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Agency and the Amnesiac Woman in S.J. Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep* and Its Film Adaptation

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Abstract

Female characters demonstrate new forms of agency in domestic noir as it is exhibited in S.J. Watson's novel as well as in its film adaptation: in middle-class homes of the twenty-first century, housewives are active participants of their own lives and ably interpret their victimisation against which they fight with alternative strategies in the hope of making a change. This chapter relies on Carisa R. Showden's hypothesis which holds that female agency can develop in situations where it is the least accounted for, such as in abusive relationships. Both texts give special attention to the relationship between female agency and victimisation, although the two texts apply different strategies to illustrate how the amnesiac protagonist, Christine Lucas, fights for the (re-)construction of a conscious and independent self. While the book is rather backward-looking in the treatment of the female experience, the movie takes a much broader view in opening up a dialogue with the technological challenges of everyday life. In domestic noir, instead of a reassuring ending where the victim becomes a hero, the aim is more to demonstrate the recognition of victimhood and the emergence of agency in tension.

Keywords

Domestic noir, victimisation, female agency, domestic violence, amnesia, thriller, detective fiction

Introduction

Domestic noir, which entered the literary market and the film industry in English-speaking countries in the 2010s, is one of the latest subgenres of crime fiction. The most famous productions, like Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2010), Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train*, Susan Harrison's *The Silent Wife* (2013), or Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies* (2014), all became bestsellers, and the film adaptations of Flynn's and Hawkins' novels as well as the HBO series of Moriarty's book brought international fame. Steve John Watson, who is publicly known as S.J. Watson, was similarly successful with his 2011 novel *Before I Go to Sleep*, which was adapted to the screen by Rowan Joffé in 2014. Nevertheless, both the book and its film adaptation have been critically neglected despite being among the first pieces of this newly recognised field of crime fiction. Domestic noir mostly concentrates on domestic violence and often (re-)articulates the horrors of the female experience in middle-class homes. Watson's novel also builds on the expected thematic blocks of the genre, but the

reason it is worthy of critical consideration is the way the author exhibits the entanglement of memory and agency in the identity construction of the female victim. *Before I Go to Sleep* recounts the story of 47-year-old Christine Lucas, who lives in a London suburb with Mike, who pretends to be her former husband, Ben. After a violent attack and serious head injuries, Christine suffers from anterograde amnesia, so her mind deletes all memories during the night while she is asleep. Every day when she wakes up, she does not know who she is, whether she has a job or a family, and often takes herself to be a vulnerable child. Christine's first-person narration reveals that her present condition is due to an accident and all the memories related to the past and the present are controlled by Mike.

The female narrator's amnesia creates a hierarchy between the couple because Christine's mental condition completely limits her potential to act and, as a result, the 'husband' acquires full control of his wife's life, identity, and body. The possibilities and limitations of female agency are a determining motif in domestic noir (Waters and Worthington 210), so too in Watson's novel and its film adaptation, but the author challenges the concept of female agency by showing that it can also develop in situations where it is the least accounted for, such as in the case of memory loss. The author's diagnosis stems from the idea that agency and amnesia are mutually exclusive conditions because the latter creates a situation where the amnesiac patient becomes fully dependent, needs care and guidance. The patients are unable to make decisions and act according to their will resulting in the disability of regaining control over their lives. Christine's injuries and ensuing amnesia necessarily result in a loss of her agency, thus it is the acquisition of control over memories that primarily determines the power relations as well as the degree of freedom and autonomy in the novel and the film adaptation.

Traditionally, the concept of female agency is determined in opposition to that of men, as Mary Evans remarks in her reference to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, "the agency of women has remained secondary to that of men and it is determined by women's relationship to the male" (51). Evans goes on to argue that Beauvoir's reading of gender relations in this context defines agency "as the capacity to make choices about a particular situation, as a form of the human condition that convention did not allow women to experience: the model for agency was therefore to be acquired from male behaviour" (51). According to Evans, this inevitably led to the view that agency is primarily identified with a male pattern of behaviour, and as a result "a pattern of behaviour of that ideal type of the market economy: the autonomous male actor, the individual who assumes responsibility for his own moral and social position but is not beset by ties or responsibilities to others" (51-52).

