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## "Forgive Me, Lisa:" P.T., Allegory, and the Monstrous-Feminine

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“Forgive Me, Lisa:”

*P.T.*, Allegory, and the Monstrous-Feminine

Kyra Chevalier

College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

University of Vermont

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## **Abstract**

Women's bodies have long served as a source for abject horror. Throughout horror books, movies, and games, images of menstrual blood, childbirth, pregnancy, and the womb abound. Recently, scholars including Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed have investigated the psychoanalytic and feminist implications of female bodies in horror through their work on abjection and the monstrous-feminine.

In my research, I investigate the interplay of female body horror and symbolic representations of domestic violence in *P.T.*, a video game hailed by critics and players for its intense psychological horror. Drawing on theoretical work in the realms of allegory and the monstrous-feminine, my research interrogates *P.T.* as a mediated experience which allegorically critiques domestic violence yet capitalizes upon the female victim, using her body as a source of shock-factor horror. I theorize that *P.T.* engages in a problematic tradition of horror media exploiting domestic violence and its victims as sources for horror, therein contributing to a cultural narrative which, rather than engaging critically with domestic violence, relegates real-world trauma to the realm of fantasy and monsters.

## **Content Warning**

The object of this study is a psychological horror game which pushes the boundaries of horror media in its depictions of violence and gore. Many readers may find the contents of the game – and this study – disturbing.

Content warnings for *P.T.* include (but are not strictly limited to): domestic violence; familicide; matricide; infanticide; suicide; psychosis; depictions of blood and bodily fluids; explicit descriptions of pregnancy and the womb; gun violence; body horror.

## Introduction

*This brutal killing took place while the family was gathered at home on a Sunday afternoon. The day of the crime, the father went to the trunk of his car, retrieved the rifle, and shot his wife as she was cleaning up the kitchen after lunch. When his ten-year-old son came to investigate the commotion, the father shot him, too. His six-year-old daughter had the good sense to hide in the bathroom, but reports suggest he lured her out by telling her it was just a game. [...] The mother, who he shot in the stomach, was pregnant at the time.*

- *P.T.* radio broadcast<sup>1</sup>

As the player explores the quaint, domestic hallway they find themselves in at the beginning of *P.T.*, a vintage radio in the entryway flickers to life. It picks up in the middle of a broadcast recounting a recent local tragedy: on a Sunday afternoon, a father took a rifle and shot first his pregnant wife, then his children. The neighbors heard the commotion and called the police, who found the father sitting in his car, listening to the radio. The commentator notes that this is not the only recent family annihilation in the area – one local father shot his family to death the month prior, and the previous December, another committed the same crime using a meat cleaver.

When the broadcast ends, the player exits the hallway through a door at the opposite end from where they started – and finds themselves back at the beginning. Again and again the player moves through the hallway and out the door at its end, only to return – impossibly – to its start. The hallway is an endless loop; the player cannot escape it.

The radio broadcast plays three separate times before the player begins their tenth loop of the hallway. By now, the once-shocking narrative is familiar – boring, even – and more pressing issues take the forefront, namely the female ghost with an anxiety-inducing habit of jump-scaring

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<sup>1</sup> *P.T.* (Tokyo: Konami Computer Entertainment, 2014), PlayStation 4.

and generally tormenting the player. Even the occasional interruption of the broadcast by a desperate voice chanting numbers isn't alarming enough to catch the player's attention.

But on the player's tenth trip through the hallway, the radio flickers back to life, picking up in the middle of the broadcast. This time, however, the father doesn't sit in his car and wait for the police to arrive. Instead, the broadcaster calmly declares, "after killing his family, the father hung himself with a garden hose in the garage." Moments after the radio announcement, a second, muffled voice repeats the broadcaster's statement, with one jarring difference: instead of a garden hose, the father hangs himself with an umbilical cord. The player can only assume that he sourced this umbilical cord from the body of his pregnant, murdered wife.

*P.T.* first appeared on the PlayStation store as a free PlayStation 4 download in August 2014. Although released under the pseudonym "7780s Studio," players quickly discovered that the game was a product of Konami Studios, best known for their horror game series *Silent Hill*. *P.T.*, it turned out, was a trailer of sorts, a *playable teaser* – hence the acronym *P.T.* – for the ninth *Silent Hill* installment, *Silent Hills*. Despite *P.T.*'s critical and popular success, the *Silent Hills* project was cancelled in 2015 and *P.T.* was removed from the PlayStation store shortly thereafter.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of length – a metric often leveraged by gamers when determining a game's quality – *P.T.* is almost negligible. *How Long to Beat*, a crowdsourced game-length metric website, pins *P.T.* at a slim three or so hours of total playtime.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, the game garnered

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<sup>2</sup> Dave Smith, "What It's Like to Play the Best Game of 2014, which is About to Disappear Forever in 2 Days," *Business Insider*, April 27, 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/silent-hills-pt-review-2015-4>

<sup>3</sup> "How Long to Beat: *P.T.*," *How Long to Beat*, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://howlongtobeat.com/game?id=20582>. The three-hour metric indicates the average time a new player takes to beat *P.T.* The fastest reported completion time on the site is 30 minutes; the longest is 6 hours, 20 minutes.

near-immediate popularity among *Silent Hill* fans and games journalists alike. Critics hailed *P.T.* as “flat-out brilliant,”<sup>4</sup> “one of the most effective, brutal horror games in the current generation of consoles,”<sup>5</sup> and “the most genuinely frightening interactive experience in recent years.”<sup>6</sup> A cult-like following cropped up around *P.T.* in the weeks following its release, flooding the internet with gameplay videos,<sup>7</sup> walkthrough guides, and thousands of Reddit threads.<sup>8</sup> Writing for *GamesRadar*, critic David Houghton observed:

By spreading out into the real world, by forcing solutions by way of hearsay, internet whispers, and desperate, rumoured logic, it has become its own urban myth. *P.T.* has taken on life, its horror story becoming real folklore, and its essence now effectively ‘haunting’ the real world.<sup>9</sup>

The cancellation of *Silent Hills* in 2015 – one year after *P.T.* launched – and subsequent removal of *P.T.* from the Sony PlayStation store only served to bolster the game’s urban myth status.

PlayStation consoles with the game installed became a coveted commodity, with some selling for as much as 1,000 euros on eBay.<sup>10</sup> Multiple attempts were made by fans to re-create *P.T.*,

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, “What It’s Like to Play the Best Game of 2014.”

<sup>5</sup> Danielle Riendeau, “*Silent Hills* ‘Pants Soiling’ Scares Won’t Measure Up to *P.T.*,” *Polygon*, August 18, 2014, <https://www.polygon.com/2014/8/18/6033001/silent-hills-pt-horror-films>

<sup>6</sup> Lucy O’Brien, “My Game of the Year Wasn’t a Game at All,” *IGN*, December 16, 2014, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2014/12/17/my-game-of-the-year-wasnt-a-game-at-all>.

<sup>7</sup> These included “Let’s Play” videos by several high-profile gaming YouTubers, including Mark Fischbach (“Markiplier”), Sean McLoughlin (“Jacksepticeye”), Felix Kjellberg (“Pewdiepie”) and Daniel Avidan and Arin Hanson (“Game Grumps”), among others.

<sup>8</sup> The *P.T.* subreddit, r/SilentHillsPT, is still active as of the time of writing.

<sup>9</sup> David Houghton, “*P.T.* is Still the Purest Horror Game Around, and One of the Smartest on PS4,” *GamesRadar*, October 31, 2016, <https://www.gamesradar.com/why-pt-first-real-horror-game-years-and-best-game-ps4/>

<sup>10</sup> Sherif Saed, “PS4 with *Silent Hills* Demo *P.T.* Installed Listed for £1000 on eBay,” *VG247*, April 29, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150519145916/http://www.vg247.com/2015/04/29/ps4-with-silent-hills-demo-p-t-installed-listed-for-1000-on-ebay/>

including a now-removed remake on the Unreal Engine<sup>11</sup> and a *P.T.*-inspired short film.<sup>12</sup>

Several games released in the years following *P.T.* reference or draw inspiration from the demo, including *Metal Gear V: The Phantom Pain*,<sup>13</sup> *Allison Road*,<sup>14</sup> and *Layers of Fear*.<sup>15</sup> Even in 2021, seven years post-release, fans continue to dissect and examine *P.T.*, adding new revelations and theories to its cultural folklore.

