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Fear of Living Dolls in Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives*

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Abstract: Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* has not garnered a lot of critical attention as a horror text, with scholars tending to focus more on its indebtedness to second wave feminism. The work has been approached as an ironic backlash against the movement when inserted within that framework. In my article, I wish to concentrate upon the book's place within the horror genre: the familiar tropes of the mad scientist, the misuse of technology, fear of living dolls/automata and doppelgängers all appear in one form or another in the novel. As usual with horror texts, under the guise of a fantastic scenario, Levin was aiming at revealing some of the most pressing problems and concerns of contemporary society (the situation of women in patriarchal society). In addition to these topical issues, there are various elements in the book which address timeless fears and anxieties independent of the given social era (such as fear of alienation or fear of animated machines).

Keywords: Gothic, horror, Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives,* second wave feminism

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Introduction

Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972) is relatively unknown in Hungary; however, in the United States the expression "Stepford Wife" has entered the cultural lexicon (Matrix 2007, 109). While most people are not familiar with the novel, there is a clear image evoked in their minds upon hearing this term: beautiful women dressed in an impeccable way, with perfect hairdos, boundless enthusiasm for housework and no interest in anything outside the domestic sphere. Written during the tumultuous years of Second Wave Feminism, directly invoking the name of one of the spearheads of the Women's Rights Movement, Betty Friedan herself, the book is tightly tied to the cultural era it is a product of, expressing many anxieties and concerns which were also on the agenda of feminist critics (especially regarding the role, the isolation, and the unhappiness of many suburban housewives).

Film critic Kathi Maio, in her review of the work, makes a useful distinction between stories that are timeless and ones that are more directly tied to the respective eras in which they were written. She claims that Levin's text is an example par excellence of the second category: a topical work, which might appear "dated" if read decades later (after all, feminism has already entered its fourth wave), yet it offers a "vivid and insightful portrait of one's own moment in time", which she compares to "a snapshot of the social landscape of an earlier time" (Maio 2004, 115).

While the novel's status as an important sociocultural document examining gender issues, conflicts and problems is beyond doubt, I would like to approach it first and foremost as a text belonging firmly within a genre which constitutes my scholarly background: horror. Thus, I propose to examine some constituent elements of *The Stepford Wives* and see how well they fit into the typical schemata employed by horror narratives.

The Stepford Wives presents the story of Joanna Eberhart, a young mother of two, whose family decides to leave the city and move to the seemingly perfect suburb of Stepford (although most people assume the city to be New York, it is never explicitly specified in the text). She initially is reluctant to move, but is eventually persuaded by her husband, Walter, that this is the best for their children: cleaner air, lower crime rates, and friendly neighbours await them.

While settling in, she discovers that almost all the women in town are obsessively home-oriented, and their status as a housewife seems to fulfill all their expectations from life. They talk about household chores and duties and are always subservient to their husbands, except for two women, Charmaine and Bobbie, with whom Joanna strikes up a friendship immediately. Charmaine is openly critical of her husband, making scathing remarks about him (Ed is "a sex fiend and a real weirdo", "Anything that gets him out of the house nights is fine with me" [Levin 2004, 53, 52]), while Bobbie is all but the tidy housewife: she is loud and energetic, with "small hands and dirty toes" (Levin 2004, 29); her house is a mess and her children are unruly.

However, after a romantic weekend spent alone with her husband, Charmaine returns just as brainwashed as the rest of the Stepford women. She will no longer pursue interests of her own (she used to be an avid tennis player) and she is completely changed from who she was. This is the first change the reader witnesses (along with Joanna), and it is introduced in such an abrupt way that we cannot help but identify ourselves with Joanna's point of view and experience her utter disbelief and shock. She has arranged to play tennis with Charmaine but when she shows up at her door, Charmaine tells her she forgot about their program. She further adds she does not have the time for such silly pastime activities since she needs to clean the house. Joanna is so flabbergasted she can only react by quipping "[o]kay, funny joke" (Levin 2004, 80). But then Charmaine reveals the full extent of her radical change of heart: "I'm not joking," Charmaine said. "Ed's a pretty wonderful guy and I've been lazy and selfish. I'm through playing tennis […]. From now on I'm going to do right by Ed, and by Merrill too. I'm lucky to have such a wonderful husband and son" (Levin 2004, 80). She is actually having her beautiful clay court destroyed and a putting green installed instead, since Ed is a golf player who could not care less about tennis. Joanna can only stammer "[w]hat did he *do* to you? […] *Hypnotize* you?" (Levin 2004, 81), as she is backing away from Charmaine, leaving the place quickly, as if she was afraid this might be some contagious disease that could infect her, too. She calls Bobbie in panic to tell her about Charmaine and they are desperately trying to find the cause of the transformation. This being "the eco-aware 70s" (Murphy 2009, 96), with such domestic tragedies looming on the horizon as that of Love Canal (a toxic waste disposal site used by a chemical company, which harmed the health of many individuals living in the area), they suspect environmental pollution or some kind of a poisoning. Fearing their own eventual transformation, they discuss moving from Stepford.

