

# Woman Interrupted: A Foucauldian Reading of Gender, Madness, and Power in the Movies *Girl, Interrupted* and *Unsane*

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**Abstract**—This article presents a Foucauldian reading of the movies *Girl, Interrupted* (1999) and *Unsane* (2018) which deal with women in psychiatric institutions. Building on Foucault's conceptualization of asylums, the medical gaze, and confinement as a paradigm of power, the researchers study the female protagonists in the two movies as characters struggling with psychological issues stemming from their rejection of gender normativity. The experiences of Susanna and Sawyer in asylums are a reflection of a larger struggle against social expectations and sexual norms.

**Index Terms**—gender, movies, medical gaze, Foucault

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the representation of incarcerated mad women in the movies; *Girl, Interrupted* (1999) and *Unsane* (2018). It analyzes the construction of female madness by examining the themes of madness and sexuality, women and confinement, and healing and re-assimilation into society post-treatment. It aims to depict the two female protagonists, Susanna Kaysen and Sawyer Valentini, as objects of held power. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theories on the birth of the clinic, confinement as a paradigm of power, and the panopticon, this study argues that the depicted madness and mental instability of the two characters are in fact symptoms of their social struggle. Susanna and Sawyer fight against social control over their sexuality, bodies, gender identity, and self-actualization. Both women end up in mental institutions, being admitted there by social coercion and deception respectively. However, it is important to underscore that the path that led them to these confined places and their experiences there are direct consequences to their personal unhealthy relationships with men. Susanna gets involved with a married man while Sawyer has a relationship with a stalker. This article examines these relationships within a social construct that is central to how asylums have been created and operated.

According to Foucault (1965, 1977b) the birth of the clinic is inextricable from confinement as a mode of 'treatment'. In fact, he states that hospitals, asylums, and prisons as well as their subjects have parallel histories in being managed and controlled by people in power (1965, 1977a, 1977b). Psychiatric hospitals, thus, not only become a manifestation of power struggles and existing power dynamics but an extension of both. The doctors, the nurses, the administrators perform control and authority over patients similar to the power practiced by elites including upper classes, capitalists, patriarchal authorities on their subjects and other disempowered and disenfranchised groups. As women and victims of heteronormative and capitalist expectations, Susanna and Sawyer are seen by those around them as in need of confined treatment, which is not only to 'cure' them of their mental ailments but also their rebellious attempts to reject the social and the male gaze. Susanna's promiscuity and Sawyer's resistance of her stalker's admiring gaze qualify them as subjects in mental institutions bent on reforming and medicating them. Their relationships with men outside and inside the institutions are fundamental for their 'diagnosis'. Some of these relationships have caused their admittance and others are depicted as a way of healing. The argument of this article is that these women are confined and diagnosed with madness due to their rebellious nature particularly as women challenging social and cultural norms.

*Girl, Interrupted* is a 1999 movie based on Susanna Kaysen's memoir of the same title. It documents her experience at a psychiatric hospital during 1967 after attempting to commit suicide by overdosing on painkillers and alcohol. It follows the aimless life of this eighteen-year-old female particularly through her doomed affair with a married man and a causal relationship with a young man who is later drafted to fight in Vietnam. Upon attempting to kill herself, Susanna

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is cajoled by her parents and their family doctor to check into Claymoore which is a psychiatric hospital. There she gets to meet several female patients who appear to be social outcasts and are dealing with trauma. Susanna's relationship with Lisa, a fellow patient in Claymoore is crucial in understanding her therapeutic journey. Lisa is the epitome of the charismatic troubled rebel, and Susanna gets tremendously intrigued by her and her wild spirit. As her alter ego, Lisa represents everything Susanna wishes to be and say. However, once their friendship sours, Susanna turns to the institution she detests and finds refuge and solace in Valerie, the head nurse, and the "wonderful" Dr. Sonia Wick. The movie ends with Susanna's release from hospital and her reminiscing about her time there and the bonding she has made with fellow women there. The movie received mixed reviews from critics and audiences but launched the career of Angelina Jolie who won her only Academy Award for her role as Lisa.

