

## The (Re)possession of the American Home: Negative Equity, Gender Inequality and The Housing Crisis Horror Story

In these troubled times, the continuing determination to turn *Paranormal Activity* into a blockbuster franchise is strangely reassuring.<sup>1</sup>

In an ongoing cycle of cross media production the American home has fallen victim to violent takeovers by demons, spirits and supernatural curses. This proliferation of popular narratives has prompted mainstream media to declare that the “paranormal is the new normal”, interpreting this trend as an “escapist sign of the unsettled times.”<sup>2</sup> This chapter argues that rather than pure escapism, the morbid fascination – of both industry and audiences – with the disruption, takeover and abandonment of homes, resonates with the reality of many recession-era households and particularly the gendered power relations therein. As Deborah Thorne highlights, during the current economic crisis the “gendered division of household labor [has] intensified among families who experience severe financial distress”, with the burden of responsibility and emotional turmoil falling onto women.<sup>3</sup> Correspondingly, within these narratives it is women – in the face of disbelief, ineffectuality, even murderous desires on the parts of their male partners – who are forced to make the difficult decisions and take the necessary actions to reclaim the American home from malevolent forces. This obsession with the violent possession of the domestic realm has emerged at a time when the model of patriarchal authority focused upon the myth of home-owning democracy has brutally unravelled. These narratives draw attention not only to the gendered power relations and symbolic violence enacted within the American home, but also work to reveal the fragility of the wider economic system.

The recent cycle of domestic possession narratives includes *Foreclosure* (2012) in which an allegorical link between spiritual possession and the housing crisis is actualized in a narrative in which a ghost – the victim of a racially inspired murder – returns to haunt the bankrupt inhabitants of a foreclosed home; and the recently released *Innkeepers* (2012) – promoted as a “ghost story for the minimum wage” – that shifts these themes to the haunting of a foreclosed hotel in its last few days of business.<sup>4</sup> While these titles suggest the continuing cultural resonance of the associations between horror and the housing market

explored here, the main focus of this chapter will be the phenomenally successful *Paranormal Activity* franchise (2009/2010/2011) and FX's popular TV series *An American Horror Story* (2011–).<sup>5</sup> Both serve as high profile examples of the “paranormal turn in popular culture” evident in reality television and live “spirit medium” shows.<sup>6</sup> This recession-era interest in the occult – particularly its infiltration of home in media spanning *Most Haunted* to *Paranormal Activity* – might be understood in relation to women's historical use of the occult as a medium to articulate anxieties and angst in depression and war.<sup>7</sup> However, this chapter will not suggest that these diverse texts represent a coherent counter-hegemonic space for women to articulate *or* escape their recessionary anxieties and oppressions. Rather it will discuss the *Paranormal Activity* franchise and *American Horror Story's* complex and contradictory dialogues with their brutal economic contexts. The repositioning of the home as a site of threat, instability and disruption, serves to expose the inequalities of recession-era households. However, the centring of housewives and mothers as the only defence against the (re)possession of the American home might ultimately act to reinforce the ideology of female domesticity.

### **The Home (Re)possession Cycle**

In October 2010 *Variety* highlighted a cyclical shift in horror “hits”, with “supernatural fare” like the *Paranormal Activity* franchise and *The Haunting in Connecticut* (2009) “on the upswing after the reign” of torture porn and slasher remakes in the mid-2000s.<sup>8</sup> This paranormal (re)turn in popular culture can be compared to the similarly pervasive and popular cycle of possessed and haunted house narratives from the late-1970s to mid-1980s. The *Poltergeist* (1982/1986/1988) and *Amityville Horror* (1979/1982/1983) franchises were also discussed by contemporary critics in relation to their recessionary “subtexts” of economic insecurity and downward mobility; for example Stephen King suggested that, “*The Amityville Horror*, beneath its ghost-story exterior, is really a financial demolition derby.”<sup>9</sup> However, while these films were seen to reflect middle-class anxieties over “loss of homes and breaking up of families during an era of economic insecurity” and aggressive fiscal policy, Douglas Kellner suggests that “the project of the *Poltergeist* films is [...] ultimately to suture the spectator into desire for typical middle-class life after allowing experience of threats to it to be played out.”<sup>10</sup> Despite the crisis played out across the *Poltergeist* films, a

desire for restoration of the patriarchal household is ultimately granted. “Who”, Kellner asks, “who would want to watch a drama of a family losing job, home, and then being torn apart, an event which has become all too familiar during the past decade of permanent economic crisis?”<sup>11</sup> The answer to his question would seem to be post-2008 audiences.

Whether or not one accepts Kellner’s argument about the hegemonic “pro-family” agenda of these texts, his final observation allows a distinction to be drawn between the Reagan-era films he discusses and the current recession-era cycle explored here. In both the *Paranormal Activity* franchise and *American Horror Story*, for example, there is no reprieve for the American home, and neither, it could be argued, is the spectator primed to desire such a conclusion. In the earlier cycle the stability of the American home – and the patriarchal authority it stands for – is disrupted by paranormal threats external to these families and embedded in the home’s histories. However, in *Paranormal Activity* and *American Horror Story*, repeated cycles of violence, trauma and infidelity are embedded in the families’ histories before the narratives begin. “Dispossession” of these haunted homes, in both senses, is not a possibility as it was in the 1980s films; thus, while the poster for *The Amityville Horror* warns “For God’s Sake Get Out”, there is no redemptive “getting out” for the horror-home owners of the post-2008 cycle.

