



The Machine in the Ghost: Writing Women in *Supernatural*

Robert Spadoni

Introduction

Supernatural thrives on its female presence.
Kristin Lopez¹

The success of their independent horror film, *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932), earned brothers Victor and David Halperin the chance to make a bigger-budget follow up at Paramount the next year. *Supernatural* (Victor Halperin, 1933) has received far less attention than its predecessor, and most of this has been negative. Compared almost universally unfavorably to *White Zombie*, which over the decades has risen to the status of a fascinating cult classic, *Supernatural*—on its first release and since—has been called absurd, ridiculous, and confusing.² Some see the film relying on too many coincidences.³ Others find the bigger budget hampering the brothers' creative energies, and see Victor “overwhelmed by the wraparound luxuriance of the Paramount machine.”⁴ Another writes that Victor loses “his flair under a bland glossy veneer.”⁵ When a viewer notes that today, “Carole Lombard fans and art deco buffs may enjoy this glossy antique,” he suggests that few others would have much reason to look closely at this film.⁶

Another disappointed viewer writes: “One can only guess at what might have resulted if the same sensibility that informs *White Zombie* had been applied here.”⁷ But it is my contention that the same sensibility does inform both films. Neither shows much interest in “realism,” and it is possible to love *White Zombie* while still recognizing, maybe affectionately, that the film sometimes tips into absurdity. This is a continuity registered by the *Newsweek* review of *Supernatural* when it calls *White Zombie* “another recent challenge to credulity.”⁸ The unrealism of these films contributes to their evocative dreaminess.

The *Newsweek* review is titled, “Spirits: Put on Good Show If Taken at Face Value.” References to *Supernatural*'s “glossy veneer” and “high-tone respectability” ask us to imagine the film possessing a slick sheen that is too competent and handsome, too “Paramount,” for its own good.⁹ Such impressions suggest that it might be worthwhile to ask what lies below this film's

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shiny surface. So do complaints about its bewildering and coincidence-ridden plot, which point to the filmmakers' efforts to reassemble the narrative after breaking it apart as it was conceived in its screenplay drafts. Especially problematic was the "First Script" (January 21, 1933), which outlines a story that could not serve as the blueprint for a Hollywood film, not even one released a year before the Production Code went into full force. But signs of the original conception are everywhere in the film, and the brothers made contributions that complicate and expand the thematic landscape that writers Garnett Weston, Harvey Thew, and Brian Marlow mapped out.

The scripts provide a lens through which it becomes easier to see that, just as *White Zombie* steepes itself in allusions to colonialism, race, and slavery, so *Supernatural* explores issues concerning, as blogger Ariel Schudson writes, "women's power, sexuality and personal rights."¹⁰ Schudson identifies the dynamic that shapes nearly every moment in this film, starting with the dense opening montage and continuing through the skein of parallels and motifs that crisscross its modest 64-minute length. Specifically, the film's transformations along gender axes and its depictions of writing reveal that the Halperins, by entering the darkened space of the séance, articulated, probably unintentionally, a feminist cry of rage.

Vacated Bodies

"God, this bastard's trying to paralyze me."

Carole Lombard on having to remain motionless for her transformation sequences in *Supernatural*¹¹

"Roma's all right, but her body was stolen—just the way thieves steal a motor car—it's being used for a joy ride, Grant—it won't hurt Roma."

Dr. Houston, *Supernatural* First Script (K-24)

The old material body is dead and done with, it will never be resuscitated by us. There is no resuscitation of a corpse, once it is completely dead: that would be no glorified resurrection; that would be either a strange inexplicable miracle, or else a mere horror.

Sir Oliver Lodge¹²

The film's major parallel concerns the two women at its center: Ruth Rogen (Vivienne Osborne) and Roma Courtney (Carole Lombard). On first glance, it might seem that these women, who never meet—although they do share a scene in which one is a not-quite-inert corpse—could not be more different. Rogen is an unrepentant murderer, sentenced, at the start of the film, to death by electrocution. She is a seductress and highly sexually active. Her inordinate physical aggressiveness is concentrated in what the Final Script (February 16, 1933) calls her "freakishly powerful hands" (C-15), with which, a newspaper in the opening montage reveals, Rogen strangled three lovers "after a riotous orgy in her sensuous Greenwich village apartment."



Figure 1. Publicity still for *Supernatural* (Victor Halperin, Paramount Pictures, 1933).

By contrast, Roma is wealthy and refined, mourning, at the start of the film, the sudden death of her twin brother, John. Roma is strongly characterized by her passivity, an attribute the First Script stresses when, for example, she does something while “her face remains unmoved” (C-30) and speaks “vacantly” (C-38).¹³ Roma’s near paralysis is so crippling that, a publicity still for the film suggests, she lacks even the energy to return the embrace of her fiancé, Grant (Randolph Scott; [Figure 1](#)). The *Motion Picture Herald*, which found Lombard acting “rather inconspicuously,” called her character a “completely docile and tranquil individual.”¹⁴ A more recent assessment finds Lombard “vacuous as Roma.”¹⁵

Roma is as defined by her bloneness and inaction as Rogen is defined by her vampish brunette locks and wildly profligate ways. The differences are stark, yet the film suggests that the women might also be alike. This similarity marks our starting point for understanding the film’s thematization of a frustration and anger that may have resonated with some female viewers.

Complicating Rogen’s characterization as physically strong and sexually voracious is her electrocution, which happens early in the film. These attributes are complicated (but not undermined) starting when Dr. Houston (H. B. Warner), a psychologist, urges Rogen to permit him to conduct experiments on her body after she dies. Unbeknownst to her, he aims to prevent her soul from migrating to a new host. Rogen refuses, saying: “Listen to me, my body’s my own. The law gives me that much. Take my body away and then guarantee I can have it forever. Funny, isn’t it? You do the laughing.” She seems to be referring to the Christian promise of an eternal afterlife, although

why Rogen would want the afterlife this religion promises her is unclear. She finally is persuaded when the warden (Willard Robertson) implies, deceptively, that Houston might be able to resurrect her deceased body. But Houston not only lacks that Frankensteinian power; he wants to keep Rogen from perpetuating herself in any form.

Frankenstein (James Whale, 1931) will not turn out to provide the template for the experiments to come. Nor will any template implicitly referenced by the film's three opening quotes, all having to do with ghosts and the undead, from ancient religious and philosophical texts. After quotes from Confucius and Mohammed, we see: "and HE GAVE HIS TWELVE DISCIPLES POWER AGAINST UNCLEAN SPIRITS TO CAST THEM OUT. —Matthew 10:1." The invocation of the New Testament might call up resurrection in the forms it takes in those books.¹⁶ But there will be nothing like that for Rogen. Houston says in the First Script (where Rogen's name is Olga Mirova): "You don't suppose Olga Mirova has become a saint because her body is dead, do you?" (D-26) No one in the scripts or film supposes anything of the kind. Rogen laughs at the "guarantee" that her body, once "taken away," will be hers forever, as though she knows the system is rigged and perhaps intuits that, in both the Biblical and Hollywood playbooks, she is the unclean spirit that will be cast out.

No one has any use for Rogen's spirit, but her body is a different matter, for Houston's motivations for his experiments are suspicious and may in fact be sinister. He intends to prevent her from surviving her death, but he seems to create the ideal conditions for facilitating exactly this. A writer on the film quotes Houston's rationale for his experiments, then offers an opinion: "'If no imitation crimes take place, I'll have negative proof that my theory is correct,' the doctor says to no one in particular, giving the audience the best explanation that scenarists Harvey Thew and Brian Marlow can offer for all this nonsense."¹⁷ Houston's motivations are at best unclear, and might be something much worse.

Houston conducts his experiments in his penthouse apartment, at night, after dressing the deceased in an evening gown and propping her up on a chair. She looks not dead but asleep, or maybe drugged. Roma and Grant pay a visit, coming upon Rogen when Houston is out of the room. Galvanically stimulated, she opens her eyes, then slumps back in the chair. Lightning storm outside notwithstanding, the atmosphere does not quite evoke Frankenstein's laboratory.