Yet despite *P.T.*'s cult status among horror fans and a wealth of research<sup>16</sup> surrounding its parent series *Silent Hill*, few scholars<sup>17</sup> have sought to examine *P.T.* as a rhetorical and cultural artifact. To my knowledge, no studies have ever examined *P.T.* as either evoking the monstrous-feminine or operating allegorically. Given the game's ongoing popularity and relevance to the realm of horror games and broader horror media, I believe that research must be conducted regarding the game's role as a cultural and rhetorical artifact which broadly impacted the landscape of horror gaming.

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<sup>11</sup> Joe Skrebels, "Developer Remakes *P.T.* in Unreal and Adds VR Support," *IGN*, January 4, 2019, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/01/04/developer-remakes-pt-in-unreal-and-adds-vr-support>

<sup>12</sup> *Oddest of the Odd*, "Silent Hills P.T. IN REAL LIFE," February 10, 2016, video, 13:37, <https://youtu.be/EqEqSFvQ7ic>

<sup>13</sup> David Roberts, "Did You Spot all the *PT* References Hidden in *Metal Gear Solid 5: The Phantom Pain*?" *GamesRadar*, October 1, 2017, <https://www.gamesradar.com/uk/all-pt-references-metal-gear-solid-5/>

<sup>14</sup> Megan Farokhmanesh, "*P.T.*-like Horror Game *Allison Road* is Creepy, Creepy, Creepy, and We Love It," *Polygon*, July 1, 2015, <https://www.polygon.com/2015/7/1/8876559/allison-road-pt-horror>

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Chapman, "Layers of Fear: Dev Laments Konami's *Silent Hills PT* Cancellation," *Sunday Express*, February 1, 2016, <https://www.express.co.uk/entertainment/gaming/639998/Layers-Of-Fear-PS4-Silent-Hills-PT-Konami-Cancellation>

<sup>16</sup> Notable scholars of *Silent Hill* include Ewan Kirkland and Bernard Perron.

<sup>17</sup> As if the time of writing, I have only located one noteworthy study on *P.T.*: Kalinowski (2019), which examines the hallway in *P.T.* as a manifestation of Freud's concept of the uncanny.

In this paper, I discuss the ways in which *P.T.* symbolically constructs horror through representations of the female body, evoking the cinematic tradition of the monstrous-feminine. Building on work by Julia Kristeva, Barbara Creed, Claire Sisco King, Ewan Kirkland, and other notable scholars of film, ludology, and horror, I explore how *P.T.* leverages tropes of the monstrous-feminine within an allegorical displacement of domestic trauma. Finally, I consider the ethical implications of a narrative which, while engaging allegorically with domestic violence, shackles its female character to the role of victim and exploits her as a source for abject horror. I theorize that *P.T.* engages in a problematic tradition of horror media exploiting domestic violence and its victims as sources for horror, therein contributing to a cultural narrative which, rather than engaging critically with domestic violence, relegates real-world trauma and its victims to the realm of fantasy and monsters.

### **Literature Review**

In this literature review, I first explore the feminist psychoanalytic construct of the monstrous-feminine. Next, I move into a discussion of allegory as a framework for creating – and analyzing – mediated representations of reality. These two frameworks will be revisited in my analysis, where I will apply them to a close reading of *P.T.* Finally, I explore previous applications of concepts from film and media studies to the study of interactive games, so as to justify my application of the monstrous-feminine and allegory to my analysis of *P.T.*

## Theorizing the Monstrous-Feminine

*All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject.*

- Barbara Creed<sup>18</sup>

Film and media scholar Barbara Creed coins the term “monstrous-feminine” in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*.<sup>19</sup> Here, Creed proposes a new framework for understanding women’s bodies in horror – one which suggests a role for women in horror not as victim, but as monster. Prior to Creed, dominant conversations in film theory characterized woman as victim by nature. Reflecting Freud’s<sup>20</sup> psychoanalytic work, woman was understood as *castrated* – that is, lacking a phallus – relative to her male counterparts. In this way, women’s bodies were conceived as inherently victim to the act of castration. Early scholars to introduce the notion of woman as monster tended to frame the female monster as terrifying because she represented the male fear of castration.<sup>21</sup> Although such studies began a framework for classifying woman as monster, they nonetheless perpetuated the notion of woman as a victim of both castration and masculine fear. Thus, Creed’s key redefinition of woman – from phallus-lacking to phallus-threatening; from horrifying because she, *castrated*, represents what men fear to horrifying because she, *castrator*, wields the power to threaten men – challenges prior

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*.

<sup>20</sup> Creed. *Monstrous-Feminine*, 87-166. Creed explores and refutes Freud’s theory at length, beginning with an analysis of the ‘Little Hans’ case and continuing on to explore the castrating woman as represented in horror film.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: BFI, 1980); Susan Lurie, “The construction of the ‘castrated woman’ in psychoanalysis and cinema”, *Discourse* 4 (1981-2): 52-74, referenced in Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 5-6

understanding of the role of female bodies in horror and re-classifies woman from necessary victim to self-realizing monster.

Representations of the monstrous-feminine abound in modern and classic horror cinema.<sup>22</sup> Most often, such films include a climactic moment where a power dynamic is overthrown and the monstrous woman seizes control. In *Midsommar*, this moment occurs when Dani Ardor locks eyes with her ex-boyfriend, assigning him the fate of the ninth – and final – Hårga sacrifice.<sup>23</sup> In *The Brood*, Nola Carveth throws her arms out to the side, lifting her nightgown to reveal the external womb protruding grotesquely from her abdomen.<sup>24</sup> And in *Carrie*, Carrie White – drenched in pig’s blood and standing over the body of her prom date – smiles.<sup>25</sup> At the climax of their respective films, these women seize power. They shirk their victimhood and instead embody Creed’s monstrous-feminine, female monsters who weaponize the abject nature of their own bodies to reign horror down upon those who wronged them.

At the center of Creed’s work on the monstrous-feminine is the notion of women as representations of the abject, as illuminated by feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in her essay *Powers of Horror*.<sup>26</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘abject’ as referring to something

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<sup>22</sup> Some notable applications of the monstrous-feminine in film studies include Sharpe and Sexon (2018), Wee (2010), and Rachmaputri (2021).

<sup>23</sup> *Midsommar*, directed by Ari Aster (Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Entertainment Inc, 2019). For further analysis of the monstrous-feminine in *Midsommar*, see Katarina Anggita Rachmaputri, “Negotiation of the Abject Through the Representation of the Monstrous-Feminine in Ari Aster’s *Midsommar*,” (Undergraduate thesis, Universitas Sanata Dharma, 2021).

<sup>24</sup> *The Brood*, directed by David Cronenberg (Atlanta: New World Pictures, 1979). For further analysis, see Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 44-50.

<sup>25</sup> *Carrie*, directed by Brian De Palma (Hollywood: United Artists, 1976). For further analysis, see Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 73-83.

<sup>26</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

which has been “cast off, rejected; cast out, expelled.”<sup>27</sup> Kristeva elaborates upon this definition in her work by introducing the notion of borders – between human and non-human, between the self and the non-self, between meaning and collapse. Abjection, per Kristeva, is the crossing of this border; the expulsion and removal of the abject. Furthering this, Creed writes, “the concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous [...] that which crosses or threatens to cross the ‘border’ is abject.”<sup>28</sup> The definition of ‘border’ is ambiguous and dependent on context; however, the role of ‘monster’ is to threaten the divide “between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.”<sup>29</sup> Creed also notes that “definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text” are “grounded in” the abject; namely in relation to the “religious ‘abominations’: sexual immorality and perversion; corporal alteration; decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest.”<sup>30</sup>

In her work, Creed outlines three key ways<sup>31</sup> in which the horror film illustrates the abject, each relating uniquely to motherhood and female bodies. First, horror “abounds in images of the abjection,” namely abjection of the bodily variety: blood, pus, vomit, saliva, and the “ultimate abjection:” the corpse.<sup>32</sup> Citing Kristeva, Creed argues that woman has a “special

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<sup>27</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, OED Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press), s.v. “abject, adj. and n.,” <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.uvm.edu/view/Entry/335?rskey=6GUEBZ&result=1&isAdvanced=false>

<sup>28</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 10-11.