The final piece of evidence for Joanna falls into place when a new Bobbie returns after spending a weekend alone with her husband. Joanna's suspicions about the Stepford men's involvement in this process of transformation grow to a point where she becomes so paranoid she no longer trusts her own husband. She attempts to flee but is literally hunted down by the Stepford men, who are all more than willing to give Walter a helping hand in finding his wife. The last time we see Joanna she is standing in Bobbie's kitchen, confronting her friend for some proof of her humanity since she refuses to believe that the big-bosomed creature standing in her impeccably clean house is the same woman who used to wear "a blue Snoopy sweatshirt and jeans and sandals" (Levin 2004, 29) and whose kitchen was covered with "little peanut-buttered handprints on the cabinets" (Levin 2004, 28). Bobbie offers to cut her

finger to show that she bleeds and the episode ends on a chilling note as Bobbie is approaching Joanna with a huge knife in her hand.

In a short coda we learn that a newcomer to the town, Ruthanne, a children's book author, whom Joanna briefly met previously, bumps into Joanna in a supermarket. She receives insipid answers to her honest enquiries and she is baffled by how Joanna has abandoned her old ways and chosen to follow the traditional, highly circumscribed way of life prescribed for the female residents of Stepford.

Horror plot with a feminist twist

Author Ira Levin is probably better known for his novel *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) about the advent of the Antichrist, which book was successfully adapted to the silver screen in 1968 by Roman Polanski. Along with William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971), it is credited with introducing horror into the mainstream, initiating a horror boom that paved the way for a future generation of horror writers, Stephen King among them. While *Rosemary's Baby* falls squarely within the genre category of horror, *The Stepford Wives* accommodates more approaches: part horror, part sci-fi, part satire, with strong feminist undertones. I would like to start my analysis by applying an idea propounded by Noël Carroll in his seminal *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), where he claimed that there are two basic plot structures underlying the narratives of most horror fiction. Interestingly enough, Levin's novel can be linked to both.

First, the novel can be examined as "*a complex discovery plot*" (Carroll 1990, 99), comprising four elements: onset, discovery, confirmation and confrontation. Curiosity plays a huge role here, alongside an investigative spirit, which is clearly reflected in the book when Joanna refers to herself as "*Nancy Drew Eberhart of Fairview Lane*" (Levin 2004, 71), thus acknowledging the detective work necessary to unravel the mystery surrounding Stepford. While Carroll connects the *onset* phase to the appearance and depredations of a monster, the monsters residing in Stepford are more insidious, less manifest. First Joanna is just baffled by the cult of domesticity prevalent seemingly in all households and by the polite refusals of women when she tries to engage them in any activities outside their homes (she attempts to start an awareness-raising group, a Women's Club, to discuss matters of politics, the women's liberation movement etc.). She spectacularly fails to drum up any interest, and while in the 1975 movie version the women do show up for one meeting, they are happy to limit their conversations to the respective merits of various brands of detergents and floor polish.

While this meeting is not part of the source text, it ended up as one of the most iconic scenes of this adaptation. One of the participants complains of her inability to finish all housework (she does not manage to bake bread and wash the floors efficiently enough). Her desperate plea to the others, who are trying their best to help her in finding better cleaning products to save time, has been used by various feminist critics to point out the impossible nature of housework. Simone de Beauvoir has famously remarked that "[f]ew tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. […]. The battle against dust and dirt is never won" (1961, 425). If a perfect Stepford wife cannot rise to the challenge of finishing all the housework in time, this only shows the absurdity of this demand when placed upon average women.