This assumption is also the starting point in the monograph of the political theorist Carisa R. Showden, *Choices Women Make* (2011), which, apart from assisted reproduction and participation in commodified sex, specifically prostitution and porno-

graphy, thoroughly analyses the relationship between domestic violence and female agency and is intrigued by observing how female victims respond to violence or what decisions they make in an emergency. Dealing with feminist political theory, Showden takes a sensitive approach to the complexity of the concept of female agency, which she explores by not only considering the social and political factors that the individual is exposed to but also through a combination of various theories, such as feminist political and legal theories, as well as phenomenological and post-structuralist approaches. She is convinced that women's agency can only be understood by relying on all of these components, not to mention the possibilities and conditions that can trigger agentic attitude (xi). In the author's interpretation, agency is not necessarily synonymous and interchangeable with the notions of freedom and autonomy, but it incorporates both: the former is understood as "the conditions that facilitate action" and the latter is "the individual capacity to act" (ix). Only by having both without limitations can one develop or gain agency to stand up and act in the world. Showden's argument stems from the recognition that women who fall prey to domestic violence come from fairly different cultural and social backgrounds, so their reactions and decisions are also strongly dependent on their cultural and social contexts. This realisation has also allowed her to counter the traditional views on women's agency measured in lack rather than gain and the insistence on such essential categories as hero or victim, which would necessarily limit the recognition of agency in subjects who leave a violent partner and discriminate the ones that stay. The root of the problem in understanding agency, as Showden further argues, "arises from the tension over the nature of subjectification . . . that one is either a victim, unable to see her way clear of her situation, or a heroic individual, an agent who liberates herself, either individually or in conjunction with others" (x). To overcome the difficulty of thinking in essentialised categories, she suggests giving up the result-oriented view in favour of focusing on "the space between these two . . . impossible-to-realise categories" and recognising that "agency is manifest in the mediation between structural determinism and self-determining autonomy" (x). This approach, as Showden proposes, allows for a revision of challenging situations that victims of domestic violence experience as well as their response to tension. Therefore, agentic attitudes must be explored and examined through considering both "the subject who acts and the conditions within which she operates, particularly the conditions that produce her self-understanding" (ix).

Considering it all, agency is "a form of resistance" (xi), which eventually leads the individual who is acting "to a broader understanding of the conditions that both limit action and construct what kind of action makes sense in different circumstances" (xi). While Showden's monograph is mostly based on empirical research involving a critical study of institutional factors in the development and exercise of women's agency, the present chapter still borrows her hypothesis that "agency and victimization are coincident rather than mutually discrete categories" (38). In other

words, she proposes that agency in the female victim can develop even in situations where it is the least accounted for, such as in abusive relationships and among limited circumstances. S.J. Watson's Christine Lucas is a helpless middle-aged housewife, whose amnesia prevents all types of action or self-understanding. She has no past, or present, no access to information, and is completely out of control. Yet, her story challenges and deconstructs traditional ideas about housewives, and their abilities to act. Relying on Showden's critical insights on women's agency, the present chapter seeks to explore the interconnection between victimisation and agency as well as to analyse the strategies that the two texts, the novel and its film adaptation, apply for its demonstration.

Generic Strategies of Domestic Noir and Female Agency

Julia Crouch coined the name for a different sub-genre called "Domestic Noir" in a blog in 2013 after facing the challenge of not finding any appropriate categories within crime fiction into which her novels would fit. According to Crouch's short definition, domestic noir "takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants" ("Genre Bender").

The first relevant criticism of the genre appeared in 2018 with *Domestic Noir. The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, edited by Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton. The articles in this collection exceed Crouch's short description and locate the genre through comparative analyses within the literary history of crime fiction. The editors of the volume provide a more detailed definition by shedding light on the main themes, the attributes of the setting and the impact of space on its inhabitants:

> The main themes are family, motherhood, children, marriage, love, sex and betrayal. Setting is important: the home a character inhabits, and the way they inhabit it, can tell us as much about them as what they say or do. At the centre of these stories is a subversion of the idea of home as sanctuary. Home can also be a cage, a place of torment, of psychological tyranny, of violence. (vii)

Beyond the often-quoted generic features of the genre taking the female perspective at its centre,[1] Fiona Peters argues that it is also "control in all its forms [which] is a

[1] Fiona Peters argues that the female perspective should not necessarily be associated with the biological sex of the protagonist by referring to Patricia Highsmith's *Deep Water*, where there is an "inversion of masculine and feminine in ways that may not on the most obvious, literal level meet the criteria of writing from a predominantly female narrative perspective" (16). There are other examples for this phenomenon in popular fiction, such as in the science fiction film *Upside Down*, where male protagonist Adam is fighting for Eden's love. Norbert Gyuris points out that while the film creates the impression that Adam is in control, in reality, it is Eden, his love, who influences his acts and decisions (39).

central element of domestic noir: thwarted desire to escape the control of others while conversely exerting one's own control over them" (14), which is also an essential element in Watson's novel.