<sup>29</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> A similar application of Creed’s three-tier breakdown can be found in Rachmaputri, “Negotiation of the Abject.”

<sup>32</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 9-10.

relationship” to this form of the abject.<sup>33</sup> The female body is optimized for the abjection of bodily wastes, designed to expel the abject through menstruation, childbirth, and lactation.

Second, woman is inextricably bound to the abject due to her unique role in establishing borders as she teaches her children about the “clean and proper body,” or the need to maintain a body free from remnants of abjection such as feces and urine.<sup>34</sup> In this instance, the mother teaches her child to define the border through toilet and hygiene training.<sup>35</sup> In the mind of the child, the mother is associated with the abject through excrement and filth. On the relationship between the maternal figure and the abjection of bodily waste, Creed writes:

Images of blood, vomit, piss, shit, etc., are central to our culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific. [...] Consequently, they fill the subject – both the protagonist in the text and the spectator in the cinema – with disgust and loathing. On the other hand they also point back to a time when the mother-child relationship was marked by an untrammelled pleasure in ‘playing’ with the body and its wastes.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, the maternal body constructs horror because it represents the first instance of abjection: the separation of child from mother, in which the maternal body becomes abject to the child.<sup>37</sup> While during pregnancy the mother and child are functionally one body, with nourishment and oxygen passing freely between them, the act of birth is the forcing of the mother to become abject to the child and vice versa. Their two bodies become separate, the border between *self* and *other* being drawn between them for the first time. Later, the child

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<sup>33</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, cited in Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, cited in Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 13.

<sup>37</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 11.

experiences further abjection when it asserts its independence from the mother, rendering her even more abject, as she is no longer controller, provider, and nourishment-giver.<sup>38</sup> When the mother fails to allow either of these abjections, she “prevents [the child] from taking up its proper place in relation to the symbolic”<sup>39</sup> and therefore becomes monstrous.

These three key representations of abjection in horror are used by Creed to identify and analyze the monstrous-feminine in five key roles: archaic mother, monstrous womb, witch, vampire, and possessed woman.<sup>40</sup> In the following close reading, I will use Creed’s framework to examine several symbols in *P.T.* as constructing the monstrous womb. I will then interrogate the role of these symbols as contributing to an allegorical representation of domestic violence and as perpetuating a narrative of female victimhood.

### Allegory and Allegorical Displacement

Philosopher Walter Benjamin once wrote: “allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.”<sup>41</sup> Here, *allegory* refers to an extended metaphor in which reality is referenced or represented symbolically.<sup>42</sup> Just as ruins serve as degraded representations of

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<sup>38</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 12. Creed writes: “Once again we can see abjection at work in the horror text where the child struggles to break away from the mother.”

<sup>39</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 178.

<sup>42</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, OED Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press), s.v. “allegory, n.,” <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.uvm.edu/view/Entry/5230?rskey=57xQIE&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. As of the time of writing, the Oxford English Dictionary defines allegory as “the use of symbols in a story, picture, etc., to convey a hidden or ulterior meaning, typically a moral or political one; symbolic representation.”

societies that once were, allegories evoke and encode<sup>43</sup> reality, encapsulating public discourse in representative symbols without seeking to add meaning or suggest an objective truth. Furthering Benjamin's metaphor, rhetorical scholar Robert Hariman writes:

Allegorical texts, by being iconographic, associational, and incomplete – that is, as if they were ruins – work more to make complexity and stimulate multiple interpretations than they do to secure specific agreements or mystify social relations.<sup>44</sup>

Hariman further argues that allegories function to place the past and present side by side and encourage the audience to observe and engage with reality in a symbolic – rather than factual - register.

Take, for example, the ruins of ancient Rome. American tourists to these sites are subject to a diluted, worn-down representations of a once-great empire. They bring to the ruin their own mythologized understanding of Rome, learned through Hollywood's gladiator movies and an often-romanticized education regarding ancient Roman history. In visiting the ruined Colosseum, the tourist does not – can not – experience or understand it in the same depth as those who visited it while it was still in active use. The stories from inside its walls have been largely mythologized and lost to time, the structure itself beaten down by the elements into a fraction of what it once was. Instead, the ruin invites its visitors to view the realities of history through the mediated lens of the present, to consider what the Colosseum represents as it stands today. Allegory may be understood as functioning in the same way: rather than seeking to present an objective truth, allegory invites a visitation, a touristic drive-by of reality. The allegory invites the tourist and constructs the ruin; it may imply or suggest – in the same manner as a tour guide

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<sup>43</sup> Here, I have walked into the language of cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall and his notion of Encoding/Decoding. For an analysis of encoding and decoding in new media, see Shaw (2017).

<sup>44</sup> Robert Hariman, "Allegory and Democratic Public Culture in the Postmodern Era," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 35, no. 4 (2002): 267-296.

handing out pamphlets – an interpretation or meaning, but ultimately leaves the visitor to form their own understanding.

Of key importance to an understanding of allegory is the notion of distance. Just as the ruins of the Colosseum stand a thousand years removed from its original form, reality is presented in allegory from a symbolic distance. Allegory, therefore, may be leveraged to discuss or evoke tragic or violent realities while distancing the viewer from the traumatizing event itself. In her analysis of the 2006 film *Poseidon* as an allegorical representation of the events of 9/11, media and visual culture scholar Claire Sisco King<sup>45</sup> explores this notion by examining how allegory may act as both a symptom and a remedy for cultural trauma. Just as trauma victims feel compelled to “repeat distressing, even painful, situations,”<sup>46</sup> so too is the public compelled to tell and re-tell traumatic stories. These compulsive re-tellings, King argues, stem from an “attempt to piece back together what traumatic history has painfully dismembered.”<sup>47,48</sup> Here, allegory plays the key role of distancing the audience from the source of trauma, allowing them to fulfill their repetitive compulsion without risking re-traumatization. Quoting from Hariman, King asserts that allegories offer “a ‘defense mechanism’ against the vicissitudes of life without risking a confrontation with history that is too close, too open, or too painful.”<sup>49</sup> Allegory, therefore, may

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<sup>45</sup> Claire Sisco King, “Rogue Waves, Remakes, and Resurrections: Allegorical Displacement and Screen Memory in *Poseidon*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 4 (November 2008).

<sup>46</sup> Burness E. Moore and Bernard D. Fine, eds., *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 165, cited in King, “Rogue Waves”

<sup>47</sup> King, “Rogue Waves,” 431.

<sup>48</sup> This notion of dismembering (and subsequent *remembering*) harkens back to Cicero’s legend of Simonides of Ceos, in which Simonides uses his visual memory to identify the dismembered bodies of guests in a collapsed banquet hall based on where they were sitting when he last saw them. See Thomas, “Ancient Imagery.”

<sup>49</sup> King, “Rogue Waves,” 435.

be understood as *displacing* trauma, constructing a rhetorical buffer between the viewer and the source of trauma through symbolic representation. Through allegory, audiences are empowered to process and reflect upon traumatic events without being subjected to their traumatizing properties.

In following analysis, I will examine *P.T.* as allegorically displacing the pervasive cultural trauma of domestic violence. In *P.T.*, players are presented a narrative of extreme domestic violence in the form of familicide both directly through a radio broadcast and allegorically within the symbol-rich horror setting of the game. In my close reading of *P.T.*, I will interrogate the appropriateness of the symbolic construction of the monstrous-feminine in the game to the underlying narrative of domestic violence and seek to evaluate the ethics of *P.T.* as a game which displaces a real-world violent cultural tragedy by relating it to supernatural symbols and exploits a female victim of domestic violence as a source of horror.

