne that "there are going to be big surprises," a line that suggests that the servants have come to the house with an agenda.

Writing about disability and eugenics in the genre of horror, Angela M. Smith states that "the term *monster* deriving from the Latin *monstra*, meaning to show, display or warn, presents aberrant bodies as symbols to be 'read'" (2011: 3). The reading of these bodies-as-symbols doesn't happen in a vacuum. Instead, it is steeped in and mirrors cultural norms, and therefore cultural biases. In the preface of *A Companion to Horror Film*, Harry M. Benshoff explains that "[c]ultural texts such as horror films tell facts about the culture in which they reside: details about gender, about sex, about race and class, about the body, about death, about pain, about being human" (2017: xvi). Cultural symbols and their connotations, positive or negative, already exist within the viewing audience, inscribed by the culture they live in. Viewers bring their expectations about these social signifiers to the films they watch, and likewise, films appeal to the cultural symbols they know the audience brings. As Benshoff explains, the otherness of monsters or of those portrayed as monsters sheds light on what has been deemed undesired in society. Similarly, in *The Horror Film: An Introduction*, Rick Worland explains that the portrayal of monsters or, in this case, ghosts in horror films, gives insight into beliefs in our material world (2007: 13). While horror films may appeal to the metaphysical, they are grounded in our understanding of physical bodies. *The Others* draws parallels between physical bodies that are old or disabled

and the monstrous by framing the three servants as scary and/or ill-intentioned. One emblematic scene is when Grace mistrustfully asks Mrs. Mills what the pills she has been given are. Grace assumes that Mrs. Mills is trying to drug or poison her, but Mrs. Mills answers that those are Grace's tablets for migraine. Another similar scene is when Mrs. Mills tells Mr. Tuttle and Lydia that the children will be easy to be dealt with, but Grace is more stubborn. This scene implies that the servants do have intentions that haven't been revealed yet and which Grace is likely to oppose, which corroborates that they are threatening. While Grace is absent from this scene, the conversation suggests that the servants are in opposition to the family, and the fact that the film is framed around the mother's perspective aligns the audience with her. In other words, because the audience's perspective is aligned with Grace, they are led to trust Grace's suspicions, and the servants are consequently viewed as ill-intentioned.

Studying horror films from the early to mid-twentieth century, Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie notice a trend in these films to portray older women as scary. They argue that this stems from a growing anxiety about aging, which became more obvious in the post-war culture's focus on youth (Shary and McVittie 2016: 78). Both authors notice that the creation of horror films with specific focus on older women "renders the aging women at their core as monstrously 'othered' objects" (ibid.: 86). This otherness is exacerbated when combined with a sense of detachment from normal societal structures, like the nuclear family. In *The Others*, both the older servants, Mrs. Bertha Mills and Mr. Edmund Tuttle, are othered because they don't belong to the Stewart family. They are not familiar grandparents but unknown intruders, strongly contrasted against the young family. In the film, this sense of otherness is magnified by combining an emphasis on age with secrecy, heightened by the film's framing, reducing them to caricatures acting in very suspicious ways. Even though, Grace has no proof that the servants are responsible for what is happening in the house and the audience later learns that they are not intentionally causing any harm, their familiarity with the house, their sudden arrival, their secrecy, and the fact that in one of the scenes Mr. Tuttle appears possibly covering his own or Mrs. Mills' tomb-

stone with dry leaves to hide it from view, emphasize the servant's role as unknown entities, and imply that they are the threat.