At this point, it is worth considering some of the subgenres emerging in the 1940s, such as marriage and amnesia thrillers like Patrick Hamilton's *Gas Light* (1938), Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), and Margery Allingham's *Traitor's Purse* (1941), or other fields like noir and noir thrillers to see how domestic noir interacts with other genres and whether this newly labelled category in crime narratives has any impact in hindsight on the literary antecedents in their generic evaluation. While domestic noir defines itself according to the abovementioned parameters, it cannot deny its heavy reliance on the several subgenres and styles that it blends, just to mention some: the 'whodunit', the marriage and amnesia thriller, noir thriller, psycho-thriller, and female gothic that comments on the dangers, the physical and emotional abuse that women in modern middle-class households are exposed to. Although the present chapter cannot give a complete picture of all the generic features of each trend preceding the birth of domestic noir, I intend to mention the ones that can be traced in Watson's novel as well as in its film adaptation in the hope of delineating a more profound portrait of the female protagonist.

In Watson's book and its film adaptation alike, the hopeless, or even deadly domestic environment offers Christine Lucas the opportunity to change her life, and even if it does not provide an ultimate solution, it still triggers action. The narrative is controlled by Christine's amnesia, and it is exactly this mental vulnerability which facilitates the emergence of agency. As opposed to the whodunit, the solution in domestic noir is not achieved through reasoning and reconstruction of the crime event but through a series of events and the psychic state of the characters. While in classic detective fiction, the past enjoys a priority as the present is controlled by the investigation (Todorov 44), thrillers foreground the present, so the past is replaced with anticipation (47). Watson's book, however, locates the relationship between the past and present differently since the secrets and the crimes of the past, which led to Christine's present condition, are as important in the present as the succeeding events in reconstructing the protagonist's identity, which is a characteristic trait of amnesia thrillers. Unlike in the whodunit where the causal connections are reconstructed by the detective's logical reasoning, Victoria Stewart points out that "the thriller typically depends more on the protagonist's ability to interpret events as they happen, rather than retrospectively, but here too the recall of significant details can prove crucial to the satisfactory resolution of the plot" (64). Furthermore, she adds that "[i]ntroducing an amnesiac protagonist necessarily disturbs this reliance on memory" (64) but in certain books, like in that of Watson, the loss of memory has other effects because "it is not only semantic memory . . . and episodic memory . . . but also autobiographical memory . . . that are lost" (65). The loss of autobiographical

memory is peculiarly intriguing in some amnesia thrillers where it "can lead to a profound disturbance of the role of the investigating protagonist" (65). Recovering lost memory in these narratives, however, becomes indispensable for the protagonist in order to "evade dangers in the present" (61). Christine's situation reflects on the detectives of twentieth-century, like Margery Allingham's Mr Campion, for whom remembering becomes a nightmare in *Traitor's Purse*. Campion feels that he should do something but remains confused for much of the novel and "does not know what to do for the best" (66). Nevertheless, one needs to consider the differences between male and female detectives, as well as those between amateur female detectives and housewives, since "[t]here are new models of agency in domestic noir, models that are more suited to their moment" (Waters and Worthington 202). Unlike Agatha Christie's shrewd spinster detective, Miss Marple, or Dorothy L. Sayers's and Margery Allingham's upper-middle-class and aristocratic sleuths, who are preoccupied either with their own career or the solution of a challenging puzzle, it is "ordinary wives and homemakers" in domestic noir, who, as Anna Snoekstra notes, "becom[e] pre-emptive detectives, investigating their own potential victimhood" (qtd. in Waters and Worthington 201-02).