It would, of course, be remiss to leverage allegory in this analysis without acknowledging the complicated history of the concept. As culture, society, and rhetoric have changed, so too have the meaning, use, and scholarly understanding of allegory shifted. A full discussion of the historical discourse surrounding allegory is beyond the scope of this paper;<sup>50</sup> however, I acknowledge that the very notion of allegory exists in flux, and that the analyses made in this paper are dependent upon a postmodern understanding of allegory and symbolic meaning as they exist in the present. For the purposes of this study, *allegory* is understood as the use of symbols to create a mediated representation of reality within a rhetorical space. Allegories may imply a

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<sup>50</sup> For a more thorough explanation of the history of allegory, see Hariman, "Allegory and Democratic Public Culture." Footnote 4 in this text lists several key works on the subject.

meaning or interpretation of reality; however, the act of allegory cannot itself change or suggest one definitive interpretation of reality.

### Interactive Cinema: Applying Film Theory to Video Games

While the above conversations regarding allegorical displacement and the monstrous-feminine do not directly address video games, games media scholars have extensively explored and justified the application of film and media studies within video game research. Despite – or perhaps in spite of – their interactive nature, modern video games rely heavily on cinematic techniques as a tool for storytelling.<sup>51</sup> Most commonly, cinematography comes into play through in-game cutscenes, wherein interactivity is temporarily suspended in favor of a narrative-driven cinematic.<sup>52</sup> During interactive sequences, filmic framing is leveraged to guide the player’s attention and movement. This may include forced camera angles and perspective, or more subtle cinematic techniques such as contrast, camera tracking, and camera focus.<sup>53</sup> And throughout every aspect of the game – cutscenes, interactive sequences, open world exploration – cinematic lighting techniques are used to direct the player’s attention, establish atmosphere, and reveal – or obscure – key information.<sup>54</sup> The techniques leveraged in film to construct or imply literal or

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<sup>51</sup> Ewan Kirkland, “Restless dreams in *Silent Hill*: approaches to video game analysis,” *Journal of Media Practice* 6, no. 3 (2005): 169

<sup>52</sup> Ewan Kirkland, “Restless Dreams and Shattered Memories: Psychoanalysis and *Silent Hill*,” *Brumal Research Journal on the Fantastic* 3, no. 1 (2015). Kirkland argues here that cutscenes are a key component of psychological horror, as the removal of interactivity leaves players at the mercy of the game. Interestingly, *P.T.* primarily contains minor (5-10 second) interstitial cutscenes, with the only substantial cutscene appearing at the end of the game.

<sup>53</sup> Yu-Ching Chang and Chi-Min Hseih, “Filmic Framing in Video Games: A Comparative Analysis of Screen Space Design,” *Multimedia Tools and Applications* 77, no. 6 (2018).

<sup>54</sup> Simon Niedenthal, “Shadowplay: Simulated Illumination in Game Worlds” in *Worlds in Play: International Perspectives on Digital Games Research*, ed. Suzanne de Castell and Jennifer Jenson (New York: Lang Publishing, Inc., 2007), 221-227.

symbolic meaning are also prevalent in video games, enabling similar approaches to analysis of each.

Beyond considerations of the camera and *mise-en-scene*, video games intersect with cinema and literature in that they are entertainment, shaped by – and ostensibly shaping – public discourse and the human experience. Research on the cultural and societal influence of films, including film as allegory, is applicable to video game analysis because both constitute visual media constructed within the same social discourse. As such, numerous scholars have drawn comparisons between analyses of games, including *P.T.* and its parent series, *Silent Hill*, and film. Discussing gender in *Silent Hill 2*, media and cultural scholar Ewan Kirkland weighed his considerations of the player’s implication in James Sunderland’s actions with similar considerations regarding the films *A Clockwork Orange*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Natural Born Killers*.<sup>55</sup> In her analysis of uncanny horror in *P.T.*, York University student Anna Maria Kalinowski drew upon Mark Jancovich’s research on psychological horror in 1940’s cinema.<sup>56</sup> And while describing the opening scene of *Silent Hill 2*, design-oriented games scholar Simon Niedenthal evoked a parallel to the cult classic film *The Godfather*.<sup>57</sup> These examples represent just a few of the many connections that form the extensive, reflexive web which connects video game studies with broader investigations of symbolism, allegory, and meaning in film and media studies.

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<sup>55</sup> Ewan Kirkland, “Masculinity in Video Games: The Gendered Gameplay of *Silent Hill*,” *Camera Obscura* 71, no. 2 (2009): 163.

<sup>56</sup> Anna Maria Kalinowski, “Silent Halls: *P.T.*, Freud, and Psychological Horror,” *Press Start* 5, no. 1 (2019): 58.

<sup>57</sup> Niedenthal, “Shadowplay,” 223.

Even if one were to disregard the established and well-documented practice of situating video game analysis within the broader domains of film and media studies, any analysis of *P.T.* would nonetheless raise questions of its cinematographic influences, if only on account of the people who made it. In developing *P.T.* – and the since-cancelled<sup>58</sup> *Silent Hills* – game designer Hideo Kojima partnered with American filmmaker Guillermo del Toro. Several films in del Toro’s repertoire address questions of the monstrous, such as *Crimson Peak* (2015),<sup>59</sup> *Mama* (2013), and *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006).<sup>60</sup> Allegorical readings of del Toro’s works abound, including analyses of *Pan’s Labyrinth*,<sup>61</sup> *Pacific Rim* (2013),<sup>62</sup> and *The Shape of Water* (2017).<sup>63</sup> Del Toro’s works are indisputably influenced by the filmic traditions of monstrosity and allegory, and it is not unreasonable to assume that these influences would carry over into his work on *P.T.*, further justifying the application of the monstrous-feminine and allegorical displacement to its analysis.

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<sup>58</sup> Asked about the future of his collaboration with Kojima in 2015, del Toro replied: “It’s not gonna happen and that breaks my greasy heart.”

<sup>59</sup> For further analysis of the monstrous-feminine in *Crimson Peak*, see Emilia Musap, “Monstrous Domesticity – Home as a Site of Oppression in *Crimson Peak*.” [sic] - *A Journal of Literature, Culture and Literary Translation* 8, no. 1 (2017)

<sup>60</sup> For an analysis of the monstrous in *Pan’s Labyrinth*, see Brenna Goodwin-McCabe, “Monstrous Progeny: Revisiting Mary Shelley’s Creature in Guillermo del Toro’s *Pan’s Labyrinth*” (unpublished work, 2020), <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0390276>.

<sup>61</sup> A. Robin Hoffman, “‘This Movie is Like a Rorschach Test:’ Disrupted Allegory and the Image of the Child in *Pan’s Labyrinth*,” *Genre* 43, no. 1-2 (2010): 137-162.

<sup>62</sup> Erin Suzuki, “Beasts from the Deep,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 1 (2017): 11-28.

<sup>63</sup> Alberta Natasia Adji, “Falling for the Amphibian Man: Fantasy, Otherness, and Auteursism in del Toro’s *The Shape of Water*,” *IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication & Film* 6, no. 1 (2019): 51-64.

### Object of Analysis: *P.T.*

In the following section, I introduce *P.T.* and give a broad overview of its gameplay, plot, and setting, including an introduction of the symbols which I will investigate further in my analysis.