During the *discovery* phase, Joanna collects evidence regarding the radical change the whole town underwent (she discovers, for example, that at one point Stepford had a Women's Club

and even hosted Betty Friedan for a talk). The *confirmation* phase in a typical horror narrative is concerned with the protagonist's efforts to convince other people (usually authority figures, such as the police or the military) of the existence of the threat. The beauty of Levin's work lies in the vague nature of the threat. What is Joanna afraid of? She confides her fears to a psychiatrist whom she sees upon Walter's suggestion. The doctor tries her best to allay Joanna's fears but in the end she resorts to the remedy her profession sees fit for such cases: she suggests therapy and prescribes mild tranquilizers. She does voice however the precarious position of the women living in that era, who were apt to feel "a deep resentment and suspicion of men" and were "pulled two ways by conflicting demands […] the old conventions on the one hand, and the *new* conventions of the liberated woman on the other" (Levin 2004, 142). What constitutes Joanna's fear is the transformation process, which she has witnessed first-hand in the case of Charmaine and Bobbie, and which must have happened to all Stepford wives: it entails a loss of identity, reducing women to the status of docile servants. Commenting upon the merits of the 1975 film version, Alissa Quart also claims that the movie can be seen as "a metaphor for how we die a little bit when we choose lives of deference and diminishment" (2004, 29).

As already mentioned, the *confrontation* phase, which usually pits the hero against the monster, takes place in a kitchen, the quintessential symbol of domesticity. The fact that Joanna presumably perishes at the hands of Bobbie, or what she thinks is Bobbie, makes her death all the more poignant. It might seem strange to write about Joanna's death when I previously stated that at the end of the book she is seen shopping, but that is a different Joanna.

Before explaining what I mean by a different Joanna, I need to introduce the second possible plot structure proposed by Carroll: the *overreacher plot* (1990, 118). Admittedly, Carroll's proposition has to be slightly modified to apply to Levin's text, but *The Stepford Wives* seems to incorporate both plot versions. The ur-text of horror overreacher plots is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and from there we can trace a long line of overreacher stories, often stigmatized with belonging to the so-called mad scientist tradition. In the case of Levin's novel, the primary focus is not on the figure of the mad scientist but on the victim, yet the main elements of such plots can still be detected.

Stepford is home to various companies using cutting-edge technologies geared towards the production of vaguely defined products and most Stepford husbands work in places such as "Ulitz Optics", "CompuTech", "Stevenson Biochemical" or "Vesey Electronics" (Levin 2004, 89). One of the men, Dale Coba, used to work in Disneyland and was responsible for the development of those eerily lifelike animated robots which impersonate various US Presidents. He is the leader of the Men's Association in Stepford, which has only male members. Joanna could hardly believe such an archaic society could exist in the present day. When Walter was invited to join, he allayed Joanna's misgivings by saying that such societies could be changed only from the inside. Maybe he honestly believed this to be the case at first, but he was too weak to resist the grandiose dreams of the other members who quickly won him over (we never see them interact; we can only infer he did not put up much of a resistance).

The master plan of Stepford men is to replace their human wives with robotic counterparts, replicas of the real women. Actually, these androids are upgraded versions of their spouses: they are slimmer, have larger breasts and are highly sexualized. There is an elaborate process through which the women's characteristics, such as facial features and voice patterns, are carefully copied before they are eliminated. The men of Stepford play God by creating new

wives, giving life to their childish fantasies of subservient partners whose only desire is to please them and boost their egos (there is a highly comic scene in the 1975 movie, when Joanna and Bobbie accidentally overhear a Stepford couple making love, where the emphasis is upon the wife's rapturous shouts of joy, underlining her subordinate position to the man: "You're the king Frank! Oh, you're the champion Frank! Oh, you're the master!"(00:48:50-49:00)

Clinging to a traditional, highly outdated formula, these men literally create Coventry Patmore's "The Angel in the House", one of whose responsibilities was to please her man ("Man must be pleased; but him to please is woman's pleasure" Canto IX, book I, lines 1-2), albeit they are less prudish than their Victorian forefathers. In a very disturbing scene, for example, after Walter returns home from his first night at the Men's Association, Joanna wakes up to find her husband masturbating in their bed. She is honestly taken aback, telling him "you could have […] Woke me. I wouldn't have minded" (Levin 2004, 24). What gives weight retrospectively to this scene is that later on we realize that Walter's arousal was probably due to the feverish fantasies the other men must have presented him with. The fact that he chooses not to wake his wife and make love to a flesh and blood woman already indicates he has been partly converted, subscribing to the common dream of Stepford men to have compliant, docile fembots, domestic slaves ready at all times to respond to their sexual needs.