As regards the strong emphasis on the protagonist, the subjective point of view, "his perceptions, (both accurate and deluded), his state of mind, his desires, obsessions and anxieties" (Horsley 8), domestic noir benefits greatly from noir thrillers. In Lee Horsley's interpretation, the addition of the adjective 'noir' to the thriller does not only show their strong interaction but it serves to enhance some of the characteristic features of the thriller, such as fear, anxiety, and vulnerability (8). Horsley's definition of the noir encompasses such traits as "the shifting roles of the protagonist" (8) between that of the victim, transgressor or investigator, and "the ill-fated relationship between the protagonist and society (generating the themes of alienation and entrapment); and the ways in which noir functions as a socio-political critique" (8). The characters in noir are ambiguous and complex, the protagonists often cross moral boundaries and their oscillation between the roles of the victim, detective and criminal explicitly deconstruct the clearly established triangle of the classic whodunits. The diversity of the female characters and their opportunities and limitations in domestic noir seem to fill in the missing gap in the history of noir with a view to the traditional representation of women, who are either marginalised or appear as *femme fatales*.[2] Domestic noir heavily relies on the aforementioned traits, it foregrounds the subjective point of view and concentrates on the emotional and often troubled psychic state of the (female) protagonist. The female characters recognise and interpret the abusive relationship they live in and fight back with alternative

[2] Julie Grossmann's *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir* (2009) revises the notion of the *femme fatale* and explores whether the traditional approach labelling them as monstrous and evil still applies by foregrounding their diversity in film noir.

strategies, which inescapably overrides their allegedly fixed identity. The struggle for autonomy aims to end their suffering which is the result of long-standing emotional and/or physical abuse. Suffering as a central motif becomes a prerequisite of female agency in domestic noir, especially because it functions as a trigger in the female protagonist's taking (brutal) revenge on her abuser.

Amnesia, Agency and Writing in Watson's Novel

Christine Lucas' situation resembles the lives of millions of middle-class white women in the West of the previous centuries and echoes feminist ambitions of the twentieth century. Considering the treatment of women's fate, experience, and agency, Watson's novel looks back on the past to articulate the challenges of self-realisation that enterprising women have faced over the past two hundred years. Christine's everyday struggles are shared with the reader through her journal, which she starts writing upon the request of her neuropsychologist, Dr Nash. The opening scene of the novel starts with Christine's inner monologue, which highlights the disorientation of the unknowing character one morning when she rises from bed. The reader quickly realises that the protagonist is amnesiac from the outset and cannot share any details about the past or upcoming events. Therefore, the story developing in the narrative and controlled by the amnesiac protagonist's point of view is completely unknown for both the reader and the protagonist. Christine's total confusion after her awakening is first attended to by her pseudo-husband, Mike, who provides some details about her identity, and later by Dr Nash, who returns her journal – including her records of the preceding three weeks – during a short meeting on the same day. This is the point where Christine's real story starts. The act of reading and writing the journal secures the ground for constructing a coherent identity on the one hand, and, on the other hand, warns her unknowing self about the anticipated threats even if she has trouble trusting her own judgements of people and events. According to Dr Nash's instructions, Christine's task is to record anything that occurs each day, such as her emotions, impressions, memories, and even little mundane things, yet the journal plays a more significant role in establishing a bridge between the past and the present through the process of writing as well as the evocation of past memories. Although the journal links different stages of time, the first few sections of the diary place a larger emphasis on the past, which is not surprising because the pains and losses that haunt Christine's recollections have a great impact on the series of events that she is forced to face in the present. On the one hand, writing appears as a form of psychotherapy – an imaginary conversation between patient and doctor – but on the other hand, it is also a means of investigation. The ability to remember helps to construct a coherent narrative identity and recollect the day of the attack. Keeping a journal of everyday events stimulates Christine's memory so much that she slowly abandons the position of

the victim and shifts into that of the detective. In her ambitions to regain control over her mind and memories, the reader recognises the emergence of agency even if it is considerably limited by her amnesia.