The historically overlaid narrative structures of the most recent cycle evince the fatalistic repetition of violence embedded within the families and homes’ histories; the *Paranormal Activity* franchise works backwards towards the family’s original trauma through its ongoing prequel structure while *American Horror Story* employs overlaid flashbacks to blur past and present happenings within a haunted Los Angeles mansion. In the series, the Harmon family, the home’s present occupiers, have relocated to what they later discover is the notorious ‘Murder House’ in order to start a new life following husband and father Ben’s (Dylan McDermott) adultery. However, the family’s ongoing domestic problems are interrupted, and exacerbated, by the home’s many ghosts, whose arrivals in the show’s narrative trigger flashbacks to their shocking murders. Both strategies serve to reveal the destructive gender relations at the heart of these domestic arrangements; these escalating tensions and traumas serve to manifest, if not exacerbate, the paranormal violence within these deceptive “dream homes.” It is not so much that bad things happen to good families – as in the earlier cycle – but that “bad faith” is the structuring principle of the

domestic arrangements these couples have resigned themselves to in order to have, what appears from the outside to be, the perfect home and family. It is the explosion (or implosion) of these internal tensions that serve to tear these families apart.<sup>12</sup>

### **Paranormal Activities**

It is not surprising that horror iconography has been used to articulate Americans' experiences of economic crisis – as the plethora of intertextual references to classic and contemporary horror monsters in foreclosure fraud and housing crisis advice websites attest – but more surprising perhaps that the genre has been embraced by economists as containing its resolutions.<sup>13</sup> In an October 2011 editorial for the *Wall Street Journal*, the chief economist at the British Embassy in Washington, suggested that “economic policymakers” should look to the *Paranormal Activity* franchise for “some broad, light-hearted yet serious lessons for trying to negotiate the best economic outcomes for their national economies and as a novel lens through which to understand the broad sweep of economic history.” He suggests that, individually, these films favor “sensible, sober, long-term policies” and employ “imaginative forms of defence.” Furthermore, through their ongoing sequelization, the films alert spectators to the expectations of “evil” returning and creating new challenges, thus encouraging them to be attuned to early signs. He explains:

In the first *Paranormal Activity* movie, the scariest part in the first half hour is when an open door moves an inch. Seemingly inconsequential at that moment, this small development of the plot represents a harbinger of more horrific things lurking around the corner. Economic policymakers should learn from this common error made by protagonists in horror flicks; they should be vigilant to the risks around them, paying proportionate heed and not waiting until cold-blooded terror is looking them in the eye before doing anything about it.<sup>14</sup>

Ever the optimist, the economist here sees *Paranormal Activity* as highlighting the strategic solutions – rather than systematic failings – of the American economy, not just in its “determination” to turn a modest investment into a “blockbuster franchise”, but in its call to remain attentive and vigilant in the face of overwhelming negative energy.<sup>15</sup>

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**Figure 1:** The *4closure Fraud* website appropriates the iconic “Here’s Johnny” image from *The Shining* (1980) to illustrate the nefarious activities of banks and property contractors during the housing crisis.

*Paranormal Activity’s* delayed release allowed it to serve as a potent critique of boom-era norms as the realities of the recession were being felt. The film was produced in 2007 but rereleased to phenomenal success in 2009 backed by an innovative viral marketing campaign, that backs up Annette Hill’s claim that the “audience is the show” within contemporary mainstream paranormal culture.<sup>16</sup> Hill suggests that within spiritualist medium shows and televised live shows such as Living TV’s *Most Haunted* (2002-2010), the active audience “co-performs and co-produces a cultural experience”; their willed commitment and embodiment of “experience” is the essence of such live events.<sup>17</sup> For Hill this is a symptom of scepticism rather than susceptibility to media representation of the paranormal, “a form of solipsism where experience, instinct and intuition are [the] basis for belief formation.”<sup>18</sup> The film’s now much replicated “faux-found-footage” aesthetic (influenced in turn by similar sleeper hit *The Blair Witch Project* [1999]) necessitates attentive spectators to analyze the screen in order to experience for themselves – at least initially – its subtle paranormal activities. The trailer for *Paranormal Activity’s* 2009 rerelease focuses upon the terrified responses of its test cinema audience – claimed as “amongst the first to *experience* the movie” – rather than footage from the film itself, replicating the film’s night-vision aesthetic in order to blur the distinction between the perceived safe and unsafe spaces of auditorium and screen. It calls upon the spectator to “*experience* it for yourself” and if it is “not playing in your city-- demand it”; it then directs us to the film’s website where we can sign a petition to get the film released in their locality. In this innovative multi-media campaign audience participation and individual experience are centered-- these discourses were summarily central to the film’s mostly positive reception.

Highlighting Hill’s idea that the “audience is the show”, the *New York Times* reviewer asserts that “by far the most entertaining thing about the movie was the audience [...] There was, above all, the sense of a communal, half-clandestine good time that is all too rare in an age of corporate entertainment.”<sup>19</sup> It is significant that the audience’s activity and

communality are positioned outside the economic imperatives of Hollywood-- a discourse that is inverted in later critiques of the franchise's manipulative exploitation of its formula. However, significantly for my purposes, the *New York Times* review highlights that the audience is equally invested in the more secular domestic clashes between the film's couple Katie and Micah, which bifurcated rather than collectivized the audience (presumably on gendered lines). The review continues, "their quarrels occasioned some interesting relationship advice from members of the audience. Half expressed the strong conviction that Micah should get as far away from that crazy shrew as possible, while the other half thought she should throw that idiot and his camera out of the house."<sup>20</sup> In *Paranormal Activity*, English graduate student Katie is subjected to demonic haunting, but it is her day trader boyfriend Micah who is responsible for the violent disruption of their household. Self serving, materialist and unwaveringly rationalist, early in the film Micah mocks Katie's fears and her attempts to address them, joking, "is the psychic going to give me some stock tips while he's here?"