While *Girl, Interrupted* represents fond memories of its protagonist's stay at a psychiatric hospital, Steven Soderbergh-helmed film *Unsane* has a contrary take. It is a psychological horror movie about its protagonist Sawyer Valentini who escapes her old life after enduring a traumatic experience of being the victim of stalking. Even though she moves to a new city, starts a new job, and upends her former life, she still suffers from post-traumatic symptoms that affect her performance at work and hinder relationships with her mother and men in her life. After an episode that follows her inability to engage in an intimate physical relationship with a man, she seeks help at Highland Creek Behavioral Center. What begins as an attempt to find a support group for victims of stalking, ends with her unwittingly admitting herself to the center after an administrator misguides her into signing 'routine' forms. Sawyer finds herself confined in the center against her will, unable to reverse her decision or convince anyone that she is not ill. During a conversation with an undercover reporter, a patient by the name of Nate, she finds out that the center is running a scam operation. It becomes clear that the center tricks people into checking themselves in, in order to receive payments from the insurance companies they deal with. Once the claims run out, the patients are deemed cured and are released. The events take a dark turn when Sawyer finds out that her stalker has impersonated an orderly in order to stalk her in plain view, taking advantage of her vulnerable position as a medicated patient. What transpires is a series of horrific events and murders that concludes with Sawyer escaping her stalker and tormenter by brutally killing him and the center being exposed. However, while *Girl, Interrupted* ends with Susanna arriving at a triumphant place of self-growth and realization, *Unsane* ends with a frozen image of its protagonist running and looking behind her and into the stalking camera with eyes full of terror and madness. This article unpacks these two cinematic experiences of madness and mental instability as socially constructed and explores the façade of tranquility in the ending of *Girl, Interrupted* and the lingering terror in *Unsane*.

## II. WOMEN AND MADNESS

The association between certain female behaviors and mental illness is a practice that goes back into history. Hysteria is one of the earliest conditions that have been used characteristically to describe socially unacceptable female conducts. First reference to hysteria dates to ancient Egyptians in 1900 BC which "identifies the cause of hysterical disorders in spontaneous uterus movement within the female body" (Tasca et al., 2012). This 'diagnosis' of hysteria continued during ancient Greek times. Melampus, a physician, diagnosed some virgins' refusal to engage in sexual activities or "to honor the phallus" as a form of madness (Tasca et al., 2012). In fact, the word 'hysteria' comes from the Greek word for uterus. There and then began the history of intertwining women's sexual rebellion and madness and mental illness. It also gave rise to medicalizing women's unorthodox behavior. Centuries of medical progress have not changed this perspective on female difference as being an illness or a disability. Even though Freud revolutionized the way psychological conditions are treated by preferring talk therapy over medication and lobotomy, his view of women's anatomical difference still ascribed it to abnormality. He saw women as castrated men, psychoanalyzing females' realization of the absence of the phallus as detrimental to their psychosexual growth (1905). He termed that condition as penis envy. Several feminist psychoanalysts have adopted a social rereading of Freud's theory, seeing the lack as a social castration performed by society and social norms on women and the female body. The envy, they argue, is not for the penis but for the freedom society grants men (Horney, 1926; Thompson, 1943).

This view of psychological symptoms and neuroses as being socially constructed has been the core of the emergent disability studies. Under patriarchy, women who stray from the norms have been seen as medically "abnormal, the sick ones" (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 22) and as "negative, vulnerable figures" in society unable to function (Morris, 1992, p. 166). All this led to the conclusion that disability has been used as a "cultural category" of a prejudicial nature (Shakespeare, 1996, p. 98) and a social construct (Garland-Thomson, 2002, 2011; Linton, 2005; Titchkosky, 2000). Female behavior and bodies have been historically characterized as disabled whether through the Freudian lack or "conditions such as premenstrual tension, hysteria, post-natal depression and Munchausen's syndrome by proxy" (Goodley, 2016, p. 46). In their seminal work *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Gilbert and Gubar (1980) see women's madness as a form of rebellion. They argue that the representation of women's madness has been inextricable from their deviation from the norms. In this patriarchal view of women's psychological illness, madness becomes a "female disease" (p. 53). This article's discussion of the two movies builds on this perspective, as Susanna's and Sawyer's perceived medical and psychological conditions and diagnoses are intricately viewed from within this prism that women's nonnormative choices are incoherent and unstable.

### III. FOUCAULT AND THE ASYLUM

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault (1965) describes the historical event of the establishment of the general hospital in Paris as the moment when medicine has become a power tool by using what he calls the great confinement:

From the very start, one thing is clear: the Hospital General is not a medical establishment. It is rather a sort of semi judicial structure, an administrative entity which, along with the already constituted powers, and outside of the courts, decides, judges, and executes (p. 125).