Returning to Carroll's theory regarding the overreacher plots, it is easy to consider the tech-savvy Stepford men as 20th century descendants of the likes of Victor Frankenstein. What makes them even worse than their predecessors is that they are not stopped in their nefarious activities; they receive no punishment (the majority of overreachers bring doom upon their heads, from Nathaniel Hawthorne's Rappaccini or Aylmer to modern incarnations such as Stephen King's doctor protagonist from *Pet Sematary* [1983], who interferes with the natural order by bringing back the dead – with horrible consequences). The Stepford husbands do not see the wrong of their ways either, which is another modification of the typical narrative, since after tragedy strikes, most mad scientists repent and try to redress the wrongs they committed.

According to Maio, Levin's work could be considered an "ahead-of-the-curve study of the male «backlash» mentality, even before the media had put a name to the phenomenon" (2004, 115). While the premise of the novel is absurd, it resonated with people to such an extent that Levin was accused of "being anti-male and conversely charged with being anti-feminist" at the same time (Maio 2004, 116), a clear indication of his success at pushing the right phobic pressure points of his contemporaries, which is one of the primary functions of horror literature (King 1981, 4).

Readers have to infer for themselves what could have triggered the backlash, but Levin inserts some subtle hints in the text. For example, Joanna discovers in an old newspaper article that Dale Coba's wife was "among the founders of the Stepford Women's Club" (Levin 2004, 147), which had a membership of over fifty. The men in town might have resented their wives' growing awareness of equality in terms of all aspects of life since for them gender equality implied "the loss of power and control" (Alshiban 2019, 36). They decided upon a counterattack, which started with the establishment of an all-male society, ostensibly with a "strictly social" purpose: "poker, man-talk, and the pooling of information on crafts and hobbies" (Levin 2004, 147). The setting of their meetings is apparently the only old building in town, a "square old nineteenth-century house, solid and symmetrical" (Levin 2004, 68), whose perimeters are never crossed by a woman. It is probably a nod in the direction of the

Gothic genre that Levin chose this isolated site for his forbidden place, "up on the hill" (2004, 68), which draws Joanna's interest in a similar way as Bluebeard's wife's curiosity was piqued by the locked room, as observed by Natalie Neill (2018, 260).

The problematics of the gaze

At this point I feel it is necessary to examine the family dynamics and gender relations of the marriage of Joanna and Walter. When we meet Walter the first time, he is doing the dishes, while engaged in a conversation with his wife. He seems to be a modern husband who does not mind sharing housework with his spouse, including taking care of the children. In spite of this, "he is still a fairly typical suburban husband" (Murphy 2009, 94), since he commutes to the city every day while the college-educated Joanna stays behind to mind the kids and run the household. However, Joanna does have a personal ambition: she is a semi-professional photographer, who has already sold some photos and now she is "trying to get up a portfolio of at least a dozen first-rate photos–to dazzle the agency into a contract" (Levin 2004, 96). She has a dark room installed in her new Stepford home and we can see her working there at several points during the story.

The importance of Joanna's role as a photographer should not be overlooked. She is a curious, open and motivated woman, who wishes to explore the world and who effectively appropriates the gaze for herself (a loaded term ever since the publication of Laura Mulvey's influential essay in 1975 analyzing the entrenched patriarchal cultural practices involved in Hollywood film making, which posited men as spectators, and women as the objects of the male gaze, occupying an engendered hierarchical position). While her pictures also bring her some money, which could be seen as a way to financial independence, potentially undermining Walter's role as the sole breadwinner, I consider the economic aspect less important than her having a mind which is alive, inquisitive and eager to engage with the outside world.