Feminist critiques of the economic crisis have highlighted the contributory role played by the "masculine norms" entrenched in capitalist institutions such as day trading. Annesley and Scheele suggest that "the male dominance and masculine macho culture in the finance sector holds reckless decision making and risk in higher regard than responsibility" and neglects the mutual independence between actors.<sup>21</sup> Qualitative analysis of the financial sector highlights fields such as investment banking and day trading as spaces marked by male dominance and the institutionalized "masculinization" of the market.<sup>22</sup> In these fields, hegemonic forms of masculinity are discursively constructed and reinforced both on the trading floor and in leisure, both implicitly – through an essentialized equivalence between competence and physicality – and explicitly – through sexually aggressive language both "at work and at play."<sup>23</sup>

Micah's stubborn and reckless assertion of this type of "trading floor" masculinity creates the negative energy upon which the demon feeds. Sidelining Katie's agency he re-inscribes *her* problems as *his* personal battle for the entitlements of patriarchal masculinity; he rages "this is *my* house. You are *my* girlfriend. I'm gonna fuckin' solve this problem." While finally persuaded of the demon's existence, Micah continues to exploit their unequal

financial partnership, mocking and summarily disregarding “Katie’s rules” regarding the use of both Ouija board and camera which she correctly asserts will antagonize the demon. As the continued point of contention, Micah’s new camera stands as a potent symbol of Micah’s financial and, perhaps resultant, sexual domination of Katie. Micah finally responds to Katie’s repeated attempts to find out how much he spent on the camera by asserting his superior earning power; Katie wilts at his response “about half of what I earned today.” Correspondingly, Micah repeatedly attempts to trick Katie into having sex on camera even though she is traumatized by the ongoing paranormal activities in their home. By the latter stages of the film Micah’s assertion of macho bravado – “no one comes in my house, fucks with my girlfriend and gets away with it” – has become ridiculous in the face of the overwhelming physical power of paranormal forces. Micah finally concedes to Katie that they should “get the fuck out of this house now” but she, either already possessed or simply resigned to their fate, thinks that “It will be better if we stay.” In the film’s shocking climax, the possessed Katie stages the final violent overthrow of Micah’s patriarchal authority, using supernatural strength to launch his mangled body at the screen.

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**Figure 2:** The façade of Katie and Micah’s happiness is shattered when the tensions underlying their unequal partnership materialize in violent *Paranormal Activity*.

In other horror recent films it is precisely women’s adoption of dispassionate, financially motivated decision-making – and resultantly their disavowal of an inherently feminine, caring relationship to the home – which forms the corrupting influence therein. For example, in *Drag Me to Hell* (2009) ambitious female loan officer Christine is cursed after she forecloses on an old woman’s mortgage following pressure from her boss to prove that she is worthy of promotion. Specifically, she must prove that she is as ruthless as a male banking colleague with whom she is competing for a middle management position. Her choice to transgress her own moral code – and thus what is within the logic of the narrative her caring, feminine “nature” – by following the bank’s unethical protocol, engenders her spiritual and, ultimately, corporeal corruption. Christine is cursed not because of her choice to work in the “masculine” sphere of banking, but because of her decision to transgress the gendering of power relations within it. The middlebrow press

explicitly discussed “recession-era movie” *Drag Me To Hell* in relation to the banking crisis.<sup>24</sup> Such references ranged from a flippant joke that director Sam Raimi should be “added to the Obama economic recovery team” to a utilization of the film as the basis for a serious discussion of recession ethics in the wider corporate world.<sup>25</sup> The financial context of these texts serves therefore to act simultaneously as critique and alibi for the patriarchal domination of the economic system in highlighting its corrupting role on an essentialized “feminine” nature as its ultimate and most unacceptable violence.

The failure of male authority is also central to *Paranormal Activity 2* (2010) – a prequel focusing upon Katie’s sister Kristi’s family – with Micah and Kristi’s husband Daniel shown at the outset bonding through their mockery of their partners’ paranormal beliefs, when they jump “straight to ghost” to explain their recent home “break ins.” However, half way in, the film begins to point towards the financially motivated, matriarchal curse that has evinced the family’s corruption. As Daniel’s daughter Ali reveals “it has been said that if a human makes a bargain with a demon for wealth, power or any other benefit they must forfeit their first born male.” Her speculation that “Kristi’s grandmother made a deal with demons so she could get rich” in the Depression-era context of the early 1930s is subsequently confirmed in *Paranormal Activity 3* (2011). Tracing the origins of the family’s possession beyond Kristi and Katie’s childhood in 1988 (when the film is set) it presents their grandmother as a member of a coven who has practised witchcraft since the thirties. The economic inequality of the household is reversed here with impoverished video photographer Dennis trying to persuade his affluent partner Julie that her children are indeed being plagued by a demon called Toby. The grandmother expresses her disapproval of her daughter’s choice of partner, deriding her for buying videos on her credit card for Dennis who she wishes “was a bit more financially secure.” Finally the grandmother expresses her ultimate disapproval of her daughter’s choice of partner by having demon Toby snap him in half. While the issue of financial (in)stability lingers uneasily throughout the franchise – perhaps nowhere more than in Katie and Micah’s domestic compromises – it materializes as an explicit motivating force in the third film.

At a roundtable discussion held on the *Paranormal Activity* franchise prior to the third film’s release, Julia Leyda linked the “mobility and ethereality” of the demon to that of



finance capital, specifically in the way in which debt follows families and individuals. Leyda continues, “just as the demon demands payment of an ancestor’s contract, the predatory mortgage allows an outsider to take away the very home and hearth (as generic and characterless as it is).”<sup>26</sup> The inescapability of debt remains central to *Paranormal Activity 3* but in “discover[ing] how the activity began” – as the film’s poster provokes – we are arguably primed to read the grandmother’s pernicious pursuit of financial stability for her family as resultant of an individual rather than systematic failing. If *Paranormal Activity 4* traces the origins of the coven back to its Depression era context of the 1930s then it may reveal more socially embedded financial motivations, though as a cynical *Guardian* critic highlighted, “unless one of their number happened to be a particularly obsessive kinoscope enthusiast, [the witches’] movements would be impossible to record.”<sup>27</sup>