The novel heavily exploits the connection between the female experience and the act of writing. Christine's journal analyses the themes characteristic of domestic noir in depth: marriage, sexuality, motherhood, and the life of a suppressed housewife. The journal introduces the reader to the deepest corner of her soul, she honestly writes about her feelings, the inability to act, the imprisonment in the house, but most of all, her desperate struggle to remember her son and herself as a mother. The act of writing provokes the recall of memories which randomly appear in Christine's consciousness as if it were a film with loosely connected images. This is called FBM (flash bulb memory) "which is a form of autobiographical memory with an astounding perceptual clarity we are able to retrieve (seemingly) intact" (Groes 23). The following quote from the novel illustrates this mental process:

> A pen was tucked between the pages of the journal and almost without thinking I took it out, intending to write more. I held it, poised over the page, and closed my eyes to concentrate.
>
> It was then that it happened. Whether that realization – that my parents are gone – triggered others, I don't know, but it felt as if my mind woke up from a long, deep sleep. It came alive. But not gradually; this was a jolt. A spark of electricity. Suddenly I was not sitting in a bedroom with a blank page in front of me but somewhere else. Back in the past – a past I thought I had lost – and I could touch and feel and taste everything. I realized I was remembering. (59)

It is also through these flashes that Christine awakens to the fact that she had a successful professional career as a writer and acquired a Ph.D. in English Literature: "The image vanished. My eyes opened. . . . Was it true? Had I written a novel? Was it published? I stood up; my journal slid from my lap. If so, I had been someone, someone with a life, with goals and ambitions, and achievements. . . . Was it true? Ben had said nothing to me this morning. Nothing about being a writer" (99). Christine's unreliability as a narrator manifests several times; her journal abounds in inconsistencies as she often confuses her own memories with the ones that Mike implants in her head.[3] The awareness of her inability to make a difference between reality and fantasy ceaselessly recreates the tension in the novel. Since Christine is uncertain about the reliability of her memories, she relies on Mike's reinforcement so that she can trust herself. Mike, however, either lies or keeps silent about the

[3] For example, when they are on a walk, Christine asks Mike to tell her about them:
"'I don't know anything about me and you. I don't even know how we met, or when we got married, or anything.'
He smiled, and shuffled along the bench so that we were touching. He put his arm around my shoulder.
I began to recoil, then remembered he is not a stranger but the man I married" (63) and then again, in the next line, she claims to remember nothing about their story.

whole truth, which he believes must be hidden to avoid causing more pain. Although Christine is inclined to accept Mike's responses uncritically, she feels more and more empowered by the journal containing all of her confidential information:

> But then I began to imagine what would happen if I did stumble upon a copy of my novel in a cupboard or at the back of a high shelf. What would it say to me, other than, *Look how far you have fallen*. . . . It would not be a happy moment. . . . The effect might be devastating. No wonder Ben might want to hide it from me. I picture him now, removing all the copies, burning them in the metal barbecue on the back porch, before deciding what to tell me. How best to reinvent my past to make it tolerable for the remainder of my years. But that is over now. I know the truth. My own truth, one I have not been told but have remembered. . . . I know that the book I am writing – my second, I realize with pride – may be dangerous, as well as necessary. (103, emphasis in original)

Although Christine keeps rejecting the idea that Mike intentionally manipulates her memories, she slowly starts to realise that the passive, helpless, and unskilled woman she should identify with is an invented model her husband/lover has created for her. The silence that surrounds Christine's true profession is due to the fear of female agency, the woman who can take control of her own life. Furthermore, the fear of the competent woman also conjures up the threatening image of the conscious and creative female artist from the turn of the nineteenth century, who, as Cecily Hamilton argues, was regarded as rather unwomanly and a danger to society: "Any woman who has attained to even a small measure of success in literature or art has done so by discarding, consciously or unconsciously, the traditions in which she was reared, by turning her back upon the conventional ideas of dependence that were held up for her admiration in her youth" (qtd. in Showalter 225). From Christine's perspective, writing means both the resistance against patriarchal control, which has to be kept a secret, and "a liberatory activity" (Ledger 27) at the same time. The protagonist's sense of guilt stemming from the act of writing reminds the reader of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's unnamed narrator in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892), who crosses moral boundaries by keeping a journal and whose inhibitions Christine shares: "I have the bedroom door closed. I am writing this in private. In secret. I can hear my husband in the living room . . . but I will hide this book if he comes upstairs. I will put it under the bed, or the pillow. I don't want him to see I am writing in it. I don't want to have to tell him how I got it" (Watson 49). Christine's fears of being revealed keep returning in other scenes where she thinks of keeping the journal as some form of crime: "I was nervous, though I didn't know why. The journal felt forbidden, dangerous" (95).