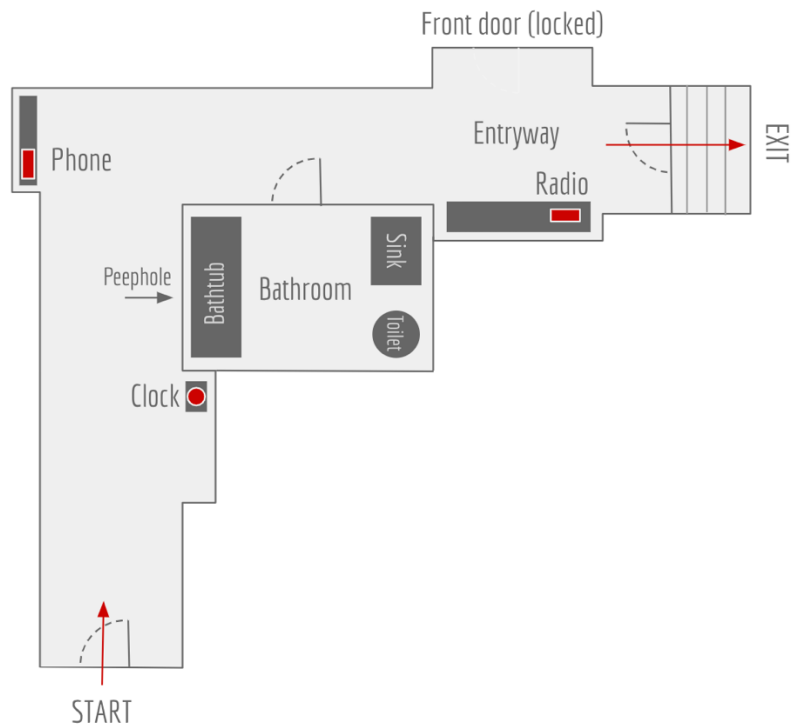


Figure 1. Map of *P.T.*'s iconic hallway.

### Gameplay & Narrative

*Watch out. The gap in the door... it's a separate reality.*

*The only me is me. Are you sure the only you is you?*

- *P.T.* opening sequence

The basic premise of *P.T.* is straightforward: the player is trapped in a never-ending hallway. Every time they attempt to leave through the door at its end, they return – impossibly – back to its beginning. As the player moves through hall again and again (for the purpose of this

analysis, I will refer to each pass through the hallway as a “loop”), the scene begins to transform from a mundane home into a horrifying space which the player is desperate to escape.

At the start of *P.T.*, the player finds themselves on the floor of a barren concrete room. The camera is tilted to suggest that they’re lying on their left side, and in the bottom left of the screen, a cockroach scuttles through their field of vision. A door, illuminated by a single fluorescent light, groans open. The camera tilts, shifts out of focus, and the player catches a glimpse of their avatar’s arm and the sleeve of a leather jacket as they stand. Finally, the camera stabilizes and the player assumes control.

On the other side of the door, the player finds a hallway. At first glance, it’s the picture of domesticity: quaint eggshell walls, hardwood floors, family photographs lovingly displayed. A digital clock informs the player of the time – 23:59, which explains why the hall is dark and quiet – and an assortment of coats are carefully hung on a rack by the front door. The only indication that something may be amiss is the filth: empty bottles, packets of pills, trash piled on tabletops, cockroaches scurrying into the shadows.

The hallway is made up of two segments; the player enters in the “lower” segment and proceeds around a corner to the right, into the “upper” segment. In the lower stretch, the player passes the clock in an alcove to their right and a table littered with trash, photographs, and a landline phone to their left. Rounding the corner, they pass a locked door on the right and rain-splattered windows on the left. It’s too dark to see anything outside. The hallway opens up to a formal entryway: on the player’s left, an ornate front door; on their right, a sideboard. On top of the sideboard is a small radio, from which a radio announcer’s voice reads off a gruesome report about the recent family annihilation. Above the player, a chandelier swings in nonexistent wind. At the end of the hallway, a door stands open. The player moves through it, down a short flight

of stairs, and through a second door – and emerges once again through the entrance door, returning against all notions of geometry to the exact same hallway they just left.

The game proceeds in this fashion for upwards of fifteen “loops,” with player decisions throughout the game increasing or decreasing the number of loops they encounter. As the player progresses, the familiar scenery begins to change. Overhead lights which were turned on in a previous loop suddenly turn off or change colors. Doors which were previously locked swing open or closed at a moment’s notice. Voices are heard crying, moaning, and laughing. Photographs change, distort, or disappear, and disturbing messages appear scrawled on the walls.

In the fifth loop, the player rounds the corner to find a woman standing in the entryway, silhouetted by the chandelier. As they approach, the lights go out, and she is gone when they flicker back on. Fans have given this apparition the nickname “Lisa,” in reference to writing which appears above the exit door around the eighth loop: “Forgive me, Lisa. There’s a monster inside of me.” Lisa reappears several times throughout the game – yanking the bathroom door closed in loop two; looming on a balcony above the entryway in loop nine. If the player fails to complete the game’s central puzzle in time, Lisa jump-scares them, knocking their avatar to the floor and sending them back to the beginning for a new loop.

In the sixth loop, the door to the player’s right swings open as they round the corner. Beyond it is a small bathroom splattered with blood and grime. There’s a flashlight on the ground, which the player picks up, scattering a small colony of cockroaches. In the sink, splattered with blood, is a fetus. Its limbs are small and malformed, it has no hands, feet, or fingers; its head is misshapen and it has no facial features except a mouth, which the fetus flings wide open as it cries. It’s a gruesome, harrowing sight.

In the tenth loop, the entryway chandelier is replaced by a refrigerator, bound by ropes and swinging. The lowest corner of the fridge oozes blood in sickening gushes which splatter the entryway floor. From inside the appliance the player hears a child crying. When the radio clicks on to announce the father's suicide, it is from inside the fridge that a quiet, muffled voice issues a correction: "after killing his family, the father hung himself with an umbilical cord."

Throughout the loops, scattered voices and scrawled messages on the walls add scraps of context to the radio announcer's narrative. Starting in the seventh loop, a male voice interrupts the radio announcer, seemingly addressing the player as he commands: "Don't touch that dial [...] Don't trust the tap water [...] Look behind you. I said, look behind you." In the eighth, scrawled writing above the final door gives a name to the monstrous woman: "Forgive me, Lisa. There's a monster inside of me." As the player stares through a peephole into the bathroom during the thirteenth loop, a frantic radio broadcast overscores a soundtrack of wet, fleshy noises interspersed with the *ching* of blades and a woman struggling to breathe. The broadcaster encourages the offscreen violence, declaring:

Our society is rotten to the core. I'm talking about all the fine, upstanding folks who got their welfare cut, got their jobs pulled out from under 'em. Yeah, you! You know what to do! Now's the time! Do it!

Further along in the same loop, the fetus in the sink addresses the player in a deep male voice:

You got fired so you drowned your sorrows in booze. She had to get a part-time job working a grocery store cash register. Only reason she could earn a wage at all is the manager liked how she looked in a skirt. You remember, right? Exactly ten months back.

These patchwork scraps of narrative provide the player with glimpses into the underlying narrative of the game, yet stubbornly refuse to clarify several basic questions: who is the playable character? Why are they trapped in the hallway? What exactly happened to the

murdered family – were the father’s actions his own, or was he possessed, as the broadcast interruptions seem to imply?

When the player exits the final door for the last time, they emerge into Silent Hill, the iconic setting of Konami Studios’ horror game series of the same name. Abandoning the first-person perspective, the camera pans outward, showing the player their avatar for the first time. Finally, the words “Silent Hills” appear onscreen, revealing that *P.T.* is not a standalone game, but rather a “playable teaser” for *Silent Hills*, a game which would mark the ninth installment in the *Silent Hill* saga, and which might have provided the answers to players’ burning questions about the events of *P.T.*, had it not been cancelled.

## Analysis

### Representations of the Monstrous Womb in *P.T.*

*The womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination – blood, afterbirth, faeces.*

- Barbara Creed<sup>64</sup>

Integral to any discussion of woman as abject body is the womb. When the womb serves its ultimate purpose in pregnancy, the abject border between *self* and *other* is blurred and threatened. The developing fetus, being its own being, is simultaneously *other* to the mother and yet entirely dependent on her: it lives inside her body, it shares the oxygen in her blood. Birth, therefore, can be understood as the first instance of the abject in the child’s life, as the abject border is suddenly, violently drawn. It is now *self*, and the mother – once an integral, connected

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<sup>64</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 49.

vessel of the child's survival – becomes abject, *other*. Central to this abject act is that which enables it: the womb. Creed writes:

In my view, woman's womb is horrifying, not because it is made to look like a penis or a cancerous growth, but because of its essential functions – it houses an alien life form, it causes alterations in the body, it leads to the act of birth.<sup>65</sup>

This notion of the womb as horrifying, abject, is central in defining one of Creed's five key roles held by monstrous women: the monstrous womb. It is this manifestation of the monstrous-feminine which *P.T.* symbolically evokes and weaponizes against the player as a source of horror.