A mother’s Faustian financial contract also evinces the corruption of family lineage in *The Box* (2009). In this supernatural morality tale, a mysterious man calls on the home of English teacher Norma (Cameron Diaz) to make her an offer of \$1m in exchange for pressing the button on “the box”; the catch is that a stranger will die as a result. Norma gives in to temptation despite her husband Arthur’s reservations; her choice to press the button results in their son becoming blind and deaf. The only way to restore the boy’s senses is for Norma to be willingly killed by her husband. This act restores the gendered dichotomy of female “life-giver” and male “life-taker”, thus reversing the erosion of the family/ household and women’s reproductive labor therein. Such reversals and their symbolic correction can be considered in light of recession-era concerns around women’s reproductive labor, evinced in widespread reports regarding the destructive effect of the recession on declining birth rates, but also wider discursive feminizations of the corruption of the market.<sup>28</sup> *The Box*’s financially-motivated Fall might seem extreme, but the film’s hyperbolic device can nonetheless be linked to the wider gendering of financial crisis discourse in contemporary reporting, in which “financial man is never safe from [Lady Credit’s] temptations and the internal desires and weaknesses she generates in him.”<sup>29</sup>

Marieke De Goede highlights the extent to which the “gendered representation of financial crises as instances of madness, delusion, hysteria, and irrationality has had particular historical durability, which simultaneously constructs the sphere of financial

normality or rationality.”<sup>30</sup> The corporeal manifestation of woman’s “pathology of the imagination” – and her resultant threat to the male rational order – has clear resonance with De Goede’s discussions of financial reporting;<sup>31</sup> this includes the myth of the “mancession” reorienting the gender gap in unemployment and pay in women’s favor.<sup>32</sup> Despite ongoing debates around whether the financial crisis might have been avoided through the presence of more women in key economic decision-making positions, texts such as *Drag Me To Hell* and *The Box* evince the violent rejection of women from this masculine realm. In these films the regendering of public and private finances serves to further corrupt rather than restore economic stability.<sup>33</sup>

### **American Horror Stories**

The theme of maternal corruption is also central to the television series *American Horror Story* – produced by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuck of *Glee* and *Nip/Tuck* fame – but, like the first *Paranormal Activity*, this TV horror series is highly critical of the violent patriarchal underpinnings of the American home.<sup>34</sup> As with the first *Paranormal Activity* movie, *American Horror Story* was a surprise hit – at least for the trade press – topping the Nielsen ratings for cable drama shows in November 2011 alongside AMC’s *The Walking Dead*. Significantly, *Variety* highlighted, the series “led all of its broadcast drama competition in adults 18-34” – TV’s key and “harder to reach demographic” – and arguably the key demographic for the *Paranormal Activity* films.<sup>35</sup> In the series Connie Britton plays Vivien, a “strong but wounded wife and mother”, who agrees to relocate the family across country following her miscarriage and her husband Ben’s subsequent adultery.<sup>36</sup> Initially, Vivien plans to leave psychiatrist husband Ben after discovering him in bed with one of his students, Hayden, but Ben persuades her to try to “fix” their marriage by making a “fresh start” in Los Angeles where he has found her “dream house” for a vastly reduced price. He tells Vivien, “when I look at this place for the first time I feel like there’s hope” to keep the family together. Vivien acquiesces to the temptation of “happiness” in this bargain basement dream home; far from a steal, the property turns out to be the site of almost a century of ongoing torture, sexual violence and murder – mostly enacted upon women – in which the spirits of the victims remain. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the house’s history – in

conjunction with the housing crisis – makes it impossible for the Harmons to resell the home for anywhere near the deceptive bargain price they paid. As Machiavellian realtor Marcy explains to Vivien: “you might have to adjust your expectations: the housing market is dropping daily.”

*New York* magazine’s film critic, Julieanne Smolinski, interpreted the program’s post-housing bubble context as predominantly an expedient plot device, suggesting:

You have to wonder what Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuck would have done if we weren’t in the midst of a historic real-estate slump. Otherwise, it might be harder to logically counter the typical horror-audience screams to *Just Leave the GD House Already*. Thank goodness for the real-estate bubble and Bernie Madoff and the stock market, which all get their due for keeping the Harmons in their hell home. I can only imagine if the show had taken place in 1997, in seller-friendly, bull-market halcyon times.<sup>37</sup>

Smolinski deigns that *American Horror Story*’s tenuous “realism” is, at least somewhat, enhanced by the fortuitous context of the “real-estate slump.” However, what is *most* significant about the show’s housing crisis setting is not that these families have to remain in these horrific homes, but that they have to remain *within these families*, despite the physical and psychological horror at the heart of their domestic arrangements. Despite their disintegrating marriage and their daughter’s resultant self-harm and depression, the Harmons have to remain together in the home, because, as Ben suggests, “we are not broke we have money, but it is tied up in this house.” Even when they finally separate – after Vivien discovers that her husband has impregnated Hayden – Ben continues to come back to the house to see patients, against Vivien’s wishes, because, as he asserts, “we need the money” and “we can’t afford to rent an office.” Vivien reluctantly acquiesces albeit while expressing a desire to “bash [his face] in” when he is in the home.

Summarily, *Rolling Stone* interpreted the show as a “hate letter to the nuclear family” suggesting that “for Murphy, the real American horror story isn’t how families break apart. It’s how families stay together.”<sup>38</sup> As the critic highlights here, the show’s “real” terror emanates from the violent tensions at the heart of the family’s enforced domestic

arrangement. This would appear to resonate with the reality of many recession-era households in which separated and divorced couples have been forced to stay together because they cannot or cannot afford to sell their homes. Citing the causes of escalating mortgage payments and negative equities, a divorce lawyer in *Lawyers Weekly* explains: “I am seeing this situation more and more often, and while it is the last thing these couples want to consider, sometimes there is financially no other option.”<sup>39</sup> The *New York Times* highlighted this as an almost entirely new phenomenon, “rarely seen before outside Manhattan”, resultant of the recent “boom-and-bust cycle.” The article moves on to explain how power is deferred to the home itself, which becomes a “toxic asset” that entraps warring couples and escalates their conflicts further; as the president of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers suggests, “we used to fight about who gets to keep the house-- now we fight about who gets stuck with the dead cow.”<sup>40</sup> Concurrent articles highlight reports from psychiatrists, social workers and the courts reporting increased suicides, mental health problems – often pre-existing but unearthed by financial stresses – and domestic violence resultant of the pressures of unmanageable mortgage repayments, and subsequent defaults and foreclosures.<sup>41</sup> In Florida, one of the hardest hit states, the clerk of Palm Beach’s overrun courts highlights that “more unhappy cohabitation and more fighting over money means domestic violence is up.”<sup>42</sup>

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**Figure 3:** The advert for FX’s *American Horror Story* reveals the Harmon’s “dream home” as a “toxic asset.” Rather than providing the new “hope” promised by adulterous husband Ben, the housing crisis traps the warring family in the unsellable “Murder House.”