Houston enters and pulls a screen in front of his subject with the haste and, it appears, embarrassment of an adolescent caught reading his older brother's dirty magazines (Figure 2). What has Houston been caught doing? The implication, John Soister notes, is of necrophilia.¹⁸ The film suggests that Rogen has been subjected to that most monstrous intersection of objectification and



Figure 2. Houston yanks the screen across and exclaims, “Roma! What are you doing here?”

exploitation. No sentience, no possibility of pleasure or sensations of any kind. All life extinguished, yet use value continuing to be wrung out of the shell. As Reynold Humphries writes, “Rogen is considered an object for scientific research, an object that will be obtained for nothing.”¹⁹ Rogen in death thus recalls Roma in her publicity still; each is a lifeless body giving pleasure to a man.

The film characterizes two women, then, by their accommodating vacantness. The connection between the two is further suggested when they strike a similar pose: Rogen in a newspaper photograph at the start of the montage; and Roma later on (Figure 3). While Rogen’s gripping fingers and brazenly direct look at the camera connote steamy self-possession, and Roma’s posture indicates her character’s grief and helplessness, the similarity nevertheless invites us to wonder what other aspects of these women’s experiences might be the same.



Figure 3. Characters strike similar poses.

Sexual Contagion

If ordinary rules no longer applied—something that was clearly true in Spiritualism—and the terms of women's identity were being undermined, women might gain access to a whole new range of behavior.

Marlene Tromp on séances²⁰

"Do not cross either your arms or your legs—it would break the circuit."

Paul Babian, instructing séance participants, *First Script* (E-51)

Rogen's spirit finds a new home in Roma's body. The possession occurs at the second of two séances, at which a charlatan medium, Paul Bavian (Alan Dinehart; he is "Babian" in the *First Script* and part of the *Final*), out to bilk Roma of her riches, unwittingly creates favorable conditions for Rogen to take control. The séance stages a transmission of essence from one woman to the other. The natures both of this essence and of its transmission become clearer in a comparison of the film with its script materials.

In the film, Rogen's spirit intends to murder Bavian because, when she was alive and they were lovers, he grew fearful for his safety and turned her over to the police. The possessed Roma (hereafter "Roma/R") lures the unsuspecting Bavian to Rogen's Greenwich Village artist's studio, then Roma's yacht, under the false pretense that she has romantic designs on him. The motivation is different in the *First Script*, where Bavian does not turn Rogen in and there is no indication that they have ever met before the first séance. Unlike in the film, Bavian shows no perplexity that Roma could possibly know about Rogen's studio, and no shock of recognition when she unveils Rogen's self portrait—but instead: "Staring at the picture, as if the woman were actually real. He is puzzled—tries to reconcile the features. He turns to look at Roma, off scene, then at the painting." (H-15). No recognition of an old flame, only puzzlement. And yet in the *First Script*, just as in the film, the moment Roma/R sets eyes on Bavian, she leaves the séance with him, even though he is not both the swindler who contacts Roma when he reads about her brother *and* Rogen's lover-betrayer (a coincidence that irked some film reviewers).²¹ The two come together, but the spirit's reason for engineering the union is not the same.

The driving force in the script is not revenge but sexual desire. From this difference stem major plot divergences. In the film, the studio scene ends when the caretaker enters and, never having seen either of them before, throws them out. In the *First Script*, the scene ends with a pan away from the kissing lovers and a fadeout (H-41). The next sequence (J) starts with Grant and Hammond (William Farnum), who manages Roma's fortune, learning that Roma/R and Bavian have gotten married. They do not marry in the film but instead head straight from the studio to the yacht for the climax; and the closest we come to the loaded pan-and-fadeout in the studio is a dissolve, on the yacht, away from their embrace and a later

return in which, their clothing showing no signs of disarray, they drink wine—and the suggestion of intervening sex is far weaker.

On the yacht, before the dissolve, Dinehart places his hand directly on Lombard's breast, a reminder, first, that this is a pre-Code film, and second, that the reengineering of the narrative, from scripts to film—specifically, the substitution for carnal lust something the filmmakers presumably hoped audiences and censor boards would find less objectionable, murderous aggression—was only partially successful. The film remains a palimpsest of the original conception, a sign of which is the moment in the film when Bavian's landlady (Beryl Mercer) calls him "Babian." Still, while the original shines through, many differences between it and the film are striking.

In the First Script, other than a moment when some brief choking in the midst of their lovemaking appears to be the expression of one of Rogen's kinks (H-41), Roma/R only attempts to strangle Bavian in earnest when, afraid she might be dangerously crazy, he rebuffs her advances (L-57—L-65). Until then, Roma/R's seductive behavior is no ruse; and indeed, many passages in the First Script read like softcore pornography. An example is a shot

from the foot of the couch as the girl draws up one leg, her body outlined provocatively under the sheer nightgown. Babian permits his eyes to move slowly over the lovely curves.

Babian starts to trace the outlines of her body with his fingertips—starting at the hand and moving slowly down along one side—the shoulder, arm, hip—the slender leg nearest him. His fingers scarcely touch. The girl closes her eyes, quivering. (L-9)

This is just one of many moments of frolicking in intimate chambers, desirous looking, and playful disrobing.

To be sure, the film can get a little overheated too, but changes—in addition to turning Roma/R's amorousness into a mask—act to tamp the eroticism down. In the First Script, Rogen's self-portrait is "a nude figure with a gorgeous evening wrap draped seductively around her" (H-14). In the Final, it is "a seminude figure draped in a black lace gown" (H-12). One would be hard pressed to call the figure in the film even seminude ([Figure 4](#)). We can thus understand the apple this figure holds to encode her former nudity.

Another change involves the pleasure Rogen takes in her upgraded body. In the Final Script, she "throws herself back, stretches her arms—feels her breasts—every move showing the curved, voluptuous body" (G-57). The closest she comes to this moment in the film is when she throws herself back, stretches her arms, and feels some upholstery fabric ([Figure 5](#)).

Other adjustments concern the scene in which Rogen takes possession. In the First Script, after she faints,

a distinct paroxysm shakes Roma's body. She twists until her face is buried in the pillows for a moment. Houston bends to take her shoulders and turn her face



Figure 4. In Roma's body, Rogen regards her self-portrait.



Figure 5. Roma/R amorously reclines.

upwards. ... Her face is not quite the clearly virginal countenance we have become accustomed to. There is a worldly wisdom about the eyes; the lips are fuller, more sensuous. They curl in a Mona Lisa Smile. (G-50)

The hard-to-miss implication here is that Roma has just had an orgasm and lost her virginity. In the film, after a superimposition of Rogen

descends onto Roma (who, in corpse-like repose, undergoes no paroxysms), Roma/R rises and says to Bavian, "Thank you for a wonderful séance." But the semantic bandwidth was wider in the First Script, where she says, "Thank you for a wonderful experience" (G-60), leaving precisely what she is grateful for unspecified.