As is the case with many allegorical texts, *P.T.* presents an intricate, tangled abundance of symbolic meaning. For the purposes of this close reading of *P.T.*, five key symbols will be investigated: the hallway, the fetus, the umbilical cord, the refrigerator, and Lisa herself. In investigating these symbols, I seek to argue the following: that each can be understood to represent or evoke the womb, and that each can be understood as monstrous, therein serving to evoke the monstrous-feminine as the monstrous womb. Later, I will interrogate the role of these monstrous-feminine symbols in allegorically constructing domestic violence. Per Creed's classification of representations of the monstrous womb,<sup>66</sup> these will be separated into two categories: *symbolic* representation in the forms of the hallway and refrigerator, and *literal* representation in terms of manifestations of the body and womb.

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<sup>65</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 49.

<sup>66</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 53.

*Symbolic Representations: The Hallway and The Refrigerator*

At the end of every pass through the hallway, players of *P.T.* descend a short flight of stairs before proceeding through the final door into the next loop. This creates a winding spiral effect: with each pass through the hallway, the player descends deeper, further *in* to the liminal space. In some loops the player navigates in the suffocating dark; in others, they wander through the haze of blood-red lights. Deeper and further the player travels through the narrow halls until they are released – birthed – into the wide-open streets of Silent Hill. In this way, the house is constructed as a womb, the narrow hallway its birth canal, pushing the player down and down through blood, darkness, and claustrophobia until they are finally released.<sup>67</sup> It is not until after this birth that the player is allowed to see their avatar. Like the fetus, the player has no identity, no self so long as they are within the womb. In order to realize their self, the player must commit the first abjection: they must force their separation from the hallway and be born. In constructing the halls as the womb and the final exit as birth, *P.T.* characterizes the womb as monstrous: it is the site of horror, fear, and death. The womb is no longer a place of safety but rather a suffocating nightmare which must be escaped, removed, made abject.

Although ostensibly the most obvious, the hallway is not *P.T.*'s only symbolic representation of the womb. During the tenth and eleventh loops, the chandelier in the entryway is replaced by a refrigerator, bound by ropes and swinging from the ceiling. The refrigerator itself evokes the domestic ideal of the family meal, a notion traditionally associated with the domestic housewife. In fact, the mother in the murder narrative was fulfilling this exact role at the time of her death: she was in the kitchen, cleaning up after lunch on a Sunday afternoon. The refrigerator, therefore, becomes associated with both *mother* and *sustenance*. Like the umbilical

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<sup>67</sup> Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 53. Creed similarly characterizes the haunted house as evoking the monstrous womb.

cord in the womb, the refrigerator is a vessel through which the mother provides for her children; it is a point of connection between mother and child even beyond the abjection of birth.

Inside the refrigerator, someone – *something* – is trapped. The player can hear it crying and banging against the refrigerator walls. But the fridge is bound by ropes – try though it might, the thing inside cannot break free. Whatever the trapped creature is, it is trapped in the womb-like refrigerator. It cannot escape – cannot be *born* from the fridge and experience the first abjection – and is therefore forced to exist in the horrifying state where there is no border between *self* and *other*. The refrigerator is monstrous for the same reason as the hallway: it is a womb perverted, a place of sustenance made into a suffocating trap, a violation of the boundary between the self and the abject. What once evoked domestic imagery of a mother providing for her family now evokes anxiety, fear, and disgust. The refrigerator evokes the womb and it is monstrous; therefore, the womb is constructed as monstrous as well.

*Literal Representations: The Fetus, The Umbilical Cord, and Lisa*

At the risk of injecting my own opinion into this analysis, I would state what I believe to be indisputable: the most horrifying aspect of *P.T.* is the fetus in the sink. I use the term *fetus* instead of the more comfortable *baby* or *child* because the being in the sink is barely developed enough to be identifiable as human. Its limbs are stunted and boneless, its head is more oval than round, and it has no distinct facial features except its mouth. One doesn't need to be a child development expert to recognize that a fetus so undeveloped could not possibly survive outside the womb, much less outside the womb and all alone in a filthy bathroom sink. At this point in the fetus' life, it should be safe in utero, suspended in the pre-abject state where the border between mother and child is blurred. Instead, the fetus has been prematurely forced to suffer the

first abjection and be separated – violently, if the blood splatters in the sink are any indication – from its mother. Given that the mother in the murder case broadcast over the radio was pregnant at the time of her death, it can be assumed that the creature in the sink is her fetus, and that its violent birth coincided with the ultimate abjection in her death. Birth, therefore, is associated through the sink fetus with violence, blood, and death, a miraculous occasion turned monstrous.



Figure 2. The fetus in the sink. Konami Studios via IGN.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, the sight of the fetus forces the player to contend with the inherently monstrous nature of pregnancy. The being in the sink looks more alien than human. With its stunted, deformed, fleshy body splattered with blood and filth, it is grotesque to behold. In seeing the fetus, the player is forced to reckon with the fact that *this* is what lies hidden within the mother's pregnant stomach. It is not a cherubic, round-faced baby – it is nauseating, it is monstrous, and it was created and nourished by the mother's womb. The womb, therefore, is the source of this grotesque being; it is the creator and genesis of this monstrosity.

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<sup>68</sup> Luke Reilly, *You weren't planning on sleeping, right?*, in "Nobody Puts Sink Baby in a Corner." *IGN*, May 21, 2018. <https://www.ign.com/articles/2014/08/25/ign-au-pubcast-102-nobody-puts-sink-baby-in-a-corner>

Notably missing from the gruesome scene in the bathroom sink is the item which, at one point, crossed the border between *self* and *abject* to connect the life of the fetus to that of its mother: the umbilical cord. Instead of remaining attached to the fetus, the umbilical cord has been removed, the reason for which is revealed in the game's tenth loop: the father, after murdering his pregnant wife and their two children, used the umbilical cord to hang himself from the rafters in the garage. The implications of this revelation are immediate and horrifying. The father shot his pregnant wife in her stomach, a monstrous act in itself, but he didn't stop there. In order to obtain his method of choice for suicide, the father would have needed to open his wife's womb, making what was once *within* her – their child, the womb, that sacred place where life is created and nurtured – *without*. The abjections here are almost too many to count: he made his wife abject by rendering her a corpse; he made his child abject by removing it from the womb; he removed the umbilical cord, which defied abjection to connect mother with child; and he used that umbilical cord to render himself abject. When the father commits suicide, the umbilical cord – once associated with life – becomes irrevocably entwined with his death. It is a monstrous, grotesque scene, and once again it was the mother's womb which enabled such monstrosity.



Figure 2. Lisa stands in the entryway. Konami via EuroGamer.<sup>69</sup>

Any discussion of representations of the womb necessitates a discussion of the womb-haver herself: the mother. In *P.T.*, the mother is manifested in Lisa, the being which haunts the player throughout the game. Her virginal white nightgown acts as a perfect canvas for showcasing the evidence of abjection. Putrid yellow bile drips down her chin and soaks her chest. The sight of her round, apparently pregnant stomach is rendered horrifying by the vibrant blood stain spreading from her pelvic area. The very sight of Lisa suggests the abject acts of vomiting, childbirth, menstruation. She is both mother and monster, a pregnant, abject body whose only apparent purpose in the game is to stalk and torture the player. If Lisa is understood be the mother in the radio murder, then it is her womb from which the monstrous constructions of the fetus and the umbilical cord originated. She is the embodiment of the monstrous womb, a woman whose fertility and pregnancy have been made monstrosities and used to torture, trap, nauseate, and horrify her victims.