Within such a climate, it is understandable that media producers and critics would foreground impacting cycles of physical and psychological violence as the structuring principle of gendered family relations.<sup>43</sup> As in *Paranormal Activity*, psychiatrist Ben dominates Vivien and denies her subjectivity, though through the disciplinary technology of medical rather than economic discourse. Vehement rationalist Ben diagnoses her paranormal experiences variously as symptoms of depression, post traumatic stress disorder, even mad cow disease, refusing to allow let her to take their daughter and leave the house; her leaving is only finally permitted, under his discursive terms, when he has her

committed to a mental institution. Ben's more subtle domination of Vivien is constantly blurred with that of previous tenants including Larry who warns Ben that the house made him burn his family to death and that he will do the same; a series of unethical and deranged medical practitioners who secretly operated upon and murdered women in the home in the 1920s, 30s and 40s (including the dentist murderer of the Blue Dahlia victim); and the "Rubber Man"-- the S&M suit-clad ghost who Vivien mistakes for her husband and who resultantly co-impregnates her with twins. The home's kindly, ghostly maid Moira explains to Vivien: "since the beginning of time men have found excuses to lock women away. They make up diseases like hysteria [...] Men are still inventing ways to drive women over the edge. Look at you and Mr Harmon, cheating on you and leaving you here pregnant with twins alone to take care of your truant daughter. Any woman would lose her mind."

Moira's appraisal of Vivien's situation can be usefully compared with Deborah Thorne's qualitative study of indebted American households and the inequitable gendering of labor therein. As Thorne highlights "even when wives pleaded for help, husbands often refused. The strain of the [new] financial chores left many wives battling severe emotional distress. In the most extreme cases, a few wished for death."<sup>44</sup> Vivien – at least until her death – experiences by far the greater emotional effects and obligations for maintaining the security of the home; these range from responsibility for reselling the home to protecting against the invasions of secular and supernatural threats. For example, when Ben goes on a secret trip to Boston to make sure ex-mistress Hayden has an abortion, Vivien and daughter Violet have to fight off a group of serial killer enthusiasts attempting to re-enact a serial murder that happened in the home in the 1960s. Violet's depression and disillusionment – and her parent's subsequent fears around her future – also resonate with the series' recessionary context; psychological research into post-2008 parent-child relationships indicate how the pressures and anxieties of families' present financial problems and children's future opportunities, had increased self-reporting of anxiety and depression in both parents and older children, serving to exacerbate conflict and reduce closeness between the two groups.<sup>45</sup>

In *American Horror Story*, Violet commits suicide half way through the series, though she is so shut off from the outside world that she does not realize she has been successful

for a couple of episodes. The cause of Violet's suicide is underlying depression brought on by the unresolved and ongoing family tensions discussed above, but the trigger is Violet seeing an "I love you" message that has been written on her bedroom wall by teenage ghost Tate. Tate is repeatedly doubled with Violet's father both through the "Rubber Man" suit and through Ben's comments "I was kind of like you Tate" before he was given the "amazing gift of [his] family." Violet therefore chooses to take her own life rather than repeat the familial cycle of domestic violence and abuse. This unromanticized relationship between Violet and Tate is therefore very different to the "postfeminist" phenomenon of "dating the dead" in the cross-media *Twilight* and *True Blood* franchises.<sup>46</sup> The narrative of *American Horror Story* appears to work against what Anthea Taylor describes as the rendering of a "masochistic relationship and an undead subjectivity for a teenage girl [...] as utopic sites" in the *Twilight* novels and films. However, the brooding character Tate has become an Emo pin-up for female teens and the doomed Violet/Tate relationship (dubbed Viol/ate) has been endlessly extended in Tumblr blogs and fanfiction.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the allusions to the female Gothic and topical critiques of domestic power relations, *American Horror Story* could hardly be characterized as feminist in any straightforward manner. The series' extreme self-awareness of popularized academic discourse and genre conventions (particularly horror and film noir) more often serve as an alibi for its simultaneous objectification and monstrous representation of female characters; for example, maid Moira is seen as a sexualized "pin up" and matronly "old crone" by male and female spectators (within the diegesis) respectively. While Ben (and other men) see Moira as a scantily clad femme fatale played by young actress Alexandra Breckenridge – Moira before her murder – Vivien (and other women) see her as grandmotherly Frances Conroy (of *Six Feet Under*) who has continued to age in ghost form. As Moira anticipates, Ben is tempted by her seductions, which are aimed at revealing him (and by extension men generally) as inherently unfaithful. The resultant objectification of the young Moira (and other female characters) thus serves to both satisfy the "male gaze" and act as a critique of it;<sup>48</sup> however the show also repeatedly fetishizes Dylan McDermott (Ben's) naked body even though his character is positioned as far from a figure of desire.<sup>49</sup>