While Christine's journal means a form of revolt against oppression that constantly recreates the possibility to become free and independent, for the amnesiac patient, it is almost impossible to fully experience this condition. Writing and (re-)reading her records ceaselessly recreate the possibility of agency, yet amnesia strictly limits Christine's movement or access to various means. Without Dr Nash and an old

friend, Claire, she would be unable to regain control over her memories. These helping characters, or 'sidekicks', however, cannot be present in the closing chapter of the novel where the female protagonist's life is threatened and although she tries to maintain her agency by facing the dangers that originate from writing and remembering her past associated with mostly traumatic events, she cannot defend herself against Mike's brutality. Unlike in the film adaptation, Christine's taking action is differently depicted in the novel's closing scene, which also takes place in a hotel room. In the respective passage, the reader sees Christine sitting on a chair with wrists and ankles tied up, a sock in her mouth. This part is an explicit example of the power relations where the man exerts control over the woman and which implies a return to the model of the passive, helpless woman: "I try to speak, but cannot. I realize something is in my mouth. A sock, perhaps. It has been secured somehow, tied in place, and my wrists are tied together, and also my ankles. This is what he wanted all along, I think. Me, silent and unmoving" (360). This form of female passivity in Watson's novel seems to go against a characteristic trait of domestic noir, which, as Diane Waters and Heather Worthington argue, portrays a woman as an active agent who goes as far as getting herself into life-threatening situations: "Although she is active, the female protagonist of domestic noir may use her agency in destructive or self-destructive ways, in pursuit of and to protect her notions of love, family, and home" (210). Nevertheless, Christine's agency is established not in her physical actions but in her mental capacity to remember. As a result of realising that she is unable to escape or fight Mike, her active and passive roles merge, certainty replaces her fears, and her recollections no longer need reinforcement: they build up a crystal-clear narrative in her head. Therefore, her last words preceding her loss of consciousness in the burning hotel room imply her full awareness of her situation, solace, and surrender to danger:

> I am beginning to choke. I think of my son. I will never see him now, though at least I'll die knowing I had one, and that he is alive, and happy. . . . I think of Ben. The man I married and then forgot. . . . I want to tell him that now, at the end, I can remember him. . . . And yes, I can remember loving him. I know I do love him and I always have. . . . Things go dark. I can't breathe. . . . There were never going to be any happy endings for me. I know that now. But that is all right. That is all right. (363)

Female Agency, Technology, and Amnesia in the Film Adaptation

The film adaptation of the novel pays as much attention to the themes of domestic noir as the novel, yet it also attempts to stretch the boundaries of the genre in order to establish a dialogic relationship between control and high-tech devices which sheds light on a different aspect of agency in the victim. Robert Stam argues that film adaptations "take an activist stance toward their source novels, inserting them into a much broader intertextual dialogism. An adaptation, in this sense, is less an attempted resuscitation of an originary word than a turn in an ongoing dialogical

process" (64). This approach allows for discarding the conventional critical attitude which claims that the source text is superior and examines adaptations through the lenses of fidelity. Understanding that the two texts not only interact but co-exist, they also acquire equal status and thus, both become sources for analysis without having to account for the hierarchy between source text and adaptation. In the film, the journal is replaced by a hand-held camera that Christine talks to. This replacement was not only necessary – writing as a silent activity can hardly be put on screen – but a witty solution that locates the text of the film in a wider context since it is not only human factors and records of external memory like the journal and photos that play a significant role in the question of authority to control memories, but more developed technology. Thus, the film not only addresses violence stemming from traditional gender roles performed in middle-class suburban homes but also the crisis of memory and identity related to digital amnesia,[4] which can be viewed as common symptoms of the experience of isolation and the condition of amnesia.

The film adaptation foregrounds the questions of unequal power relations stemming from the uneven degree of the control over different types of technology. Dominance is embodied in several forms of technology: the husband fabricates photos to create an imaginary past for the wife while Dr Nash, the neuropsychologist, instructs Christine on the phone on how to start investigating her own identity. Due to her amnesia, the victim does not know her own story, so she passively internalises the narrative which the male figures in power positions, – mainly Mike –, have made for her. The opening scene of the film foregrounds all the themes that epitomise a helpless middle-class housewife's everyday reality, isolation, and memory in a technological setting. The camera shows Christine waking up beside a man in the bed, she is disoriented in an unknown world; the only reference points she has are the pictures on the bathroom wall, which do not show anything else but some moments with her (pseudo-)husband. Although the question of the photos' authenticity also appears in the book, the pictures can only be vitalised in this visual context and they play a determining role in the construction of Christine's missing identity. In this scene, her identity merges with technology since she cannot distinguish between herself and the woman in the pictures. According to Sebastian Groes, "[m]emories are not something we necessarily control: often it's the memories that control us, and in doing so, determine our self-perception and behaviour" (17).