When it comes to disability, the strategy to transform it in alterity is similar to what happens to old age in films. Disability as a category is used in horror films to highlight bodily differences that appeal to existing societal assumptions about bodily impairments (Sutton 2017: 74). Writing about the concept of the norm, how its creation in the 1840s resulted in ideas about "abnormality" and in practices that created disability, Lennard J. Davis explains that the introduction of the idea of norm signifying "average" and "standard" created expectations that "the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm" (Davis 2016: 3). The norm was informed by the work of statisticians (many of them eugenicists) such as Adolphe Quetelet, who applied mathematical notions to "the distribution of human features such as height and weight [...] [and] [...] formulat[ed] the concept of '*l'homme moyen*' or 'the average man'" (ibid.: 3). By defining the norm through a series of mathematical equations and graphs, these statisticians created the circumstances that placed disabled bodies outside of what would be scientifically considered "normal" and made them, consequently, seen as deviant (ibid.: 3). This deviation from the norm is key to understanding why disabled bodies are portrayed as monstrous, that is, are othered. In *The Others*, while Lydia's speech disability is not immediately distinguishable, it gains a suspicious connotation as the film progresses: as Mrs. Bertha Mills and Mr. Edmund Tuttle become more suspicious due to their lack of surprise with the strange things happening in the house, Lydia's inability to speak can be read as an extension of their power over the household. She is often depicted being subservient to Mrs. Mills and Mr. Tuttle. Spectators are likely to believe that she has been coerced to keep mum about the intentions of the other two servants. In the end, when spectators realize the film had led us to believe that the three servants were dangerous when they were not, we discover that when Lydia was alive she didn't have a speech disability. Her speech disability developed when she realized that she had died.

In addition to Lydia's disability, Grace's likely mental illness also means she is disabled. Rosamarie Garland-Thomson corroborates this

idea when she places disability and mental illness in the same "artificial category that encompasses congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illness […] temporary or permanent injuries" (qtd. in Smith 2011: 4). Anne's accusations that her mother is mad, Grace's strange habits of locking doors behind her and the revelation at the end of the plot that Grace killed her children and herself are all indications that Grace may have a mental illness. If this is the case, why does it look like the servants may be posing a threat to the family? The revelation that Grace and her children are also ghosts exposes that Grace's perspective, which permeates and conducts most of the film, has always been unreliable. The unreliability of the characters enhances and magnifies ambiguities. Indeed, uncertainty is an important feature of the genre of ghost stories because it encompasses the struggle between relying on the material and rational world or on the supernatural (Bissell 2012: 40).

Writing about literature, scholar Julia Briggs understands that ghost stories are a category of the Gothic (2012: 177) and recognizes that they are "part of a wider reaction against the rationalism and […] secularization of the Enlightenment, which […] reflected in […] new philosophies that set out to explore how knowledge was formulated in the mind and how the less conscious processes of the mind operated" (ibid. 2012: 179). A result of the opposition of rationalism is that, in ghost stories, rationality is questioned and the supernatural becomes as feasible as the rational (Long Hoeveler 2012: 23). This means that ghost stories represent a "challenge to the very notion of an agreed, verifiable reality […] [and they present] a chance to […] open up new questions about reality" (Brewster and Thuston 2018: 3). Therefore, ghost stories make space for people to explore their subjectivity and complexity. This often results in a scrutiny of what is in the realm of the familiar, not only because this tends to be intruded upon (Briggs 2012: 176) but because it may be a source of terror and fear.

In *The Others*, the ambiguities are not so much about the rational *versus* the supernatural world. Instead, they encompass different explanations of who or what is responsible for the chaos in the house and vary according to how much reliability characters are granted. Vera Nünning explains that narrative reliability enables crucial insights into

how cultures operate. Nünning is interested in learning about narrative reliability beyond the realm of literature thus integrating it with other disciplines. From this comprehensive perspective, she asserts that "[j]udgements concerning unreliability […] highlight the borderline between the normal and the deviant; they show those implicit norms, values, and personality theories that are part of the implicit cultural knowledge but rarely expressed in explicit terms" (Nünning 2015: 14). Her insights resonate with *The Others* especially when it comes to the portrayal of old age and disability and how untrustworthy the characters that are either old or disabled are. For instance, in the beginning of the film when Grace's habits enable her portrayal as quirky and her likely mental illness is not yet obvious, the monstrous, i.e. abject, depictions of old age and disability give some sense of stability to the film. When Grace starts asking questions about the servants to Mrs. Mills, but the latter gives Grace vague answers and soon goes about her work to evade more questions, the audience recognizes that there is something suspicious about Mrs. Mills. As long as spectators identify older and disabled people as the threats, the film offers us tools to navigate the complexity of the plot and ambiguities are obscured.