*American Horror Story* equally references classic film noir as much as horror, particularly in its series of femme fatale roles, most notably Jessica Lange's character Constance, the first season's only "survivor" in a central role, perhaps in part because she is the show's most interesting and complex character. This might well be linked to the evocation of noir-esque visual landscapes and themes in other quality TV dramas such as HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–) and *Mildred Pierce* (2011), and their wider connection to the nostalgic generic and gendered modes in TV texts spanning *Mad Men* (2007–) to *Downton Abbey* (2010–).<sup>50</sup> Constance fits the corrupted maternal principles discussed in relation to *The Box*, in her reproductive history of a series of physically and psychologically "flawed" children and desire to reproduce (or acquire) a "perfect" child for herself. It is significant that Constance (ex-inhabitant and constant uninvited visitor to the Harmon's home) is the only one who is able to navigate and exploit the Murder House's threats unscathed; this is in part because she is responsible – at least from the 1980s onwards – for much of the home's ghosts, either directly (she murdered maid Moira and her husband for having an affair; and her subsequent affair with Larry is the reason that his wife burns the family to death- rather than Larry as it is later revealed) or through her dead son Tate's ghost (he murdered the gay couple who lived there prior to the Harmon's because they would not be having a child anymore; and impregnated Vivien with the "anti-Christ" twin that kills her in child birth, and becomes Constance's "perfect" adopted son at the end of season one).<sup>51</sup> Her narrative trajectory and identity are thus entwined, even imprinted upon the house, suggesting the workings of a "monstrous" femme fatale ultimately pulling the strings.

Perhaps more nihilistic than feminist, *American Horror Story* provides the Harmon family with tranquillity and stability only in the annihilation of death, when instead of trying to pass on the Murder House to other unsuspecting families – as throughout the series – their bad example becomes a warning to other families to flee. In the season finale, realtor Marcy reinscribes the Harmon's experiences as a "tragically romantic love story" when quizzed on why the asking price is "so below market" even for an economic downturn, thus convincing the Ramos family to move in. However, in a sinister twist on the *Beetlejuice* (1988) premise, the Harmon family's ghosts haunt the home's new inhabitants, not to

reclaim their idealized home from gauche secular intruders as in *Beetlejuice*, but rather to save the new family from replicating their own domestic horror. As Vivien's ghost gouges the guts out of Ben's ghost in front of the new inhabitants she tells them, "you have no idea how long I've been wanting to do that." The family flee and the house goes on the market at an even further reduced price.

Ultimately therefore, Ben gets his wish to keep the family "together" in the house for eternity. The opening of the season finale stages a macabre juxtaposition of Ben's speech persuading Vivien to "just come see the house" – a narrative of domestic bliss that seeing the brochure for the house triggered "like a movie in his mind" – and a montage of shots from the series, including Vivien's sexual violation (though by Ben not the "Rubber Man") and subsequent loss of bodily control (through her violent impregnation) and Violet's self harm. Cutting to widower Ben in the empty house in the present, the opening scene of the season finale makes clear that husband and father Ben triggered the family's brutal fate.

The Daniel Craig vehicle *Dream House* (2011) initially promises a similarly "teasing variation on the haunted house movie" that highlights the patriarchal violence underlying the veneer of American home life.<sup>52</sup> At the start of the film Will Atenton (Craig) leaves his high powered editor's job in Manhattan to join his nuclear family in their new suburban dream home where he will write his long-in-the-works first novel. The home soon comes under attack from secular, then seemingly supernatural threats from which Will must protect his family. However, the film's midway point reveals that we have been experiencing not the haunting of Will's idealized family but his psychological delusions following his release from a mental institution, after being committed for murdering his wife and family five years previously. Following this revelation, the spectator sees the reality of the home's boarded-up, graffiti strewn present of 2011 rather than the delusion of the 2006 "dream house" prior to the family's murder. Unlike *American Horror Story*, *Dream House* ultimately clears the widowed father from his guilt and ghostly visions – it is revealed that a neighbor had hired an incompetent hit man to murder his wife but he went in to the wrong house – even affording him the financial redemption of a bestselling novel based upon his horrific experiences. However, in the central perceptual shift from Will's 2006 to 2011 perspective, the spectator is forced to witness the visceral housing crisis fallout experienced by a growing number of American families and neighborhoods.



## Conclusion

With the cycle of housing crisis “horror stories” showing little sign of abating – whether on or off screen – the real *American Horror Story* home went on sale in January 2012 for \$4.5 million, highlighting the unabated, more likely exacerbated, disparity between the 99% and the 1%.<sup>53</sup> While popular horror like *Paranormal Activity* and *American Horror Story* materializes the structural violence and gendered inequalities underlying capitalist cycles of boom and recession, they still serve to stress white, middle class families as the main victims of the current housing crisis. Likewise within these nuclear families, it is the paranormal threat to women’s “inherent” roles as life givers and protectors which is fore-grounded as the ultimate horror of tough economic times. These texts do not finally call for a rethinking of the gendering of markets or homes, but rather enact a vigilant reinforcing of the parameters of both.

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## References

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Heritage, “Paranormal Activity 3: Is there a demon in the house?” *Guardian: Film Blog*, July 27, 2011.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2011/jul/27/paranormal-activity-3>

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Elliott, “In TV Pilots, Paranormal is the New Normal.” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Thorne, “Extreme Financial Strain: Emergent Chores, Gender Inequality and Emotional Distress.”

*Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 31 (2010), p.185.

<sup>4</sup> In an attempt to build a topical viral buzz for Foreclosure the film’s website calls for visitors to “Submit Your Real-Life ‘Foreclosure’ Horror Stories and Win Stuff.” <http://www.ghostsdontmoveout.com/foreclosure/yourstory/>

<sup>5</sup> Other texts that I would position within this cycle include Hollywood films such as *The Haunting in Connecticut* (2009), *The Last Exorcism* (2010), *Insidious* (2011) and *Dream House* (2011). However, the cycle could also be seen to have manifested in recent revampings of Hammer Horror in the UK – with the film *Women in Black* (2012) and Helen Dunmore’s novel *The Greatcoat* (2012) within its literary imprint – and

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linked to the popularity of vampire romances in film, TV and popular fiction, particularly the *Twilight* and *True Blood* franchises, with their preoccupations with negotiating the nature of family and home.

<sup>6</sup> Annette Hill, *Paranormal Media: Audiences, Spirits and Magic in Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Snelson "The Ghost in the Machine: World War Two, Popular Occultism and Hollywood's 'Serious' Ghost Films." *Media History* 17 (1), (2011), pp. 16-32.