One night, when she is out looking for worthwhile subjects for her pictures, she stops by the building of the Men's Association to take some photos of the impressive mansion by the light of the moon. Soon a policeman shows up and diverts her attention with questions while the men in the house, who were in all probability warned by the policeman, pull down the shades. By the time Joanna raises her camera to her eyes again, her vision is obstructed and she cannot hope to unravel what the men are up to in their exclusive club.

While her photography firmly positions her as a subject with the right to choose her objects, there are some disturbing scenes in the novel where she is relegated to the status of an object to be looked at, which position is more comfortable (and clearly less threatening) for the male subject. One evening Walter invites some members of the Men's Association to their home, and while Joanna does join their discussions on various projects (presumably to the surprise of these men who are not accustomed to intelligent women), she also has to play the housewife, serving refreshments to the guests. While sitting among them, at one point she notices that Ike Mazzard, a famous magazine illustrator, is drawing sketches of her: "Full faces, three-quarter views, profiles; smiling, not smiling, talking, frowning" (Levin 2004, 45). She becomes self-conscious because of the artist's actions and she "felt suddenly as if she were naked, as if Mazzard were drawing her in obscene poses" (Levin 2004, 44). Mazzard never bothered to ask for her permission, he probably assumed she would feel flattered by becoming the subject of his art. She later remarks that the drawings do not do justice to her because they are upgraded versions of her, not faithful renditions. The reader realizes only

with hindsight that these specific drawings must have served as some kind of a blueprint during the production of the female robot which eventually replaces Joanna.

The other episode I wish to highlight in connection with Joanna's unwittingly becoming the object of male gaze occurs in that most domestic place, the kitchen. While she is there preparing coffee for the guests, she becomes aware of the presence of Dale Coba, who is silently watching her from the doorway. Smiling at her, he says: "I like to watch women doing little domestic chores" (Levin 2004, 47). Coba is clearly the kind of man who is not happy with women having any interests outside the home; he identifies females with the private sphere. By leaning in the doorway and watching Joanna closely with his ice cold gaze (his look and attitude are repeatedly characterized as "disparaging" [Levin 2004, 40, 41 42, 48]), he exudes an aura of superiority and he effectively stands in Joanna's way, shutting her in, blocking her escape route. In fact, "she wished Walter would come" (47), as if she needed to be rescued from the predatory attention of this alpha male.

These scenes serve as illustrations that men are reluctant to let women out of the cage of domesticity and they feel so threatened by the prospect (or rather, the reality) of assertive, free-thinking, opinionated wives that they resort to violence to protect their cherished notions of traditional gendered relations. Levin quotes from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in the epigraph to his book: "Today the combat takes a different shape; instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavors to escape from one […]. Now the attitude of the males creates a new conflict: it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go" (1961, 675). In his dystopian vision women never had a chance to leave this prison.

Uncanny doubles and suburban horror

Next I would like to address an element of the novel which also cements its relation to the Gothic/horror tradition, and this is the figure of the double. Although the Stepford women do not meet their own doubles, meeting someone else's double is only slightly less uncanny. Freud, in his 1919 essay entitled "Das Unheimliche", relies on Otto Rank's exhaustive study on doubles and cites them as frequent sources of the uncanny. Originally conceived as a protection against death, "an insurance against the destruction of the ego" (Freud 1955, 235), doppelgängers came to be associated with sinister qualities later on, in fact, they became "the harbinger[s] of death" (Freud 1955, 235). Freud also lists such figures as automata or mechanical dolls, entities where the dividing line between animate and inanimate is blurred, as capable of evoking the feeling of the uncanny. During his analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (1817), he highlights the character of Olimpia, who becomes the protagonist Nathanael's obsession before he realizes that the beautiful creature is just a lifelike doll, an inanimate object. Nathanael mistakes a doll for a real woman, while in Stepford robots are mistaken for real women.

The fear provoked by living dolls, connected to their ambiguous ontological status, lingers even when one knows for certain how to categorize such an entity. A cognitive dissonance is created in the mind since these creatures do not belong to the natural order of things. Right after Bobbie is changed, she and her husband, Dave, come to Joanna's house to fetch their son, who spent the weekend there (at this point the reader, similarly to Joanna, has no knowledge of what befell Bobbie). When Joanna opens the door, she immediately perceives the change, but she has no misgivings: "Bobbie had had her hair done and was absolutely beautiful—either due to make-up or love-making, probably both. And Dave looked jaunty and keyed up and happy" (Levin 2004, 114). She does sense something strange in Bobbie's

behaviour, but nothing alarming. Following a flippant remark of Dave, Joanna expects her friend to react in her usual, sarcastic way, but Bobbie just smiles at her and keeps silent.