Thus, according to Foucault, the birth of the hospital has been marked by an understanding of its usefulness as a tool of correction, control, and management. The use of confinement, particularly in psychiatric hospitals and centers, as a pretext of treatment makes these institutions indistinguishable from prisons while blurring the line between treatment and punishment.

In tracing the origin of the clinic and medical centers, Foucault (1965, 1973) notes that these institutions have been created to solve what people in power observe as political and economic problems. Unemployed people were some of the first to be admitted to these establishments. Their condition as unemployed and their poverty as a consequence have been equated with idleness and uselessness to maintain them under control and prevent any uprising (Foucault, 1965). It is no coincidence that “madmen were included in the proscription of idleness. From its origin, they would have their place beside the poor, deserving or not, and the idle, voluntary or not” (p. 136). This led to the rise of medical institutions as places of an “ethical status” (p. 137), as they do not only ‘cure’ the body but also the spirit and immorality. This status, Foucault writes, grants them power and authority which are usually associated with judicial and security apparatuses. They are able to confine, punish, administer medicine without the consent of the patients, and take full control of people’s bodies, spaces, personal and intimate choices. Administrators and doctors in medical and particularly psychiatric hospitals can decide when and where patients sleep, when they eat, where they spend their free time if they have any, and when they ‘misbehave,’ they are sent to solitary confinement. Consequently, when a nonmedical behavior is treated as an illness and such institutions are given unlimited power to ‘correct’ that behavior, then places of healing become spaces of a performance of power, subjugation, and moral correction.

In psychiatric hospitals or what used to be called asylum, “madness was controlled, not cured” (Foucault, 1965, p. 143). This control is administered using fear which is “an essential presence in the asylum” (p. 144). The administration of fear takes several forms, most powerful of all are confinement and solitary confinement which is a confinement within confinement. The threat of permanent confinement surrounds Susanna’s entrance to Claymoore. First, the taxi driver who dropped her there warns her not to throw anchor in that place. Then, Valerie, the head nurse, cautions her not to be like Lisa who has been in the hospital for eight years. For Sawyer, the threat of making her accidental confinement permanent prompts her to perform the role of the voluntary patient temporarily until she gains her freedom when her insurance money runs out. This performance is interrupted when she sees her stalker and a greater terror trumps the fear of confinement. Thus, the fear of punishment leads to socially approved self-disciplining and re-indoctrination. For Susanna, she is reintegrated into society while Sawyer remains a social pariah because her treatment is interrupted by the stalker’s intrusion in the institution.

One technique used in asylums, according to Foucault (1965), is guilt which is administered like a medicine. He says that as part of their treatment, patients are held responsible for their irrational and violent actions which affect them and other patients. Even though psychiatric hospitals create the environment of fear of confinement that is conducive to the patients’ violent behavior, the treatment makes it the responsibility of the patient to control the anger, the fear, and the violence it creates (pp. 145-6). Sawyer, for example, is blamed for her outbursts when they are the result of her coercive confinement. Even Nate, who is the only sympathetic figure in the hospital, tells her that it is up to her to remain sane. Lisa in *Girl, Interrupted*, is seen as incurable because she does not control her anger and causes harm to others. In a climactic scene in the movie, Lisa’s harsh words provoke Daisy, a former patient, to hang herself. Lisa shows no remorse which stuns Susanna who feels guilty for not defending Daisy. Susanna is the ideal Foucauldian madwoman who accepts her guilt whereas Lisa remains defiant rejecting her culpability because the system and society are to blame for what has happened to all the women in Claymoore. Foucault concludes that “the asylum no longer punished the madman’s guilt ... but it did more, it organized that guilt” (p. 146). Therefore, what is central to the asylum is management rather than cure, and control rather than treatment. These spaces that are supposed to heal the mind and the spirit become places of indoctrination, and madness becomes a manifestation of nonnormative behavior rather than an illness.