<sup>8</sup> Marc Graser and Andrew Stewart, "Fright Plan For All Seasons." *Variety*, 18-24<sup>th</sup> October 2010, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen King, "Why We Crave Horror Movies" *Playboy*, January 1981, p. 237. See also: Tony Williams, "Poltergeist and Freddy's Nightmares." In *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996, pp. 225-237; Douglas Kellner, "Poltergeist, Gender and Class in the Age of Bush and Reagan." In *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 127-139.

<sup>10</sup> Kellner, pp. 131, 139. Since the 1970s horror scholarship has highlighted the genre's historical engagement with shifting political, economic and social anxieties as well as its positioning of the family home as the primary institution of patriarchal aggression and repression in American society. These critics – I would argue – typically make an unproductive distinction between the progressive politics of the dysfunctional family horrors of the 1960s and 70s (eg: *Psycho* [1960] and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974]) and the reactionary Reagan-era horror homes overseen by patriarchal avengers such as Freddy Krueger and Michael Myers (see Robin Wood *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986; Williams, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Kellner, p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> I am using "bad faith" in a de Beauvoirian sense here. Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, translated by B. Frechtman, New York: Citadel Press, 1976.

<sup>13</sup> For example [www.stopforeclosurefraud.com](http://www.stopforeclosurefraud.com)'s logo superimposes the image of Frankenstein's monster over the map of America's most foreclosed states while [www.4closurefraud.org](http://www.4closurefraud.org) stamps "I'm from the bank" on Jack Nicholson's forehead in the famous "here's Johnny" scene from *The Shining* (1980).

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<http://4closurefraud.org/2012/07/19/jackbooted-thugs-break-into-occupied-homes-terrify-residents-lawsuits-say/>

<sup>14</sup> Peter Matheson, "What Horror Movies Can Teach Economic Policy Makers." *Wall Street Journal*, October 28, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Heritage, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> This is not to suggest that Hill's scholarship was a reference point for the campaign. However, the films and their marketing – like *American Horror Story* – are very knowledgeable of horror history, generic conventions and audience pleasures. It is worth noting that the *Paranormal Activity* rerelease was overseen by executive producer Steven Schneider who went on to produce the other *Paranormal Activity* films as well as *Insidious* (2011) and *The Devil Inside* (2011). *Paranormal Activity* marked Schneider's career shift from horror scholar to horror producer; Schneider's books include *Horror Film And Psychoanalysis: Freud's Worst Nightmare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Hill, 2011, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 127.

<sup>19</sup> A.O. Scott, "Ghostbusters on a Budget: If Things Go Bump in the Night, Grab a Camera." *The New York Times*, October 9, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Claire Annesley and Alexandra Scheele, "Gender, Capitalism and Economic Crisis: Impact and Responses." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 19:3 (2011), p. 336

<sup>22</sup> Raewyn Connell, "Inside the Glass Tower: The Construction of Masculinities in Financial Capital." *Feminist Studies: Journal of Interdisciplinary Women's and Gender Studies*, 28:1, (2010), pp. 8-24.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Levin, "Gender, Work, and Time: Gender at Work and at Play and in Futures Trading." In Cynthia Fuchs Epstein and Arne Kalleberg (eds) *Fighting For Time: Shifting Boundaries of Work and Social Life*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004, pp. 249-281.

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Brown, "Recession Era Movie." *Guardian* May 21, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Betsy Sharkey, "Drag Me To Hell." *Los Angeles Times* May 29, 2009; Micelle Goodman "Recession Ethics: Dealing With Morally Bankrupt Bosses." *ABC News*, June 25, 2009,

<http://abcnews.go.com/Business/Economy/story?id=7919449&page=1#.T32IfKt8C8A>

<sup>26</sup> Julia Leyda, Nicholas Rombes, Steven Shaviro and Theresa Grisham, "Roundtable Discussion: The Post-Cinematic in Paranormal Activity and Paranormal Activity 2." *La Furia Umana*,

<http://www.lafuriaumana.it/index.php/locchio-che-uccide/385-roundtable-discussion-about-post-cinematic>,

accessed May 19, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Stuart Heritage, "Paranormal Activity 4 is haunted by the sequel problem." *Guardian* Blog, January 6, 2012.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2012/jan/06/paranormal-activity-4-sequel>

<sup>28</sup> Sam Roberts, "Birth Rate Is Said to Fall as a Result of Recession." *The New York Times*, August 6, 2009. The economic crisis's corruption of motherhood is a theme explored in non-supernatural horrors such as *Mother's Day* (2010), in which backlash veteran Rebecca De Mornay (*The Hand That Rocks The Cradle* [1992]) returns as the deranged "mother from hell" following the repossession of her house. However, as with the reception of *Drag Me To Hell*, *The Box* and *The Haunting in Connecticut*, critics highlighted how the film raises questions regarding recession era ethics; as *Variety* highlights, in *Mothers Day* the 'perils of buying foreclosed properties are made painfully clear'. Charles Gant, "Mothers Day." *Variety*, June 10, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Marieke De Goede, *Virtue, Fortune and Faith: A Genealogy of Finance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, p: 45.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. London: Routledge, 1999, p. 138

<sup>32</sup> Nancy Cook, "What Mancession?" *Newsweek* July 16, 2009; Dana Mattioli, "Few Gender Differences in a Recession." *Wall Street Journal* August 18, 2009.

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<sup>33</sup> S. Vinnicombe, R. Sealy, J. Graham, J. & E. Doldor (2010) "The Female FTSE Board Report 2010: Opening up the Appointment Process." *Cranfield University School of Management*. Available online at: <http://www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/dinamiccontent/research/documents/FemaleFTSEReport2010.pdf>

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<sup>34</sup> James Lyons highlights *Nip/Tuck's* deployment of classic Gothic tropes through its male doppelganger theme and symbolic "figuration of monstrosity and vampirism" (p.9). *American Horror Story* might be seen therefore to extend and literalize underlying themes in Falchuk's earlier productions, but also significantly flips the focus of this male doppelganger struggle from the fraternal love triangle to a wife's horror at living with a potentially "monstrous" and internally conflicted husband. James Lyons, "Miami Slice: Surgical Shockings in *Nip/Tuck*." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 35:1 (2007), p. 2-11 .