What is more interesting is Walter's reaction. When the couple is leaving, Walter hesitates to kiss Bobbie's cheeks. Joanna confronts her husband about this as soon as they are alone: "Why didn't you want to kiss her?" (Levin 2004, 117) Walter's hesitation is the result of his knowledge that Bobbie has been eliminated and swapped with a fembot. His instinctual reaction is to hold back and he is wary of physical contact. Sadly, he will change his mind regarding such reservations soon enough, since the same fate will await his wife, too. Extrapolating from this premise, I would like to point out how fertile this idea of people getting replaced by replicas without their environment noticing turned out to be for the horror genre.

In probably the most famous example, *The Body Snatchers*, Jack Finney's novel of 1955 (filmed several times under the title *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956; 1978]), the residents of a small California town are gradually taken over by extraterrestrial entities. The heyday of such alien invasion narratives coincided with the Cold War, so these texts were often seen as expressing paranoid fears related to communist infiltration. However, the numbing conformity, the loss of individuality, the feelings of isolation and alienation, which are the results of these invasions, could equally apply to the situation of housewives in their highly circumscribed suburban existence during the same era. These were the women Friedan described in her *Feminine Mystique* (1963) and to whose situation she famously referred as "the problem that has no name" (1971, 11). Since this phenomenon was typical of suburban life, of supposedly idyllic places like Stepford, I would like to conclude with a brief look at a relatively recent development within the horror genre, the so-called Suburban Horror, which is concerned with the "dark and terrifying underside" of the suburban experience (Murphy 2009, 11).

A characteristically American phenomenon, the suburb came into being following the Second World War, when major housing developments were built to meet the demand for more houses by returning GIs, who were given financial incentives to buy a home. As a result of new and fast building technologies, suburbs sprang up in astonishing numbers: "between 1948 and 1958, 11 million new suburban homes were established" (Murphy 2009, 6). However, moving to the suburbs just entrenched the role divisions between men and women: husbands commuted to the city for work, leaving the woman in sole charge of the home. The boredom and the non-intellectual quality of such a restricted life, where the separate spheres ideology of Victorian times resurfaced, left many women in desperate need of something more and drove them to seek relief in alcohol or tranquillizers, although many cultural practices (such as magazines, advertising agencies, TV sitcoms) were employed in convincing them to find total emotional fulfillment in the role of housewife. According to architectural critic Annmarie Adams, "[t]here is no doubt that the mass movement of young American families to the suburbs in the 1950s and early 1960s had devastating implications for women's status … The suburbs isolated them from political, social, and financial power and segregated them from opportunities for employment, education, and cooperative parenting" (1996, 164). In fact, Joanna harbors exactly such thoughts when she contemplates their decision to move:

> She wished—that they would be happy in Stepford. That Pete and Kim would do well in school, and that she and Walter would find good friends and fulfillment. […] That the lives of all four of them would be enriched, rather than diminished, as she had feared, by leaving the city—the filthy, crowded, crime-ridden, but so-alive city. (Levin 2004, 12)

Against this suburban background of dehumanizing conformity, which on the surface appeared to be attractive for its seeming stability and safety, a new generation of writers decided to set their stories: Shirley Jackson and Richard Matheson are among the initial contributors to this subgenre. Suburban horror has also achieved enormous success and popularity in the genre of films, as shown by *Halloween* (1978), *Poltergeist* (1982), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) or the recent Oscar winner *Get Out* (2017), whose director repeatedly referred to *The Stepford Wives* as one of the major inspirations behind his film, claiming that "what *The Stepford Wives* did for gender, *Get Out* does for race" (Schweitzer 2021, 125). As pointed out by Murphy, "in the Suburban Gothic, one is almost always in more danger from the people in the house next door, or one's own family, than from external threats" (2009, 2), and Ira Levin's novel bears a sad testimony to this truth.

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