However, since the film is told from Grace's point of view, if Grace is mentally ill, the narrative that she is telling lacks a logic reliability so the audience may be left wondering what is really happening, which adds more instability and ambiguity to the narrative. Grace's possible mental illness connects her to the monstrous, that is, the abject, and, more importantly, it suggests that she may not be a reliable narrator. In addition to discovering who or what the threat is, Grace's possible lack of reliability complicates the plot further because there seems to be nothing about the film that is normal, logical or coherent. As a result, spectators are likely to question if the servants actually pose a threat especially as Mrs. Mills often seems to be more understanding and level-headed towards Anne than her own mother. While scenes that show servants discussing upcoming changes amongst themselves continue to corroborate Grace's distrust of the servants, spectators are likely to consider if there are answers to the mysteries of the house that we haven't accessed yet.

In an examination about the role of novels in the creation of disability, Davis argues that novels were used to impose normative structures and enforce ideas about normalcy (2016: 9). Similarly, films, and especially horror films with ideas of what or who can be monstrous, also function corroborating notions of normalcy and average. Since it is unclear if Grace is really going mad or if the servants are plotting against the family and haunting the house, it is difficult for spectators to make sense of what is going on or where to locate the expected normalcy that Davis recognizes in narratives. Moreover, spectators are not likely to believe the children because their age suggests that both Anne and Nicholas are unreliable. Lastly, Anne claims that she sees ghosts, a statement that appears to defy logic and makes her untrustworthy for most of the film.

The lack of clear logic and the uncertainties of the plot are materialized in the constant fog that surrounds the haunted house the Stewart family and the servants inhabit. As demonstrated by the scene in which Grace decides to venture outside of the house to look for her husband and then returns home because she fears getting lost in the fog, the plot of the film leaves important information out thus making spectators feel as if we are also lost in the fog. The ghosts and the fog also add to the horror/ghost story atmosphere and indicate that the plot is set in a haunted house. Surrounded by fog, the house is almost like a character itself, especially as its inhabitants hear the piano in the empty, dark room being played and it seems like the house has a life of its own. In *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King explains that a "haunted house" or a "bad place" (as he calls any spaces that elicit fear) is a "house with unsavory history" (qtd. in Freeman 2018: 328). The many uncertainties in the plot of the film hint at the possibility of a house with an unsavory history.

The film reveals its plot twist in two stages, first revealing that the servants are ghosts, then dismantling the narrative reliability in the séance scene where Grace, Anne and Nicholas discover that they are also dead and ghosts. The fact that they are ghosts and the manner in which they died links back to the idea of a house with an unsavory history. In this case, instead of overlooking death, which is what Briefel suggests they are doing (96) by being unable to acknowledge their status as deceased, Grace and the children are repressing their knowledge of being

dead. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery F. Gordon explains that ghosts have a real connection to the material world because "[t]he whole essence […] of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention" (2008: xvi). In the film, the ghost servants and the living inhabitants of the house that are initially perceived as ghosts do receive the attention of the Stewart family and, consequently, of the spectators. However, later in the film we learn that this is a mere distraction from what has really happened, that is, Grace's suffocating her children before killing herself. When it comes to the narrative, this is also a distraction that functions to not give the plot away even if throughout the film, the audience is given hints about what has happened to the family, such as when Grace walks into a room whose furniture is covered in white sheets that look like ghosts. Their fate lingers in the film, but it takes time for them to acknowledge it.