With Rogen's soul onboard, Roma becomes sexualized. The change takes a more scandalous form in the First Script, where, in addition to stroking her body in approval, she behaves like so following the moment of possession: "As she rises, she artfully opens her gown so that her bosom may be more exposed, every move suggestively rippling under the silk" (G-56). Still, while the character's exhibitionism and masturbatory self-delight have been reigned in, Lombard's lighting and makeup do render her appearance more sensual, and her performance style shifts from grieving milquetoast to scheming harlot. The possession triggers, as Jenny Hazelgrove writes, "the emergence of Roma's reckless and amorous double."²²

What is the mechanism of this transmission of essence—from Rogen, into the air for a time, and into Roma? One model came readymade to the filmmakers with their subject matter. For spiritualists, "ether"—the same invisible medium that enabled electricity, magnetism, x-rays, and radio to propagate—also enabled communication with spirits. As prominent scientist and fervent believer in spiritualism, Oliver Lodge, wrote: "The Ether of Space is the connecting link."²³ No one in the film mentions ether, but some of Bavian's language evokes the concept. Meanwhile, Houston is worried that "mitrogenic waves," which are "ultraviolet rays given off by the body," might carry Rogen's spirit to a new host. These pseudoscientific ideas, however, do not supply the primary basis for conceptualizing the mechanism of transfer. The governing metaphor is that of a *disease*. Houston voices his fear of a "danger of contagion," language *The New Yorker* picks up on when it writes that, "by a 'contagion of the spirit,' a sweet young girl is infected with the disposition, and even the strength, of a recently executed murderess."²⁴ More recently, a writer calls Rogen "Paramount decadence in its most virulent form."²⁵

What exactly is being communicated? Humphries and Schudson note that the airborne contagion consists of a femininity so concentrated that it is venomously toxic.²⁶ The film underscores the composition and poisonousness of this material when it imbues Rogen with a surfeit of feminine stereotypes and "deviant" behaviors and appetites. A newspaper in the montage reports that she killed three lovers following a "riotous orgy," putting group sex in the minds of viewers. On the witness stand, also in the montage, she says she would "do it again, and again, and again," referring to murder but the boast smacks, as Humphries observes, of nymphomania.²⁷ Pointing to the possibility that Rogen is a lesbian is her attempt

to possess Roma first in Houston's penthouse and then, successfully, at the second seance—when a superimposition of her body “lays down on top of Roma,” a moment one can read as a rape; and when she touches herself in the First Script after gaining access to Roma's body. This last bit of behavior, like her self-groping in the newspaper photo (see [Figure 3](#)), further implies that Rogen has a habit of masturbating in the presence of others. Add to these compulsions hysteria, which Rogen exhibits when, hours before the execution, waiting for Bavian, she cries out, “Why doesn't he come?” with increasing intensity until she screams.

That the disease Rogen embodies is feminine in nature is emphasized by three symbols peppered into the studio scene. First, Bavian compares her to a black widow spider. Second, the camera comes to rest on a picture of a black cat on the wall, with eyes glowing as Rogen's and Roma/R's do in extreme close ups. Third is Rogen's apple, to which the camera returns throughout the scene (see [Figure 4](#)). Rogen is the unclean spirit and she is Eve, the great progenitor of sin in the world.

Also suggesting the nature of Roma's inheritance from the dead woman are critics who see her transformation in unsubtle terms. *Variety* complains that “the Jekyll-Hyde transposition in the femme gender is crudely done, forced as it is to depend on such flimsy device as fainting spells, smirks, she-devil facial expressions and double exposures.”²⁸ The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* writes, more sympathetically, that “it is a difficult role and Miss Lombard has a difficult time trying to make it ring true with her shrieks, devilish grimaces and double exposures.”²⁹ More recently, a writer remarks that “Roma's portrayal of the possessed Roma ... relies mostly on slutty make-up, a forward manner and many an arched eyebrow.”³⁰

Still, while the film loads Rogen with societally damning traits, it also implies a few positive ones. The First Script describes her studio as “distinctly feminine—a sort of artist's studio and voluptuary's retreat. A huge divan, littered with soft cushions, predominates” (H-8). Rogen, whatever else she represents, is an artist, too. Her space, distinctly feminine, is devoted to pleasure but also creativity. Rogen is a progenitor of more than sin. More radically, one might further conjecture that, assuming she killed her lovers immediately after the orgy, her studio is the site of another kind of “art” she makes, a possibility I will briefly consider later.

The murder-for-sex revision strategy papers over another natural attribute Rogen originally possesses. In the film, the warden asks why Rogen. Houston answers: “She should prove a remarkable subject. So notorious a criminal should, I imagine, have quite a number of what you would call imitators.” In the First Script he gives a different reason: “The authorities gave her to me because I had to have a powerful, dynamic spirit—but one bound to the earth by its own sensual passions—and Olga Mirova was

perfect” (F-18). Earthly sensuality, then, is this character’s *original* Original Sin. It still is for some viewers: Humphries writes that “it is Rogen’s sexuality or libido that turns out to be the film’s unassimilable ‘foreign body’.”³¹

Rogen dies early, but her spirit exacts revenge at the climax and, still laughing, vanishes. Raymond Valinoti describes his lingering sense of a character going unpunished, in an ending that would be harder to pull off once the Production Code began to be enforced the next year.³² The film kills her early, but it never quite manages to finish her off. It annihilates a character who, in the end, proves to be indomitable. Along the way, she excites dread and desire in many she meets. Places the film registers, more and less implicitly, an ambivalence surrounding this character are the opening Confucius quote—“TREAT ALL SUPERNATURAL BEINGS WITH RESPECT ... BUT KEEP ALOOF FROM THEM!”—and Bavian’s description of Rogen as beautiful, “yes, but repulsive.”³³ She represents, simultaneously, the animating core of the story and the threat that it is the work of the narrative to suppress and eradicate. As Schudson writes: “The film ... centers on the containment of her ‘murderous spirit’ since [Houston] is certain that it will infect others! Isn’t that how unbridled female sexuality works?”³⁴ This sexuality is active and weaponized. And it is in the ways this force manifests itself, both before and after Rogen’s body ceases to contain it, that the film reveals how, for all its antipathy, it cannot help but acknowledge this force’s unmatched and even glorious power.

Switching Genders

It is precisely in this place, at this site of fluid boundaries and metamorphosing identities, that I would argue change becomes possible, that whole worlds—and not just those imagined by the Spiritualists—begin to shift.

Marlene Tromp on séances³⁵

Rogen must pay for her sin of embodying unrepressed female sexuality. Men condemn her, from Bavian to the gavel-banging judge and male-dominated jury to the warden to Houston, Grant, and Hammond. The film’s judgement, however, is less univocal than these characters’. This ambivalence manifests itself in two major ways. The first involves a transposition that swaps the genders of two characters, in a development Soister sums up when he describes the film’s

not-so-subtle male/female role reversal. It is the *woman’s* physical strength that lays waste to the weaker male; in addition to throttling gents left and right, Ruth takes a shine to crushing metal cups in her (or Roma’s) bare hands. ... It is Bavian who mouths the classical female query—“Are you trying to get me drunk?”—and sports the classic female weapon—poison. Roma, however, performs the clichéd male ritual of locking the door and secreting the key, and ... it is Dr. Houston, male authority figure *par excellence*, who faints dead away.³⁶



Figure 6. Roma/R awakens and starts exercising her hands.

A closer look at this reversal will help frame some questions about its implications and address an apparent contradiction in my argument.

Rogen's gender realignment has already occurred when we meet her, for she has dispatched three men with her bare hands. The hand motif is emphasized in the First Script when, for example, Hammond says of Rogen: "They say that girl could rip a pack of cards in two with her hands" (D-6). This emphasis passes to Roma when, in the film, following the superimposition of Rogen's descending form, Roma immediately starts working her hands together (Figure 6); when, as Rogen did, she crushes a cup; and when, in the Final Script, Bavian "looks at Roma's hands. They are muscular and efficient-looking, not at all the sort of hands one would expect to find belonging to Roma Courtney" (L-12).

Also implicated in this motif is Bavian, who poisons his enemies by means of a dark-stoned ring that resembles one on Roma's finger (Figure 7; and see Figure 6). Here are two characters who kill with their hands—comparing which, we see one emerging as the more natural and authentic killer, who doesn't need to "put something on" to achieve her ends, which is one way of describing Bavian's whole spiritualist act. Rogen's power is more raw and ultimately effective—for at the climax, she easily overpowers Bavian, forcing him onto a settee and nearly killing him before Grant bursts into the room.