<sup>35</sup> Rick Kissell, "Cable Dramas Win Key Demo." *Variety* Nov28-Dec 4, 2011, p. 41.

<sup>36</sup> Mike Hale, "They Said It Had Good Bones." *The New York Times*, October 4, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Julieanne Smolinski, "American Horror Story Recap: I Love the Eighties (Murders)!" *Vulture.com*, October 20, 2011, [http://www.vulture.com/2011/10/american\\_horror\\_story\\_murder\\_h.html](http://www.vulture.com/2011/10/american_horror_story_murder_h.html)

<sup>38</sup> Rob Sheffield, "American Horror Story Will Restore Your Faith in Ryan Murphy's Dark Side." *Rolling Stone*, November 10, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Heather Cooper quoted in Correy E. Stephenson, "Breaking Up Is Even Harder To Do: Divorce Becoming Increasingly Complicated." *Lawyers Weekly USA*, May 5, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> John Leland, "In Housing Fall, Breaking Up Is Harder to Do." *The New York Times*, December 30, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, "The Suicide Solution." *The Nation*, August 4, 2008; Nick Tursey, "The Body Count On Main Street." *In These Times*, December 19, 2008; Stephanie Armour, "Foreclosures Take Toll On Mental Health; Crisis Hotlines, Therapists See A Surge In Anxiety Over Housing." *USA Today*, May 15, 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Christine Stapleton, "New Rules Aim for Smoother Defaults." *Palm Beach Post (Florida)*, October 12, 2008.

On the eve of the recent Oscars ceremony, *The New York Times* reported that even the "dream factory" of

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“Tinseltown” was becoming a “ghost town”, where “dark, vacant houses, emblazoned with the public notices taped in the windows like shameful scarlet A’s, are holes in the hidden, fraying social fabric of Hollywood, where a vast majority belong not to the 1 percent but to the 99.” Hilary De Vries, “Tinseltown, Ghost Town.” *The New York Times*, February 22, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> In the Halloween double episode an opening flashback reveals that, like the Harmons, the warring gay couple living in the house before them were forced to stay together because, as Zachary Quinto’s character Chad tells his cheating partner, “all of your money and mine is in this house we decided to flip but can’t because the economy is in the shitter.” The episode concludes with Chad’s ghost coming to the realization that “I’m doomed for all of eternity to be trapped in an unhappy, adulterous relationship, working on this goddamn house.”

<sup>44</sup> Thorne, 2010, p. 185.

<sup>45</sup> Catherine Stein et al, “Family Ties in Tough Times: How Young Adults and Their Parents View the U.S. Economic Crisis.” *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25: 3 (2011), pp. 449-454.

<sup>46</sup> See: Hill, 2011, p. 48; Anthea Taylor, “The Urge Towards Love Is An Urge Towards (Un)death: Romance, Masochistic Desire and Postfeminism In The *Twilight* Novels.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15 (2012), pp. 31-46. The *Twilight* saga and its “Twi-hard” fans have come under attack for a variety of “sins” including regressive gender politics; fetishizing the male body; fuelling a “feminized” consumer culture; and transgressing the generic expectations of horror. While *Twilight* is certainly postfeminist in its stylistic and thematic concerns, a highly gendered cultural politics of taste is clearly at work in its denigration by male critics and the resultant reification of masculine “horror” tastes (see: Lisa Bode, “Transitional Tastes: Teen Girls and Genre In The Critical Reception Of *Twilight*.” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 24: 5 (2010), pp. 707–719; Mark Jancovich, “The Critical Reception of the *Twilight* Saga”, forthcoming).

<sup>47</sup> Taylor, p. 31. See for example: *Violate tumblr*. <http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/violate>.

<sup>48</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Screen*, 16: 3 (1975), pp. 6–18.

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<sup>49</sup> The extensive media dialogue around the sexualization of McDermott's body in the series serves to highlight its atypicality. See for example: Jethro Norder, "American Horror Story's Dylan McDermott On Nude Scenes: 'It's All Me.'" *Hollywood Reporter*, November 16, 2011; Perez Hilton, "Dylan McDermott Is Nakkid And Seksi In American Horror Story." *Perez Hilton.com*, October 6, 2011. <http://perez Hilton.com/2011-10-06-dylan-mcdermott-is-naked-and-sexy-on-american-horror-story#.T32vpqt8C8A>

<sup>50</sup> The global success of *Downton Abbey* in particular has been debated widely in relation to its recessionary context, potentially reflecting either a conservative political turn, a "response to tough times, Or it may be that a full experience of culture and imagination embraces new and old, experimental and orderly, and that all worthwhile art contains both conservative and radical possibilities." Jonathon Jones, "From Hockney to Downton Abbey: Have Our Cultural Tastes Gone Conservative?" *Guardian* blog, January 23, 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/jan/23/hockney-downton-abbey-culture-conservative>

<sup>51</sup> In her paper at "Console-ing Passions, 2012", Beth Pentney situated the 'mother blame' in *American Horror Story* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) in relation to wider obsessions with the consequences of "bad mothering" in postfeminist media culture. Pentney suggested that, like "bad mother" Constance, Eva (Tilda Swinton) is held responsible and made to suffer for the actions of her mass murderer son Kevin. Beth Pentney, "'We're still Blaming Mothers': Postfeminist Mother Blame in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *American Horror Story*", Console-ing Passions, Suffolk University, Boston, July 19 -21, 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Koehler, "Dream House." *Variety*, October 1016, 2011, p. 29.

<sup>53</sup> Ilyce Glink, "American Horror Story Home for Sale." *CBS Money Watch*, January 17, 2012.