Freud's uncanny is useful to understand why, beyond their old age and disability, the servants are scary to the family. According to Freud, "the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something that is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimisch]* which has undergone repression and has returned from it" (2001: 245). The act of repression is never fully successful because the uncanny tends to recur producing fear (ibid.: 241). To the Stewart family, the servants are scary because their status as dead people is eerily familiar, that is, somehow known. The servants evoke the uncanny because they represent what Grace and the children have become but are trying to repress and, consequently, the family literally feels haunted by their counterparts. As the plot unfolds, Graces feels increasingly restless because it becomes more and more difficult to repress her knowledge and memories. One pivotal moment in the film is when her husband returns from the war in a state of shell shock and soon after leaves. This is when chaos ensues. The curtains covering the windows are completely removed and light starts to get in. The light illuminating the house functions as a metaphor showing that Grace is getting closer to the truth about what happened to the children and her, which she has repressed. The haunted house is often read as a "metaphor for the mysteries of the mind" (Bissell 2012: 45), so the light getting in brings clarity to those that have been in the dark. An example of this clarity is when Grace's mem-

ories return in the séance scene resolving the complexity of the plot and matters of unreliability. In this scene, Anne whispers to the Old Lady, an old woman with cataracts, that her mother suffocated her and her brother with a pillow and then shot herself. Even though this plot twist seems to undo the connection of old age and disability to monstrosity because it becomes obvious that the servants are not the menace, the old woman's ability to communicate with the afterlife still displays a connection with the abject because of the trespassing of borders and the proximity to the dead.

A previous scene had already shown the Old Lady as monstrous. This scene is one of the most disturbing in the film and it reinforces ageist and ableist stereotypes. It shows Anne being possessed by the old woman. When Grace gets closer, instead of Anne, she sees an old woman with cataracts that speaks with Anne's voice. Moreover, where we expect Anne to be sitting, we see an old hand maneuvering a puppet and the Old Lady is wearing Anne's First Communion dress. Grace is so frightened that she tries to suffocate the old woman, who then transforms into Anne. This scene elicits fear because of the stark contrast between Anne's young age and the old woman that is produced when Grace looks closely and doesn't see Anne. When Grace and the spectators discover that this is, in fact, an old woman, this gives everyone a scare. With so much information being left out of the plot, this scene makes the spectator question if Anne had been an old woman all along. If this hypothesis is true, the film embodies the horror and the grotesque because of characters' possible inability to acknowledge the passing of time (Chivers 2011: 45). However, the old woman soon transforms into Anne and the audience has to rule this hypothesis out. This scene isn't scary because the characters are unable to perceive the passing of time and then suddenly encounter irrefutable proof of aging. Instead, more than showing the old body as abject this scene magnifies fear by portraying the old woman as if *she* hadn't acknowledged the passing of time and hadn't realized that she is not a child anymore. But, in the end, this is not true either as the old woman doesn't seem to be unable to recognize her own age.

The truth is that Grace and her children were the ones who were unable to acknowledge the passing of time because they had been living in

a fixed time frame. They weren't trying to forgo aging. Instead, their fate was the result of the experiences the family was subjected to: the Nazi occupation of the island of Jersey and Grace hearing that her husband had probably died in France, where he was deployed. That is, the family's inability to acknowledge the passing of time has more to do with grief and trauma than an attempt to avoid aging. This realization about the Stewart family has, as an effect, a normalization of what had previously been portrayed as abnormal and monstrous. We then gather that the war and its effects on the family were so horrific and devastating that, in comparison, the servants and the old woman lose some of their status as abjection, while Grace and her children become more abject because of their status as dead people and their shocking death.

When the tensions resolve and spectators have all the pieces of the puzzle to make sense of this complex plot, we understand that the ambiguities that trespass boundaries and make the self feel repugnant or fear-inducing don't have to be resolved. They don't have to be separated by rigid boundaries that protect the self as Kristeva suggests. In the end of the film, the dead and living must coexist. Similarly, the Stewart family must learn to live together with Mrs. Mill, Mr. Tuttle and Lydia. Of interest here is how this idea makes the boundaries between old and young, able and disabled more porous. Instead of seeing old age and disability as undesired features that one cannot get rid of, the characters learn to embody contradicting, inherent features with no consequence to their reliability. The knowledge of the contradictory embodiments that the different characters comprise doesn't make them any less sinister than they were before, but perhaps more human and even relatable because their experiences offer spectators the opportunity to explore our own complexities, and perhaps even our own biases against older and disabled people.

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