Another motif, also worked out in the scripts and also encouraging a reflection on two kinds of power, is laughter. There is quite a bit of it in the film. Rogen laughs hysterically when, after accepting Houston's offer, she crushes the cup. In the scene in which Bavian, realizing his landlady



Figure 7. Bavian's ring resembles Roma's.

knows too much about his designs on Roma, poisons her, she giggles throughout, including nervously after he pricks her hand and she starts succumbing—all while mockingly, and eventually triumphantly and alone, Bavian giggles along.³⁷ On the yacht, when Rogen's spirit leaves Roma's body to ensnare Bavian in some ropes, we hear her maniacal laughter again. Bavian believes he has the upper hand, plays the villain, and does his share of laughing; but the climax sees him snuffed out and silenced while his better cackles on.

The film armors Rogen with “masculine” traits while sliding Bavian into a position of “feminine” weakness, in a movement anticipated by his name. Originally “Babian”—which makes Hammond's insult in the film, “Mr. Baboon, or whatever your name is,” make more sense—his name now recalls not a monkey but a bird, for it is “avian” with one letter added. Strengthening any cultural associations of birds with women is a scene, in the aviary on Roma's estate, that associates them with her ([Figure 8](#)).

Two more parallels underline Bavian's weakness. He has a dog, and Roma's brother had one—and John, as spirits go, represents a far less formidable visitor to the earthly realm than Rogen. From across the divide, Rogen will thoroughly “outman” John—just as Roma will prove Bavian's superior as a medium. A second parallel links Bavian to Houston, for both, as I noted, unintentionally facilitate Rogen's return. Also, Houston “faints dead away” at a moment when action is called for, while Bavian twice falls into a faint-like trance—including at the séance at which, moments later,



Figure 8. Birds surround and adorn Roma.

Roma will faint. All this swooning is culturally gendered behavior, compromisingly so in the case of the scientist and spiritualist—which *Variety* further aligns on the basis of the ripe hokum of their practices:

The villain is a phony spiritualist, and he's painted with a pretty broad brush all the way. On the other hand there's a prominent scientist whose ideas are equally far-fetched, but he's accepted as a legitimate person. But of the two, the villain is the more worthwhile because his stuff is shown to be faked, while the scientist, although just as nutty, takes himself seriously. But audiences won't believe in the scientist any more than the spiritualist, and that's *Supernatural's* weakness.³⁸

Houston muses in the First Script: "The cheap spiritualist ... and the great scientist ... both meddling with the same things ... maybe I'm the fraud ... and he's the scientist" (F-24, ellipses in original). Two men faint—although Bavian, of course, is only pretending. It turns out that this difference will make no difference at all, for Bavian's act, including his entire spiritualist persona, is exactly what gets him into trouble.

Bavian is the pretender while Roma, though she is unaware, is the natural medium. Before demonstrating this through Rogen's lightning-rod attraction to Roma, the film implies it in a shot in which Bavian (channeling spiritualist discourses on ether) says to a skeptical Grant: "I'm very sensitive as well as being psychic. Hostility affects me the same as static affects radio reception, so if you'll pardon me, for Miss Courtney's sake, would you please keep an open mind?" Throughout the 15-second shot, the camera looks past Bavian's blurry, rear-facing form to Roma, whose brightly lit, crisply focused face marks the shot's glowing center of interest.

The implication that Roma is the person Bavian is actually talking about draws on assumptions that good mediums will be sensitive individuals. A 1919 guide to mediumship, by Swami Bhakta Vishita (real name William Walker Atkinson), anticipates Bavian's objection to Grant's dismissive attitude when it describes the medium's temperament as marked by "a diffidence which causes the person to wish to be out of the range of the observation of strangers and those not sympathetic to them," and a "quality of being extremely sensitive to sneers and slights, adverse criticism and oppositions, while ridicule drives them almost beside themselves."³⁹

Mediums are sensitive, and they are also passive. Vishita writes: "It must be always remembered that the medium is not the active agent in the production of mediumistic phenomena—he is not called to *do* anything except to passively act as the medium or channel of communication between the two planes of existence."⁴⁰ Lodge writes that "over-anxiety on the part of a sitter is by no means helpful. Calmness and placidity are."⁴¹ Roma, rendered practically inert by her loss—her response to which speaks, also, to her delicate sensitivity—could therefore not come to the job with higher qualifications. Another reason her mediumship outstrips Bavian's is that she is a woman.

As many who write about the spiritualist movement note, women were widely believed to make superior mediums to men, and they outnumbered, especially at first, the men who occupied the position.⁴² This position was "feminine" regardless of the medium's gender, as Tom Gunning writes:

The medium was passive, but passive in a particularly dynamic way. She was receptive, sensitive, a vehicle—a *medium*—by which manifestation appeared. All mediums, men or women, had to be, in spiritualist parlance, feminine, or negative (borrowing again from electricity and magnetism, a technical term which also has implications for photography), in order to let the spirit world manifest itself.⁴³

Male mediums thus faced an occupational hazard, one Bret E. Carroll describes when he traces cultural perceptions of mediumship as a "feminized profession" that constituted, for male practitioners, a "threat to manhood."⁴⁴

Researchers who explore the sexual dimension of this threat include Marlene Tromp, who evokes both the boundary-crossing nature of the séance—where the here and hereafter intermingle—and its eroticism when she locates, and genders, the medium within it, referring to "the receptive bodies of mediums, often young and feminine, which provided the primary channel for intercourse with the spirits."⁴⁵ Not less suggestively, Alex Owen writes that "the very vocabulary of trance mediumship oozed sexuality. Mediums surrendered and were then entered, seized, possessed by another."⁴⁶ These are the waters Bavian wades into, where he learns that only pretending to swoon does not make it less dangerous. And when, for one

of his deceptions, he asks to borrow a handkerchief, plucking one from Hammond's pocket, his charade carries, again, a whiff of femininity when he requires a man's hankie. No matter that he does not wait for one to be proffered, or that he deftly exchanges it for his own. The forces at work on Bavian are indifferent to the agency he thinks he possesses.

Roma's status as a woman, and an emphatically vacant one at that, renders her vulnerable to invasion by Rogen—just as Rogen's brute aggression in life primes her to embrace the role of marauding spirit. Carroll writes that "Spiritualists imagined a dualistic cosmos in which spirit, perceived as causal and active, pervaded and vitalized a passive and receptive world of inert matter. They interpreted the function of spirit as 'masculine' and used explicitly sexual imagery."⁴⁷ Rogen thus finds her life's calling in the afterlife, while Bavian stumbles into a trap from which he will not escape.

But Rogen cannot represent both a concentrated distillation of femininity and a masculine woman, can she? I believe this contradiction exists in the film, which is not fully in control of the tangle of forces and ideas it freights into itself when it engages spiritualist discourses and practices. Rogen is masculine and feminine, an ambivalence that aligns with other ways the film depicts her character.

The film dreads Rogen because she is aberrant twice over—too active both for a woman and a dead person—but it also harnesses her generative power, for there is no story without her. She is the film's "unassimilable foreign body," expelled but never, in the end, fully contained or negated. A disease and a serial killer, she is also an artist from which many things, not all of them bad, issue. The film kills her early but never stops recognizing her awesome power. I suggest that masculinizing Rogen is the film's inarticulate and ideologically unenlightened way of exalting something it is drawn to, fears, and does not understand—which is her desirable, desirous, undiluted sexuality—this while the film dresses Bavian up as a feminized man to show his weakness. The film does not sort these conflicting ideas out, just as spiritualism did not. In *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, Ann Braude asks:

How could Spiritualists reconcile this celebration of female weakness and passivity with their assertion that women were naturally strong and healthy? As Spiritualists struggled with the cultural vocabulary of Victorian ideas about gender and stretched them to their limits, they bumped up against the contradictions inherent within them.⁴⁸

Supernatural bumps up against similar limits and blithely ignores them. Still, while I argue for a measure of incoherence, and a smaller dose of self-awareness, in the film's gendered recognition of Rogen's power, this

recognition comes through more clearly, and breaks free of the sexist mindset, in the film's depiction of writing.