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<sup>69</sup> Vikki Blake, [*Lisa standing in hallway*], in “If You Don’t Want to Sleep Tonight, Here’s What Happened to *P.T.*’s Lisa,” *Eurogamer*, September 29, 2019, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2019-09-29-if-you-dont-want-to-sleep-tonight-heres-what-happened-to-p-t-s-lisa>

Distraction Tactics: Allegory in *P.T.*

In their first loop of the never-ending hallway, *P.T.* presents players with a ruin of domesticity. The radio narrative evokes imagery of the mythical nuclear family: the breadwinning father; the mother overseeing the kitchen; their quite literal two-and-a-half children. All that's missing from the scene is a family dog and a white picket fence. But just as soon as *P.T.* evokes this mythically perfect image, the domestic scene is violently torn apart. The father – given the role in this myth of breadwinner and protector – turns violent. He shoots his wife – caretaker, life-bringer – in the stomach, and then murders his two innocent children. Within a matter of seconds, the perfect domestic family is torn apart, perverted, and – to evoke Walter Benjamin's metaphor – turned to ruins.<sup>70</sup>

Having established this gruesome scene, the game transitions into an allegorical register. As the player navigates the endlessly looping hallway, their supernatural encounters symbolically evoke the violence described by the broadcast. Where the radio narrative described a murdered pregnant mother, the hallway presents a monstrous specter of a woman with a swollen stomach and blood on her nightgown. The mother's unborn child is reflected in the fetus wailing in the sink. The scene of the crime – the kitchen following a Sunday family lunch – echoes in the refrigerator above the entryway.

In this way, instead of addressing the reality of domestic violence directly, *P.T.* symbolically evokes the familicide narrative within a supernatural context. This allows the player to engage with domestic violence from an allegorical distance: because the game situates the murders within a supernatural setting, the player is encouraged to treat the domestic violence as a manifestation of the supernatural as well. Rather than contend with the notion that familicide

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<sup>70</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 178.

– this violent, traumatic act – can and does occur in the “real world,” players are given permission to dismiss the murders as fantasy because they exist and are symbolically represented alongside the impossible: an endless looping hallway, a ghost woman, an underdeveloped fetus with the voice of a grown man.

*P.T.* can therefore be understood as allegorically *displacing* the traumatic narrative of domestic violence. Players of the game are encouraged to engage with the notion of domestic violence specifically as a relic amidst the ruins of a notion of the perfect domestic family. They are asked to consider how it is that the perfect family image of a mother cleaning up after having lunch with her husband and children can so easily transition into an image of violence. Like the allegorical tourist referenced earlier, players must contend with a collision of past and present, reality and fiction, as they are led to speculate on the cultural and personal motivators that might bring a man to murder his own family. The game, however, stops short of actually depicting the murders or the victims (some may argue Lisa and the sink fetus are depictions of the mother and child victims; however, I would argue that these constitute – at most - supernatural *representations* of the victims and not the victims themselves). In this way, *P.T.* allows players to engage with domestic violence at an allegorical distance, wherein they can repetitively engage with the concept without witnessing or being forced to accept the reality of the traumatizing act of familicide itself.

#### Monstrous Mother, Absolved Father:

##### Pitfalls of Allegory and the Monstrous-Feminine in *P.T.*

In previous sections, I have established that *P.T.* symbolically evokes the monstrous-feminine in its figurative and literal representations of the monstrous womb. I have explored *P.T.*

as operating in an allegorical register to displace the pervasive cultural trauma of domestic violence and invite the player to consider domestic violence as a ruin of the mythologized notion of the “perfect” domestic unit. In this section, I consider the intersection of these two concepts and examine *P.T.* as a game which leverages the monstrous-feminine as a tool for allegorical displacement, therein using woman’s body as a symbolic distraction from a narrative in which woman is victim.

### *Allegory and Blame: Absolving the Father*

In studying any piece of horror media, it is crucial to establish which character takes on the role of villain. For players of *P.T.*, the distinction may belong to Lisa: she stalks them through the hallway, jump-scaring and generally acting as a source of torment. Considered objectively, however, Lisa doesn’t actually do much to earn the title of villain. She’s unpleasant to look at and occasionally catches the player off guard, but she never attempts to cause them physical harm. Even when Lisa grabs the player and shoves them to the floor, the player is returned to a new loop completely unharmed. One may even argue that she does this to help the player, as her actions allow them to progress to the next iteration of the hall.

In fact, only one character in *P.T.* commits an outright villainous act: the father in the radio narrative who brutally murders his entire family. Of all the characters in both the radio narrative and the supernatural hallway, he is unquestionably the most monstrous and most evil.

But despite his incomprehensibly violent actions, the father is neither addressed nor represented as an antagonist within the allegorical space of the hallway. If anything, the father is painted as a somewhat sympathetic figure. The interruptions to the radio broadcast suggest that he may have been suffering from a psychotic break as they obsessively repeat “you can’t trust

the tap water” and “204863,” insinuating the workings of a paranoid mind. A voice – emanating from a bloody bag in the concrete room where the player re-spawns after being grabbed by Lisa – seems to imply that the murderer may have actually been a doppelganger as it asks “the only me is me. Are you sure the only you is you?” Later on, a new radio broadcast blames society, declaring:

Our society is rotten to the core. I’m talking about all the fine, upstanding folks that got their welfare cut, got their jobs pulled out from under ‘em. Yeah, you! You know what to do! Now’s the time! Do it!

Finally, the fetus in the sink speaks up, painting a picture of the father as a desperate, struggling man who “got fired so you drowned yourself in booze” and felt guilty because, in his failure, his wife “had to get a part-time job working a grocery store cash register” where she was sexually harassed by the manager.

Over and over again, the narrative in the hallway – which I’ve established can be understood as addressing the familicide in an allegorical register – provides excuses for the father’s actions. His violence is blamed on insanity, society, a doppelganger, the economy, his own sense of failure,<sup>71</sup> alcohol, and even the tap water. Never once is the father interrogated as the perpetrator of an unforgivable violent act; instead, the player is presented with numerous reasons as to why the murders may not have been entirely his fault. In this way, the game uses its allegory to absolve the father of blame for his violent, monstrous actions.

### *Victim, Monster: Interrogating Lisa’s Role as the Monstrous-Feminine*

In section one of this analysis (“Representations of the Monstrous Womb in *P.T.*”) I examined how *P.T.* evokes Creed’s notion of the monstrous-feminine as monstrous womb

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<sup>71</sup> Given the notion of father as domestic provider (breadwinner), the father losing job and therefore his means of providing for his family may constitute a loss of his manly identity; a social *castration*.

through its use of representative and literal imagery of the womb, pregnancy, and childbirth. Lisa, being a representation of both mother and womb, can therefore be understood as the monstrous woman of Creed's monstrous-feminine herself. I find, however, that *P.T.* fails to realize one pivotal aspect of Creed's theory.

As discussed in the literature review, the theory of the monstrous-feminine is centered around a reassignment of roles. Rather than being monstrous because she is victimized, per traditional horror tropes, the monstrous-feminine is horrifying of her own right. No longer is she constructed as *castrated*; instead, she wields the fear-evoking power of *castrator*. She controls her body and weaponizes her abject self, and it is that which makes her monstrous.<sup>72</sup>

In examining Lisa, however, no evidence of this crucial power-swap can be found. She, is, by nature, a victim: the ghostly specter of a pregnant mother brutally murdered by her own husband. She has suffered not only the loss of her own life, but her unborn child's as well. Where the traditional monstrous-feminine figure would here reclaim her victimhood and come to discover her own power – Carrie White shoving her oppressive mother into the closet and leaving for the prom; Dani Ardor nominating her emotionally abusive boyfriend for sacrifice – Lisa fundamentally fails to do so. She is not allowed the satisfaction of taking revenge on her violent husband. She isn't able to lash out at the player who, although the identity of their avatar remains unknown, is at the least a man trespassing in her home and at most her murderous husband himself. Like the player, Lisa is a victim of the hallway,<sup>73</sup> trapped in a never-ending

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<sup>72</sup> Creed stresses, and here I should re-emphasize, that the monstrous-feminine is not an inherently *feminist* figure. There can be, and certainly are, women in horror who fulfill the role of the monstrous-feminine and yet still represent a decidedly *anti-feminist* ideal. The key distinction of the monstrous-feminine is that she controls and weaponizes her own womanhood, regardless of the feminist implications (or lack thereof) of her or the narrative in which she exists.