### IV. MADNESS AND SEXUALITY

The sexuality of the two female protagonists plays a central role in their institutionalization. In *Girl, Interrupted*, Susanna uses her sexuality to explore her choices and test the limits of the social norms. She engages in an affair with a married professor and casual sex with Toby, a man whom she has met at a party. Sawyer, in *Unsanse*, rejects the attention of David who meets her when she volunteers to read to his invalid father. He stalks her until she gets a restraining order against him. She seeks professional help when she has a traumatic reaction during sexual intimacy with a man she has met online for casual sex. She explicitly tells him that she wants to have sex with him and not to see him again. The next day she looks up Highland Creek Center to join a support group and is unwittingly admitted as a

patient. Both women assume nonnormative sexual choices and immediately after are deemed psychologically unstable and are coerced into checking into mental facilities. As Foucault suggests, these places of confinement are meant for moral corrections and programming people into accepting social norms.

Foucault (1978, 1982) argues that sexuality as well as sexual behavior is aspects that social, religious, and/or political authorities find suitable to regulate. Not only do they regulate sexual behavior but they also produce identities based on observing sexual norms, eliminating what they deem abnormal, unnatural, or deviant. Susanna's promiscuity and noncommittal sexual appetite become a precursor to her admittance into Claymoore. The audience sees no other indicators that led to her attempted suicide; no family history of abuse or infidelities, no disillusionment at school, no heartbreaks, as if her 'abnormal' sexual experimentations are her only ailment. The sociopolitical framing of normalcy vs. abnormalcy becomes clearer when Susanna's story is placed in parallel to Toby's. After their first sexual encounter, he tells her that he might be drafted to fight in Vietnam. Later when Susanna is in Claymoore, Toby comes to visit her. They attempt to have sex in her room before they are interrupted by head nurse Valerie. When they take a walk outside, Toby tells Susanna that he has been drafted and he will be shipped to Vietnam. He asks her to run away with him to Canada where she can escape her confinement and he the draft. She refuses because she is not ready to leave Claymoore now and if she were to leave with a man, it would not be him. Toby disappears from Susanna's life and from the narrative as no conclusion is given to his fate. The film's juxtaposition of Susanna's and Toby's confinements, hospital and army respectively, creates a parallel of situations; however, Toby's decision to escape which Susanna rejects in favor of continued confinement suggests that her war is more serious and in need of administration than his. In the historical context of a senseless war which will cost thousands of lives, Susanna is represented as finding haven and logic in a psychiatric institution, making her choice sane in comparison to the insane war. Susanna returns voluntarily to the confinement she has been resenting, signaling the beginning of her 'therapy' when she rejects Toby and the kind of sexual non-attachment he represents for her. Her reformation has begun.

For Sawyer, her so-called 'non-feminine' character is highlighted from the beginning and before she is institutionalized. When a colleague in another cubicle overhears Sawyer speaking irately with a client on the phone, she tells her that she can win him [the client] over with honey rather than with vinegar, assuming the caller is male. Sawyer corrects her tersely that the caller is a woman before she walks angrily out of the office. She is already viewed by people around her as cold and unaccommodating particularly towards men. Her next interaction is with her boss who compliments her work before he offers her a trip with him to a conference, insinuating an expectation of sexual favors on her part. Sawyer rejects her boss' unwanted sexual advances; however, the narrative does not frame it as an act of empowerment but rather as a symptom of her trauma. She is seen as broken because she does not appreciate men's 'attention;' however, this is not a symptom of post-traumatic symptoms disorder, PTSD, but of her nonnormative behavior of resisting the male gaze and being the passive recipient of men's attraction, whether David the stalker or her harassing boss.

Not long after this incident, she is depicted as seeking physical pleasure with a stranger whom she has no intention to see again. When she is unable to be intimate in this purely physical relationship, the audience realizes that she has a psychological problem due to her traumatic experience of being stalked. Sawyer is not represented as firm, strong, or independent as these encounters might suggest but she is weak and unstable. Her refrain from using 'honey' is not a reflection of her professional character, her rejection of her boss' unwanted sexual advances is not a sign of strength, or her clear and unburdened pursuit of sexual pleasure is not characteristic of metropolitan independence, but they are all framed as PTSD and her failure to play the woman role. Sawyer is disintegrating and her symptoms are related to her refusal to play the normative social roles.