Christine's identity-making is dependent on the technological medium that provides her with a discontinuous set of images. Thus it is crucial to examine who or what controls this medium and who selects the images from which she can reconstruct

[4] The term "digital amnesia" was coined by Kaspersky Lab in 2015 for "the experience of forgetting information that you trust a digital device to store and remember for you" (Finley et al. 170).

her memories and existence. Christine's identity is essentially defined by preselected, filtered, and prearranged images and narratives. The first dialogue of the film objectifies Christine and establishes a predefined model that she is obliged to identify with: Christine's reality is constructed by Mike, who plays her husband Ben in this male narrative; she has difficulty recalling anything since her "accident" and her brain cannot store memories for more than one day. In this case, the memory of the woman is dominated by male discourse whose authenticity cannot be questioned since the photos are the imprints of a reality the wife has already forgotten. The only option left for Christine to reveal her true identity is to record the events of each day to warn her unknowing self the following morning and to evade dangers. Nevertheless, the recordings on the camera mediate her memories only in fragments, in a less organised way than her journal in the novel. Furthermore, the intimacy and introspection developing through the writing of the journal cannot be replaced by the camera, so a stronger emphasis is placed on constant fear and Mike's violence in the film adaptation. Beyond the filmic text, the act of storing memories on a camera on an everyday basis also sheds light on the impact of digital tools on our memory which is conceptualised by the term of digital amnesia. In *Memory and Technology*, Jason R. Finley et al. claim that "[w]hile researchers can measure the amount of information that people choose to internally memorise in the presence or absence of external memory, a broader open question is whether our very *ability* to internally memorise new information is atrophying with disuse in the long term" (Finley et al. 170, emphasis in original). Related to this dilemma, the writers refer to Andrew Hoskins's study, *Archive me! Media, Memory, Uncertainty*, in which the author warns us that "the increasing entanglement of human and digital memory leads to a potentially dangerous ceding of control over our memories to networks, with uncertain consequences such as loss of privacy and security, degradation of the spontaneity and schema formation of human memory, and alienation of memory from the self" (qtd. in Finley et al. 171).

Considering the circulating debates about the future of human memory, Christine's amnesia reaches beyond the filmic text, and the individual level connects to global phenomena that highlight the indispensability of digital tools in one's identity-making. At the same time, however, the film ironically reflects on the everyday practices of digital memory in the scene where Christine comes across a memory stored in one type of medium through another piece of recollection stored in a different one. Nevertheless, the verification of the authenticity of memories still depends on the subject and his/her episodic and autobiographical memory. The aforementioned scene is related to the credibility of the photos. Christine records her videos in the bathroom every day with some of the photos in the background on the wall. When one day she watches a video of the previous day, she notices a difference between the photos on the wall on that morning and those at the time of the recording. She quickly realises that the photos removed from the bathroom are all hers, which she

found in her husband's study. Although she cannot make sure whether the photos hanging in the bathroom are manipulated or not, she understands that they are assembled by her husband to construct her life story, which obviously lacks her own story. Consequently, the victim's agency in the film largely depends on the acquisition of control over the external memories accessible in different types of technological media because these contents determine the degree of her freedom. The information she receives about her present and past is kept in various technological forms, such as photos, videos, and telephone calls from Dr Nash, who appears as a more dominant character in the film than in the novel. He telephones Christine every day, tells her that she is amnesiac, needs his treatment and explains why and how she needs to use the camera. Although Dr Nash is fighting for Christine's mental recovery and finding her true identity in his function as a doctor, he is still an authority figure who has control over his patients and expects them to obey his instructions.