<sup>73</sup> When the player exits the hallway at the end of the game, Lisa is nowhere to be seen. Presumably, she remains in the hall, trapped and wandering for all eternity.

nightmare. She cannot leave. She cannot hurt the player. The fetus in the sink – representatively, if not literally, the body of her unborn child – serves as a painful reminder to Lisa of everything she has lost. Even as her body and womb are appropriated to create shock-value horror, Lisa herself remains always a victim: of her husband, of the lewd manager at the grocery store,<sup>74</sup> and now of her own home.

I would argue, therefore, that although it effectively evokes the monstrous womb, *P.T.* fails to fully realize the monstrous-feminine. The horrifying representations of the womb make for excellent shock-value horror but are just that: shocking moments of body horror. Where *P.T.* had the potential to leverage its symbolic representations of the monstrous-feminine to encourage larger critical discussion of woman’s victimhood and domestic violence, the game stops short of actually doing so. Lisa is left relegated to the role of victim, her body weaponized without her consent and her potential as a character cut tragically short.

### *Unresolved Domestic Allegory*

By allegorically addressing domestic violence, *P.T.* engages with a pervasive, traumatic cultural experience which players are certainly aware of, if they have not witnessed it firsthand. According to NIH statistics, 1 in 3 adult women in the United States have experienced domestic violence. Every year, over 1,500 deaths occur as a result.<sup>75</sup> The radio narrative in *P.T.* isn’t a far-off, fantastical impossibility, but rather a fictionalized case study of a tragic reality.

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<sup>74</sup> In Loop 13, the fetus in the sink describes the father’s job loss and alcoholism to the player. During its speech, the fetus notes: “She had to get a part-time job working a grocery store cash register. Only reason she could earn a wage at all is the manager liked how she looked in a skirt.”

<sup>75</sup> Martin Huecker et al, “Domestic Violence.” StatPearls, February 17, 2021, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK499891/>

As a mediated experience operating allegorically, *P.T.* possesses the unique potential to help shape players' perception or understanding of domestic violence from a safe rhetorical distance. It could, potentially, present an allegorical stance that critically examines the societal pressures that may contribute to increased incidence of domestic violence. In *Lisa and the fetus*, *P.T.* might have found a way to give voice to victims of domestic violence within a safe, allegorical setting.

Instead, the game stops short of any sort of productive, critical engagement with the notion of domestic violence. Like a narrative tour guide, the game *leads* the player to the subject of domestic violence. It maybe, perhaps, suggests that domestic violence exists as a ruin of the mythologized "perfect" domestic family, in that it presents the murders as happening after a quaint Sunday dinner. The societal pressures that may enable this ruining – the construct of father as breadwinner; the embarrassment of his wife working part-time at a grocery store – are introduced within the allegorical space. But *P.T.* critically fails to engage in any productive conversation with or about the considerations it points to. Instead, the Sunday dinner is used only as a backdrop for the shocking image of familicide; the societal pressures are introduced only in an attempt to (seemingly) displace blame from the father for his murderous actions. If *P.T.* is a tour guide to a ruin of domestic life, then it is a sensationalizing one, focused more on the shock value of blood and gore than the real-world trauma of domestic violence.

In *P.T.*, players find a horror game which leverages domestic violence not as a cultural trauma necessitating critical consideration but as a source of shocking, brutal horror. The game describes in grueling detail the murders of a mother and her children but does nothing to critically examine the conditions that enabled their deaths; it uses the image of their corpses to generate horror yet doesn't even bother to condemn their murderer. Instead, the father –

murderer – is absolved and child victims left almost entirely unacknowledged beyond their initial purpose of horrifying the player in their murdering. The female victim – in whom one of three female players may find themselves represented<sup>76</sup> – is perversely exploited, her body made monstrous while she herself is shackled to the role of victim.

In a society where domestic violence is not a rare occurrence but a pervasive, traumatic cultural phenomenon, any media which evokes domestic violence necessitates a careful approach which considers the impact of the media on our cultural understanding of domestic violence incidents. For *P.T.* to exploit victims of domestic violence as a source of shock-value horror while failing to engage in critical conversation with the real-world implications of its subject matter is at best an oversight and at worst an ethical fault.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I examined *P.T.* as evoking the monstrous-feminine and allegorically displacing domestic violence. I explored the symbolic representations of the monstrous-feminine in the game and demonstrated how those representations construct the monstrous-feminine as monstrous womb. Speaking on allegory, I examined *P.T.* as allegorically displacing the pervasive cultural trauma of domestic violence within a supernatural setting.

In my study of *P.T.*, I found that although the game sets up an allegorical space in which it might productively engage with cultural discourse around domestic violence, it critically fails to do so. Instead, *P.T.* leverages domestic violence – and victims thereof – for shock-value horror and exploits the female victim, perverting her body and womb into a source of horror.

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<sup>76</sup> Huecker et al., “Domestic Violence”

The scope of this particular study is limited to considerations of *P.T.*, allegorical displacement, and the monstrous-feminine, and presents a specifically American perspective on the game. Given the game's popularity and cultural impact, broader research should be conducted to further a scholarly understanding of the game and its role in shaping public discourse. In particular, future researchers may choose to examine the game from a Japanese cultural perspective (given that Konami is a Japanese studio). Additionally, although this study addresses the feminist psychoanalytic concept of the monstrous-feminine, it does not examine the game from a specifically *feminist* perspective, and I would encourage future examinations of *P.T.* to do so. Finally, this study leaves several aspects of *P.T.* undiscussed, including its evocation of Freud's notion of the uncanny, its references to popular horror films -- *Eraserhead* being the most obvious example -- and its role within the broader interplay of themes in the *Silent Hill* canon.

Despite its tragic prevalence in American society, domestic violence is not often included in our everyday lexicon. Students aren't taught about domestic violence in the same way they're taught about history, poetry, and even sexual health; they aren't given the critical skills to understand and contend with the reality of domestic violence the same way they're taught to abstain from drugs or evacuate a building in the event of a fire. Out in society, domestic violence isn't a common topic of conversation around debate or dinner tables. Domestic violence is treated as taboo, horrifying, other; it's danced around in news articles and whispered about by concerned friends and neighbors. In the absence of a cultural lexicon for understanding and reckoning with domestic violence, we turn to media to shape our understanding, filling in the gaps with dramatic and allegorical representations in TV, books, movies, and video games.

But what happens when our cultural understanding of domestic violence is shaped not by productive conversations or accurate representations but by horror texts? Throughout the history of the horror genre, domestic violence has front-lined as a go-to source of trauma, shock, and gore, and has served as backstory for victims and monsters alike. Audiences to horror media are exposed to domestic violence in extremes and taught to equate it with monsters and slashers, to simultaneously be horrified by it and relegate it to a realm of fantasy and fiction. *P.T.* is both a symptom and a perpetuator of this cyclical construction and re-construction of domestic violence in horror. Not only is *P.T.* influenced by the representations of domestic violence that came before it: in its popularity, *P.T.* has already begun to influence new manifestations of domestic violence in the games that have succeeded it.

In the absence of a cultural lexicon for engaging with domestic violence, audiences turn to media to inform their understanding. And as long as exploitative representations of domestic violence persist in the horror genre, they will continue to influence and inform the way we discuss and understand domestic violence at a cultural level. As long as we, as creators and consumers of horror media, continue to exploit domestic violence for its shock value without critically addressing its real-world impact, we will remain as the player in *P.T.*'s hallway: stumbling through the same narrative blunders, living the same horrors over and over again.

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