Writing Machines

"Roma my dear, life does continue after death. There's not a doubt of it. But communication, well that's a different matter."

Houston, *Supernatural*

We allude to the fact that while a wireless telegraphic sending instrument may be sending forth vibrations of the strongest power, its messages are capable of being received or "picked up" only by those instruments which are "in tune" with the sending instrument to at least a certain degree; to all other instruments, those which are not "in tune" with the sending instrument, there is no message perceptible.

Swami Bhakta Vishita⁴⁹

Much of the writing in *Supernatural* serves classical Hollywood storytelling needs in conventional ways. Bavian sends Roma a letter in which he offers to help her contact her brother. On death row, Rogen awaits a reply to her letter in which she entreats Bavian to visit. We can widen the purview to include other forms of inscription—such as the record John and Roma pressed, on which they clown and sing, that she listens to after his funeral. Wider still, Bavian makes another kind of impression when he molds a death mask of John. The record and mask point to the status of writing as the trace, index, and identifier of an originating source. In this light we see Rogen writing in more ways than one. When Bavian gets Rogen's letter, he suspects his landlady has opened and resealed it when she names the sender. Asking how she knew, the landlady says she recognized the handwriting on the envelope. The next spoken line comes when Bavian, after reading silently, exclaims: "This is a lie! Her fingermarks were found on his throat." Rogen, then, through two means, leaves behind signs of her distinctive style and hand.

Writing as identifier and trace is another idea developed in the First Script, which makes much of the change in Roma's handwriting after the possession—when her "signature is quite different to the fine Spencerian script we saw when Roma signed her name in Babian's book. The name is here written in a heavy, bold style" (J-10); and when Houston, demanding proof that Rogen has left Roma's body, says, "Let me see you write your name" (L-36). Handwriting style reflects, or carries, the essence of the material transferred from one woman to the other. So does hand strength and its signature activity of strangling. But hands, more in the scripts than film, also caress and undress. The emphatic intertwining of writing and hands reinforces the original conception of Rogen's identity as sexual in nature.

Writing points back to an author and it forms a bridge to readers. Who is writing and whose message is being read represent the most important indicators, in *Supernatural*, of who has and who lacks power. Consider John. What is the “original source” of the mask, John’s face or Bavian’s hand? John’s face will have almost nothing to say in the film, as Bavian will steal it to carry out his plans. At the first séance, John speaks audibly, but then we learn this was only a trick rigged by Bavian. At the second séance, words of warning appear on a handkerchief, another apparent communication from John whose real author is the mountebank. John’s actual manifestations in the film are decidedly underwhelming: he appears a couple of times as a superimposition and makes his presence felt in the form of some breezes blowing indoors. Bavian speaks for and as John, whose identity he molds to suit his own purposes, while John keeps wanly silent throughout.⁵⁰ He is nothing like the film’s other unmoored spirit.

To understand how writing figures in the film’s articulations of power, one must examine the montage.⁵¹ It begins with a newspaper dominated by three headlines, all about Rogen (see Figure 3). The sheet tears apart and reveals a complex image—a triple superimposition consisting of large, turning, belted flywheels; listening jurors, mostly men; and Rogen saying, “He’s lying. I’ll kill him!” Because we know nothing about Bavian at this point, Rogen’s accusation and threat lack a clear referent. Without an explanatory context, and in view of other aspects of the montage and film, the utterance can be construed as an expression of hatred toward *any* man, toward men in general.

Viewers have only just gotten into the film. The montage is packed with information; it has a lot to lay out in a minute and a half, before the next scene begins unfolding the story at a slower speed. This story confused some viewers. Where does the confusion start? Well, we have no idea who is lying and whom Rogen wants to kill. Second, what are those big flywheels? Some viewers see a printing press, an inference justified by the fact that we have just seen a front page tear apart and the wheels are shown to be “behind” the sheet.⁵² But one might also sense, while the stone-faced jury looks on, that these are the wheels of justice grinding toward a verdict and Rogen’s fate. Some see a printing press, but this machinery does not resemble the printing presses in any Hollywood montages I have seen. Another who might not have been sure was the studio writer of the “Release Dialogue Script” (April 26, 1933), who refers to it simply as, “TRICK SHOT — Ruth’s eyes and machinery.”⁵³

I contacted E. Haven Hawley, president of the American Printing History Association, a historian of technology and science. She watched the montage and wrote back: “It looks like the back end of a textile machine.” She then put me in touch with Frank Romano, president of the board of

directors of the Museum of Printing in Haverhill, MA, about whom she said, if anyone can answer my question, it was he. His determination:

God bless Hollywood. Rather than go down to the *Los Angeles Times* and photograph their press, they created a “Frankenstein” press. The two big wheels are actually from a single-user Gordon-style platen press. The curved spokes are what we call “old style” and from the 1870s to 1890s. Newer versions (after 1890) were straight. They probably hooked them up to motors to get the rotation and placed some benign mechanical apparatus in-between. To answer your question: It is a fake printing press.

Romano confirmed my suspicion that the machinery in the montage is wonderfully ambiguous.

After its first appearance, the wheels disappear, the jury remains, and a new superimposition, a headline, reads, “‘My Life’: Ruth Rogen’s Own Story.” This raises a crucial question. The jury is mostly male. The judge is male. The warden and Houston, introduced in the next scene, are male. So, we can assume, is the press, another massive apparatus that—like the interlocked justice and penal systems, and Houston’s “science”—is *processing* this woman, converting her into copies sold like so many sheets of paper. The newspapers are exploiting Rogen because she makes a good story. However, might this headline suggest that, through the press, she is telling her own story? She reveals her ability to control many things after she has been disenfranchised of a body. Is the film raising the possibility that she possesses this ability while alive?

More images flurry by, including the angry judge banging his gavel, then another multiple superimposition: the wheels again; a headline, floating forward, reporting that Rogen has been judged not insane; Rogen’s silhouetted face, eyes glowing, getting larger; and Rogen, in profile, saying she would do it again and again and again—ending with her trademark crazy laugh (Figure 9). The laughter motif returns seconds later when a headline reports, “Famous Slayer Laughs at Chair,” and expressionistic images of hands make strangling gestures. More misandry surfaces when Rogen says, as the jury reappears, “Men, I hate the whole breed.” Then, in reply to something we don’t hear, she snips, “Never mind the speeches.” Here she cuts off an interlocutor the film itself silences by excluding their speech. Moments later a headline reads, “Rogen Paints Own Death Portrait As Execution Nears.” Second-time viewers will think of the painting in her studio, but the headline also looks back to the headline about Rogen telling her story. Even though she cannot get her hands on a typewriter, her story flows through the anonymous reporter who, to Rogen, is another writing tool. Now, deprived of her brushes, she nevertheless paints her portrait—this while, below the headline, she pantomimes laughter and reaches out to throttle an unseen man. Thus does the montage establish the inseparability

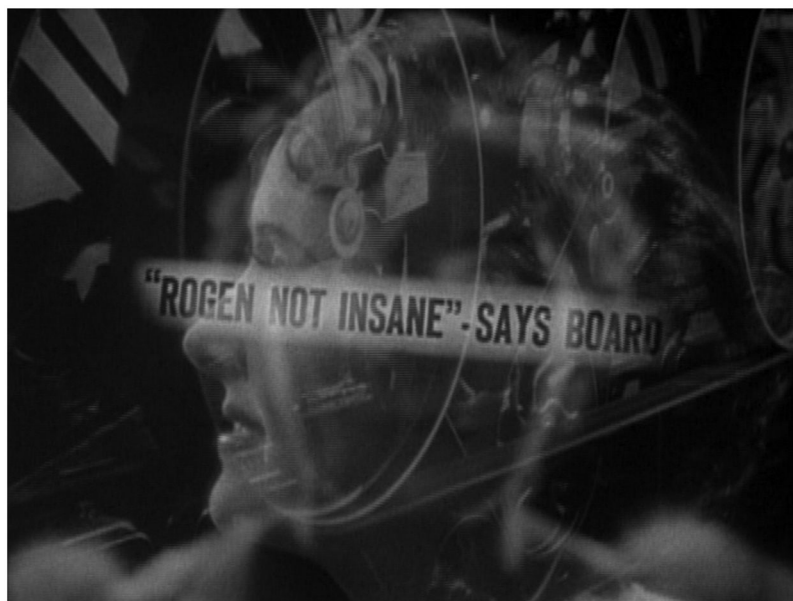


Figure 9. Multiple images, including two of Rogen, overlap in the opening montage.

of the film's cardinal motifs. This image, like the whole montage, is packed, but there is another layer. While Rogen noiselessly laughs and strangles, and the headline tells us she paints, her voiceover remarks, "I've nothing to say." This is an amazing line considering that her voice has been the only one we have heard so far.