Nevertheless, as Claude E. Shannon points out, a medium or channel of information always has a distorting effect: the desired information or the message is called the signal, which can be modified by distortion or noise (447). To be able to evaluate the information that is filtered through the channel or the medium means to have the ability to differentiate between the signal and the noise. In other words, Christine needs to find useful information in the array of non-essential or useless information. She is provided with different types of media by male figures, and all these channels are filled with signals and noise. She needs to separate the available information so that she can find out who she really is. Also, she has to cope with her social and informational isolation, which hinders understanding herself and building up her earlier authentic identity. Christine's feeling of imprisonment is undoubtedly enhanced by the suburban home. While both the book and the film adaptation intensively reflect on the psychological impact of feeling lonely and trapped in the house, there are no exact details of either the location or the surroundings, which implies the fragility of our concept of the home, exactly because they are perfect sites for torture and violence regardless of where they are. Christine's experience of her everyday reality in the house is, however, more explicitly described in the novel than in the film:

> I look up at the wipe-clean board that Ben had shown me before he left. . . . [W]ords have been scrawled on it and wiped out, replaced, amended, each leaving a faint residue. I wonder what I would find if I could go back and decipher the layers, if it were possible to delve into my past that way, but realize that, even if it were possible, it would be futile. I am certain that all I would find are messages and lists, groceries to buy, tasks to perform. Is that really my life? I think. Is that all I am? (29-30)

The feeling of isolation in the film adaptation is illustrated from both an external and Christine's internal perspective. The house is often shot from angles where it seems to be standing alone, or Christine's monotonous, wasted life when she is led

to the board by Mike in the mornings or when she is just browsing in the house. The house gradually transforms into a prison where the female victim is going to be exposed to suffering and fatal risks. The lonely suburban house reminds the reader of the haunted castles from early gothic stories where the cruel male character tortures the woman held in captivity, but these types of houses with their isolated characters also feature in the horror genre, such as Alfred Hitchcock's film adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938). The film greatly benefits from the exploitation of gothic traits in the representation of the house; the ruling darkness, Christine's futile attempt to escape, and Mike's aggressive intervention in one of the last scenes do not only intensify tension but prevent all of Christine's efforts to acquire control over her memories and the different types of media. It seems that her endeavours are all in vain, the next morning she wakes up with no memory of Mike's brutality of the previous day.

The closing scene of the film, however, serves as a remedy to Christine's inability to act. The viewer sees a more active and aggressive Christine in the filmic text, who would even be willing to sacrifice her own life to get her family back. In the hotel room by the airport, Christine is not a passive observer of the events: when Mike attacks her, she fights back and escapes from the scene, taking her camera with herself. Practically, the film could end with the arrival of the ambulance car when Christine is recording her vow that she will never let anyone take her life again. While the novel ends with Christine hoping and remembering, the last scene of the film overrides this optimism. Robert Stam argues that "[f]ilm adaptations can also add events . . . these additions can have any number of motivations: to take advantage of a brilliant actor, to suggest contemporary relevance, or to 'correct' the novel for aesthetic reasons" (72). Christine's story is taken further in the film adaptation. When she wakes up in the hospital, she does not remember anything except for her son, and Claire's hair-colour. Although the fact that her sufferings have terminated might be a relief, the inability to remember what has happened to her undoubtedly leaves her fate open, views the maintenance of agency sceptically, and foregrounds the temporal indeterminacy of amnesia.

Conclusion

S.J. Watson's novel *Before I Go to Sleep* and its film adaptation bring to light the oppression that women experience even in the twenty-first century. Both texts depict domestic violence against women, and as a consequence, the female victim's declining mental health. Beyond the recurring themes of domestic noir, Watson's story extensively reflects on the possibilities and limitations of female agency, but the novel and its film adaptation apply different strategies to illustrate the connection between victimisation and the patterns of agency. The novel primarily looks back on

the past to comment on the middle-class housewife's fate and her struggles for autonomy, but the film establishes a more active dialogue with the challenges of the contemporary world. While the amnesiac protagonist develops agency through the act of writing her journal and constant self-reflection in the novel, it is control over memories stored in different types of media that determines the degree of agency and freedom in the film adaptation. Showden asserts that "[h]aving 'agency' involves both deliberating on choices and having choices on which to deliberate" (ix). Nevertheless, it is not so much the dialectics of success and failure that determine the degree of agency in female victims of domestic violence as how the recognition of their emotional and physical abuse can trigger resistance and self-care which necessarily affect the degree of freedom in light of their decisions. In domestic noir, just like in Watson's novel and its film adaptation, the aim is not to offer a reassuring ending where the female victim becomes a heroine but rather to illustrate the awareness of the subject's own victimisation as well as her actions and revolt shaped by her temporal and relational circumstances.

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