A final image of machinery appears near the close of the montage. As Rogen cries out, "Why doesn't he come!" we see what looks like a large shop floor filled with rows of machinery attended, it appears, entirely by women. The prison laundry? The shots are probably meant to represent a printing press, but one might think of Moloch in *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, GER, 1927), the furious god-machine the men serve, and to whom they are sacrificed, below the streets of the city. No Freder will liberate the slaves here. Maybe this is Rogen's job? This is where we see the "trick shot" of Rogen's eyes—superimposed, glowing, in extreme close-up—referred to in the Release Dialogue Script. They suggest that Rogen's presence, even when she is alive, burns with supernatural intensity—in this shot favored by the Halperins, who use it to evoke Murder Legendre's mystical powers in *While Zombie*. Rogen has turned the courtroom into her mouthpiece, and she will climb atop this machinery, too, and commandeer it to broadcast her story to the world—just as the Halperins' film will do.

Who is the master enunciator? Bavian fancies himself a suave manipulator when he sends a letter of introduction to a woman who has been laid low by tragedy. He reels off spiritualist patter with grave solemnity and a magician's panache. His apartment, site of the first séance, conceals an impressive array

of gadgetry: electrical switches behind a door cut into a wall that is itself hidden behind a framed picture that swings open on hinges; tinkling chimes inside a secret compartment that snaps open on command; a trumpet and plaster hand suspended on wires that make them appear to float; a sliding panel that hides the death mask that seems to speak—as does a handkerchief he doctors with chemicals so that words materialize on it. Bavian fancies himself a master of machines and messages, but another parallel, with an anchor in the montage, suggests otherwise.

The flywheels look as much like train wheels as they do a printing press. (Look quickly and the belt resembles a rail.) After Bavian poisons his landlady, he looks out the window and wonders what to do with the body. An elevated train passes, and a close-up of the wheels shows them sparking—irregularly, brightly, and with seeming intention—in a way recalling the controlled bursts of a telegraph. Bavian gets an idea and turns from the window; but Rogen's machinery is still turning and speaking, and it is her words and hands that will shape the events to come, while Bavian, another tool, plays the far weaker role, as he learns too late.

Bavian imperils himself when he steps into the medium function, even while the searching Rogen bypasses him for someone in the room who is more receptive. Roma, the mild-mannered opposite of Rogen, is not so different than her after all. Both are vacated women. Rogen aims for a different target than the one Bavian offers because Roma is—recalling Vishita in my epigraph above—more attuned to her vibrational energies. Still, while the women are alike, they also differ in a way that makes them complimentary. Rogen is ready to write; and Roma is the soft, white, impressionable tablet on which the inky black Rogen will inscribe herself.

But sometimes mediums write too, when they copy down the words of a spirit. *Supernatural* depicts no automatic writing (the words on the handkerchief appear without the intervention of a medium's hand), but the concept can be brought to bear in a reflection on this film. Anthony Enns writes that “the distinction between authors and writers introduced in spiritualist séances was often linked to gender roles, as the deceased authors were typically male and the spirit mediums who transcribed their messages were typically female.”⁵⁴ I have envisioned Roma more as a pad than a scribe, although she certainly begins transcribing Rogen's messages when she carries out her strangling agenda and mouths her words. Before then, Roma exudes the traits of femininity that Enns and others find built into, and conferred by, the medium role, while Rogen assumes the “masculine” role of author—which I posit as the film's (mis)recognition of her frightening hyper-femininity. In my conclusion, I turn to a quality of automatic writing other than the purported masculinity of its source.

Conclusion

The style is involved, obscure, inflated, yet possessing a superficial smoothness and a suggestion of flowing periods and musical cadences. The ideas are often shallow and incoherent, and all but lost in a multitude of words.

Lewis Spence on “Automatic Writing and Speaking”⁵⁵

Nineteenth-century female spiritualist mediumship might have been subversive, even empowering, but it was also ensnaring.

Alex Owen⁵⁶

Surrealists and psychologists have viewed automatic writing as a manifestation of unconscious thoughts.⁵⁷ A subject, thinking about nothing in particular, moves pen across paper, making words that reveal secrets buried far below the waking mind. In spiritualist practice, the empty vessel of the medium, pen or chalk in hand, channels not repressed impulses but messages from the Beyond. Yet here as well, suspicions of another source persist. Of “automatic writing and speaking,” Lewis Spence writes in his 1920 *Encyclopedia of Occultism*: “The general consensus of opinion ... ascribes such performances to the unconscious activity of the agent.”⁵⁸ Not that one must choose one explanation over the other, as a 1948 history of the Society for Psychical Research explains: “Much automatic writing shows no sign of being anything else than the product of the automatist’s subliminal [sic]. Sometimes, however, the content of the messages suggests that the subliminal is the channel for them rather than their ultimate source.”⁵⁹ Automatic writing can be two things at once. So can a public séance; Simone Natale notes that such events, at once resolutely theatrical and deeply earnest, were packaged to be received simultaneously as entertainments and as venues for authentic supernatural occurrences.⁶⁰ Combining these two observations inspires a question: Can a séance function as both a diverting spectacle and a mirror of the unconscious?

The same could be asked of any Hollywood film, but I suggest that *Supernatural* presents itself, certainly more than the longstanding tradition of dismissing the film suggests, as a candidate especially worthy of this double-optics view. The film is densely sedimented with layers of meaning in part because the subject matter it narrativizes comes to the film displaying a surface-level entertainment value that encloses—as Owen, Tromp, and others observe—a cluster of sexual and potentially feminist energies. And this was a subject that—as references, especially in the script materials, to spiritualist practices, figures, and scandals attest—the film’s makers approached with an interest greater than merely in exploitation and sensationalization.⁶¹

The film and its publicity campaign further attest to the maker’s intentness to convey a point of view that was at once wryly skeptical of spiritualist assertions and solicitously respectful of them. On the one hand, the

press sheet announced that Lodge himself was asked to serve as consultant on the film.⁶² And, while he politely declined, an article on Lombard in *Shadoplay* magazine noted that, “to be sure that everything is the real McCoy, she will have the technical advice and aid of Morgan Howard, who enjoys a considerable reputation as a legitimate medium, under the sobriquet of *Doctor Q*.”⁶³ On the other hand, Paramount wanted to turn away no comers, and a moviegoer looking for no more than a good show and maybe a chuckle would not be discouraged by items such as one, in the *Hollywood Reporter*, that described a séance hosted by Paramount and attended by “an overabundance of wisecrackers.”⁶⁴ The studio wanted it both ways, touting the film’s “sympathetic” view of spiritualism while planting stories about unsuccessful scientific attempts to confirm the movement’s most basic claims.⁶⁵ The film itself amply demonstrates the methods by which frauds perpetrate their deceptions while also depicting genuine spirits, these accompanied by a musical sound that, Murray Leeder notes, guarantees their authenticity—and which, sounding to me like a wheezy church organ, genuflects so low to these manifestations that no viewer who believes there might be real spirits afoot could possibly be offended.⁶⁶

The film, presenting spiritualism as both a mere show and real spirit communication, functions as both a mere Hollywood genre exercise and a portal to another world, which we might call the film’s “unconscious.” Automatic writing does not figure in *Supernatural*, but the film, with its—recalling Spence in my epigraph above—“superficial smoothness,” and “shallow and incoherent” ideas, all enclosing a core that is none of those things—brings this practice to mind.

The wheels print newspapers, grind out justice, bear down on victims like trains, and tap out messages like telegraphs. They also resemble the reels of a film projector. Or maybe they are the montage’s own machinery baring itself while it churns out large quantities of narrative material, quickly and efficiently, so the storytelling proper can get underway in the next scene. *Supernatural* lends itself to a reflexive reading in other ways as well. At the first séance, Bavian asks Grant to turn out the lights once the medium enters a trance. When Bavian’s head tips back, Grant jokes, “I suppose that’s my cue.” At the second séance, Bavian sits at a piano and plays accompanying music to his own performance while again asking Grant to get the lights. The participants, appalled by the words appearing on the handkerchief, do not see Bavian, slumped over in another fake trance, produce a pocket-sized projector, point it at a wall, and create the ghostly image of John’s face that makes Roma shriek and pass out (Figure 10).

Supernatural stages the séance like a miniature film exhibition, a bit of show business flimflammy at which, unbidden, the real spirit of



Figure 10. Bavian's secret for producing the apparition of John is a pocket-sized projector.

Rogen spectacularly appears. What “real spirits” does this fiction film conjure? Some veneer has to go before an answer can be made out. Removing a layer uncovers an original story wound tightly around ideas about female lust and satisfaction. Scraping off another reveals expressions of awe and dread at a woman's sexuality. But this is not yet the core.

Rogen, disincarnated once more, entangles and hangs Bavian, then exits the film. The avenging spirit, avenged, goes unpunished—all while, simultaneously, the film depicts the relentless harshness of women's treatment in a world of men. There was never to be any resurrection for Rogen, not even the horrific Frankensteinian kind. She was the unclean spirit that was cast out. She was the object for scientific research obtained for nothing—destroyed, yet wired into the narrative like a battery to make everything happen. In the end, Roma can go back to her passionless non-embrace with Grant, for good girls are not supposed to enjoy sex—and in this grotesque light, we see the “cure” for Rogen's nymphomania administered in Houston's penthouse. Both women can go back to being well-behaved corpses, in a film that shows no explicit interest in making visible the experience of being a woman living under patriarchy.

And yet the film expresses, with a bleakness that borders on annihilating indifference, just that untenability. In her analysis of *Blackmail* (Alfred Hitchcock, UK, 1929), Tania Modleski shows that, while the film takes sadistic delight in silencing and punishing its heroine, it also vividly dramatizes her plight. Modleski traces how laughter in *Blackmail* reveals more than

merely a mocking attitude toward Alice White. The film is too sympathetic to be outright, and only, condemning her. Modleski shows that, in scenes that triangulate White between the controlling authority of her cop boyfriend and the machinations of the criminal blackmailer—and by jolting her into an expressive silence for a long stretch of the film following the traumatic event at its center—the film permits a female viewer, identifying in a way Hitchcock did not intend, to appreciate a joke she doesn't find funny but "gets" nevertheless.⁶⁷ Placing *Supernatural* alongside *Blackmail* as Modleski understands it can help bring a last strata of its subtext into view.

In *Blackmail*, in her would-be rapist's studio, Alice paints a cartoonish, childlike head, to which the artist adds a voluptuously mature woman's body—signing which, Modleski claims, Alice is "authorizing, as it were, man's view of woman."⁶⁸ Rogen, by contrast, paints her portrait the way she wishes, with no man's hand completing the picture for her. And *Supernatural*, like *Blackmail* (although less rigorously, brilliantly, and sympathetically), visualizes the societal constraints on a woman when a shot frames Rogen with the pressuring warden and Houston standing closely to either side. A moment earlier, the camera starts on Houston, catches his spoken line—then darts past Rogen *while she is speaking* and stops on the warden. Rogen is trapped, and the brevity of her blurred appearance in this shot, while she pleads, suggests that her words carry no weight at all, not with a viewer—and not with these men, who wait for only one word: yes. So do we, if we are eager for the ghost story part of the film, and Lombard's part, to begin. The film gives viewers interested in feeling sorry for Rogen virtually nothing to work with, for it is easier to see her as repulsive or—even less regarding—a narrative expedient, raw material to be caught up in the gears, quickly, so the ghost show can start. If perhaps in just this way, *Supernatural*'s absence of sympathy for the character displays, with greater cruelty and thus clarity than *Blackmail*, a societal view of women. Rogen is unmourned by, literally, everyone.⁶⁹ The precariousness of her nonstatus is also expressed through the laughter motif.

Rogen protests helplessly: "Listen to me, my body's my own. The law gives me that much. Take my body away and then guarantee I can have it forever. Funny, isn't it? You do the laughing." This she says while the men box her in and the shadows of bars fall on the wall behind. She has nowhere to go—and here seems to forfeit her right to laugh—but Rogen will go on to do plenty of laughing, none joyous, and all of it edged with rage. The film insists she seeks revenge against just one man, but it also has her declare: "Men, I hate the whole breed." This is the rage that she passes on to Roma.

Rogen's spirit makes only one vocalization that does not come through Roma's mouth. At the climax, Roma/R laughs giddily while she looks through a porthole at Bavian struggling to escape. A superimposition shows

Rogen leaving Roma's body. Interestingly, just after the exit, Roma continues to laugh, as though perhaps her time with Rogen has taught her something. Then the laughter, now off screen, turns maniacal while Bavian fumbles with the ropes and eventually hangs from one; and we suppose that Roma, from the cabin, is still laughing. But a cut back to her reveals the figure watching, solemn and tight lipped; this laughter was wholly Rogen's own. Still angry, the laughter was wilder and more free than any we have heard so far. And so, unlike the close of *Blackmail*, where, Modleski notes, Alice attempts to laugh along with the men but can make no sound—and the final shot shows a painting of a laughing jester—in *Supernatural* it is the woman who gets the last laugh.⁷⁰

Rogen can take leave of this world because she has finished business that was left unfinished. This multimedia artist, whose canvasses included men's necks, has, beneath a fusillade of sexist tropes, authorized a view of herself—in which an apple becomes not a badge of guilt but the embodiment of all her unapologetic allure and desire. She has finished telling the joke that was her existence before and after her execution. Hitchcock's film, Modleski writes, "foregrounds the problems of woman's speaking."⁷¹ *Supernatural* foregrounds woman's speaking. Rogen spoke through the court system, the press, and the Halperins' film. Too few viewers have gotten the joke, and while explaining a joke never makes it funnier, this one never was to begin with.

Notes

1. Lopez, "Supernatural (1933)," in *Journeys in Classic Film*.
2. Unfavorable comparisons to *White Zombie* include Nott, *Films of Randolph Scott*, p. 29; C., "Supernatural," in *Video Watchdog*, p. 18; Hutchings, *Historical Dictionary of Horror Cinema*, p. 154; Rhodes, *White Zombie*, p. 169. A rare viewer who finds *Supernatural* the equal of *White Zombie* is Henenlotter, "Films from Under the Floorboards," in *Sci-Fi Entertainment*, p. 54. Writers calling the film absurd, ridiculous, and nonsensical include Aaronson, "Supernatural," in *Motion Picture Herald* (1933 April 29), p. 30; "Supernatural," in *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, p. 18; *Herald-Tribune* and *World-Telegram*, both quoted in "New York Reviews: 'Supernatural,'" in *Hollywood Reporter* (1933 April 26), p. 2; Senn, *A Year of Fear*, p. 262; Nott, *Films of Randolph Scott*, p. 28; Hogan, "Supernatural," in *Filmfax*, p. 61. Writers finding the film confusing include "Supernatural," in *Time*, p. 38; *New York Journal* and *New York Post*, both quoted in "New York Reviews: 'Supernatural,'" *Hollywood Reporter* (1933 April 26), p. 2; Burr., "Supernatural," in *Billboard*; Hanke, "Supernatural," in *Mountain Xpress*; Nott, *Films of Randolph Scott*, p. 29.
3. Examples include Hanke, "The Paramount Horrors," in *Scarlet Street*, p. 57; Soister, "Supernatural," in Svehla and Svehla, eds., *Cinematic Hauntings*, p. 291; Norris, "Cool Clicks: *Supernatural* (1933)," in *Pretty Sinister Books*; Humphries, *The Hollywood Horror Film, 1941–1941*, p. 180.
4. Rigby, *American Gothic*, p. 137.

5. Hardy, *The Overlook Film Encyclopedia: Horror*, p. 57.
6. Wright, *Horrorshows*, p. 66. Other writers calling the film “glossy” or a synonym include Clarens, *An Illustrated History of Horror and Science Fiction Films*, p. 90; Hogan, “Supernatural,” in *Filmfax*, p. 61; Henenlotter, “Films from Under the Floorboards,” in *Sci-Fi Entertainment*, p. 54; Senn, *Year of Fear*, p. 263.
7. Hogan, “Supernatural,” in *Filmfax*, p. 61.
8. “Spirits: Put on Good Show If Taken at Face Value,” in *Newsweek*, p. 27.
9. “High-tone respectability”: See note 7 above, p. 61.
10. Schudson, “Carol Lombard is Supernatural.”
11. Quoted in Salkow, “Carole Lombard: Blythe Spirit,” in Peary, *Close-Ups*, p. 31.
12. Lodge, *Why I Believe in Personal Immortality*, p. 200.
13. More examples of Roma looking expressionless and vacant are First Script C-28 and L-84; and Final Script D-31, D-33, and D-39.
14. Aaronson, “Supernatural,” in *Motion Picture Herald* (1933 April 29), p. 30.
15. See note 7 above, p. 61.
16. Jesus is resurrected in all four Gospels; he raises Lazarus in John.
17. Nott, *Films of Randolph Scott*, p. 28.
18. Soister, “Supernatural,” in Svehla and Svehla, eds., *Cinematic Hauntings*, p. 288; Nott also finds the proceedings suspicious (*Films of Randolph Scott*, p. 28).
19. Humphries, *Hollywood Horror Film*, p. 179.
20. Tromp, *Altered States*, p. 23.
21. See for example Hanke, “The Paramount Horrors,” in *Scarlet Street*, p. 57.
22. Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars*, p. 134.
23. Lodge, *Ether and Reality*, p. vii.
24. M., “The Current Cinema,” in *The New Yorker*, p. 45.
25. See note 21 above, p. 57.
26. See note 19 above, p. 179; See note 10 above.
27. See note 19 above, p. 179.
28. Bige., “Supernatural,” in *Variety*, p. 18.
29. “Supernatural,” in *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, p. 18.
30. C., “Supernatural,” in *Video Watchdog*, p. 18.
31. See note 19 above, p. 179.
32. Valinoti, *Hollywood's Pre-Code Horrors*, p. 138.
33. Ellipses in original.
34. See note 10 above.
35. See note 20 above, p. 25.
36. Soister, “Supernatural,” in Svehla and Svehla, eds., *Cinematic Hauntings*, p. 294.
37. Numerous indications of laughter in this scene can be found in the First Script (E-8—E-22).
38. See note 28 above, p. 18. The Los Angeles-based Women's University Club found the film “unsavory, not because it touches the realms of the unknown, but because it does so in the guise of experimental science in a wholly unscientific and sensational fashion” (“Supernatural,” in *Motion Picture Reviews*, p. 9).
39. Vishita, *Genuine Mediumship or The Invisible Powers*, p. 175.
40. Ibid., p. 214. Emphasis in original.
41. Lodge, *Why I Believe*, p. 187.
42. On the prevalence of women mediums, see note 22 above, p. 80.
43. Gunning, “Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations,” in *Fugitive Images*, p. 52.
44. Carroll, “The Religious Construction of Masculinity in Victorian America,” in *Religion and American Culture*, pp. 28 and 40, respectively. See also Dyson, “Gentleman

- Mountebanks' and Spiritualists," in Kontou and Willburn, eds., *Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, pp. 243–244; and see note 22 above, pp. 80.
45. See note 20 above, p. 22.
 46. Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 218.
 47. Carroll, "Religious Construction of Masculinity," in *Religion and American Culture*, 35.
 48. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, p. 161.
 49. See note 39 above, p. 51.
 50. Originally, John possesses Houston and speaks through him (First Script K-16; Final K-8).
 51. There is no montage in the First or Final scripts.
 52. Two who see a printing press are Senn, *Golden Horrors*, p. 198; and see note 32 above, p. 137.
 53. "Supernatural, Release Dialogue Script": Reel 1, p. 4, item 8.
 54. Enns, "The Undead Author," in Kontou and Willburn, eds., *Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, p. 72.
 55. Spence, *Encyclopedia of Occultism*, p. 56.
 56. Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 242.
 57. On Surrealists' interest in automatic writing, see for example Breton, "The Automatic Message," in Breton, *What is Surrealism?*, pp. 97–109. On psychologists' interest; see for example Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments*, p. 127.
 58. See note 55 above, p. 56.
 59. Salter, *The Society for Psychical Research: An Outline of Its History*, p. 33.
 60. Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments*, pp. 1–17 and throughout.
 61. An example is Houston saying, in the First Script: "As a member of the investigating committee of the American Society for Psychical Research—I've seen some remarkable things—actual materializations—particularly in the Margery Case in Boston—and with the famous medium, Eusapia Phallidino" (D-37).
 62. "Oliver Lodge Asked to Aid On Spirit Film," in "Paramount Press Sheet, Supernatural." Newspapers stories repeating the claim include: "Invite Sir Oliver Lodge to Aid in Making Talkie," in *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, p. 22; "Plan Spiritualistic Film," in *Motion Picture Daily*, p. 8; and Shaffer, "Films to Invade Spirits' Realm," in *Detroit Free Press*, p. 5.
 63. Crawford, "Carole Lombard, Our New Sheba of Shivers!" in *Shadoplay*, p. 30. The press sheet reports: "Numerous spiritualists, who understood that the film dealt sympathetically with the subject, sent friendly invitations to attend seances and demonstrations, or offered aid and advice" ("Crank Send Dire Threats To 'Supernatural' Producers").
 64. "Supernatural Stunts at Halperin Party," in *Hollywood Reporter* (1933 March 4), p. 2.
 65. Assertions of the film's sympathetic treatment are in, for example, "Crank Send Dire Threats," "Spirit World Supplies Weird Picture Thrills For 'Supernatural,'" and "Oliver Lodge Asked" (all in the Press Sheet). The claims were repeated in, for example: "'Supernatural Film' Showing at State," in *Reading Times*, p. 9; and "Supernatural," in *Monitor Index and Democrat*, p. 8. The publicity campaign also includes a story titled, "Science Demands To Be Shown! And Spiritualists Can't Deliver Proof—Even for \$5,000 Prize" (Press Sheet).
 66. On this "ghost noise" in the film, see Leeder, *Horror Film*, pp. 166–169.
 67. Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, pp. 15–27.
 68. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

69. Rogen is a pariah even among women. A headline in the montage reads: "Women's Federation Bureau Refuses Aid To Ruth Rogen." The film itself garnered disdain from a similar quarter when it was deemed "not suitable for public consumption" by "a women's organization previewing pictures." ("55 Films Rejected of 343 Seen In Year, Mrs. Winter Reports," in *Motion Picture Herald* [1934 March 31]: 13). See note 38 for another bad review from a women's organization.
70. Modleski, *Women Who Knew Too Much*, pp. 17 and 27.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

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