When Sawyer goes to Highland Creek Center, the administrator tricks her into confessing that she has thought of suicide and encourages her to sign the 'routine' forms, which are in fact a relinquishing of her freedom and licensing for the center to confine her. Once she is involuntarily admitted, she reacts angrily and violently to her confinement; punching an orderly and slapping another patient. Even though these actions are reactions to the terror of her sudden ordeal, a violent reaction to the violence of confinement, all elements of the system of the asylum blame her for her actions, whether the administrators, the doctor, or fellow patients. This is the guilt, described by Foucault, which the system creates around the patient who in turn internalizes it. When Sawyer meets the doctor for the first time to explain to him the mistake that happened because the therapist she has met tricked her into checking herself into the center, he responds by listing her own violations. He uses her confession that she has thought about suicide and the incident of punching the orderly to make her believe that she belongs in the asylum. It is the discourse of the asylum that the patient should be in control of their actions even when they are not in control of their own bodies and freedom as they are confined and observed. Even though Sawyer has been struggling even before she went to the center, her violent reactions do not begin until she is admitted there. It is her confinement that exasperates her anxieties rather than her condition that is causing her volatile reactions. Susanna's reaction to her confinement might not have been as violent as Sawyer's but she too begins to get worse in Claymoore especially when she becomes increasingly lethargic as she refuses to leave her bed for days. This continues until head nurse Valerie intervenes and physically forces her out of bed and into a filled bathtub. Valerie scolds her for "wasting her life." Even though the movie and Susanna herself see this as a healthy intervention, Valerie performs the role of guilt assigning. It is Susanna's fault and not the confining aspect on

which the asylum is built that causes her condition to deteriorate. Claymoore, represented by Valerie, creates the façade of being a place of corrective influence rather than a place of control and discipline.

Central to the two protagonists' experience in the asylum are relationships with other individuals connected to confinement: Susanna and Lisa in *Girl, Interrupted* and Sawyer and David/George in *Unsane*. The moment Susanna sees Lisa she is taken by her. Her entrance is quite theatrical, as she storms back to Claymoore like a celebrity, a well-dressed enigma. She is everything that Susanna is not. Most importantly, Lisa is confident in her own madness. Throughout the movie, Susanna begins to experience Claymoore through Lisa. She enjoys her stay and becomes more rebellious when her relationship with Lisa is strong. Lisa is madly rebellious and rebelliously mad, as she spectacularly blurs the line between the two, madness and rebellion. Susanna is instantly drawn to Lisa's free spirit and embrace of her madness. She disregards Lisa's cruelty towards other female patients which comes in the form of brutal honesty. Lisa recognizes Susanna's fascination and takes her under her wings, giving her special attention and protecting her when she is vulnerable. Once when Valerie is about to walk in on Susanna and Toby having sex in her room, Lisa playfully attempts to stall Valerie from walking towards the room to allow Susanna privacy. Lisa also notices the attraction between Susanna and orderly John and orchestrates some privacy for them to kiss. She is invested in nourishing Susanna's sexual rebellion and breaking the rules of confinement.

In another and central instance, Lisa loudly and aggressively defends Susanna when she accidentally runs into the wife and daughter of the professor with whom she was having an affair. Bonnie, the indignant wife, confronts an uncomfortable Susanna and tells her that she hopes "they put her away forever," which is a language associated with prison and sentencing, creating that Foucauldian link between criminality and mental illness. Susanna's sexual 'crimes' (affair with a married man, promiscuity) are what lead to her confinement, and her reaction to seeing Bonnie in the ice cream shop reveals her sense of guilt as she tries to hide from view. On the contrary, Lisa demands conspicuity. When Valerie asks her what ice cream she wants, she sleekly walks towards the front of the counter and uses sexually suggestive language and gestures when she makes her ice cream order. Her performance is rewarded with outbursts of laughter from the young people in the shop and a disapproving headshake from older women. During all that, Susanna stands next to Lisa and in her shadow as she tries to hide her presence and the memories of the sexual transgressions it evokes. Lisa parades her sexuality and attempts to do the same for Susanna when she retorts back to Bonnie: "Look she gave your husband a rim job. Big fucking deal! I'm sure he was begging for it and I heard it was a pencil anyway!" Lisa relocates the shame from Susanna to the cheating husband when she publicly acknowledges the affair and humiliates the husband by describing his genitals as small. Not only does she defend Susanna from public humiliation, but she also turns tables on the social morality that shames the woman and excuses the man. The wife displaces her anger from the cheating husband to the exploited teenager, and Lisa redirects it where it belongs. Unlike the psychiatric institution that thrives on guilt, Lisa liberates Susanna from self-blame.

It is clear from these examples and others that Lisa is presented in the narrative as Susanna's alter ego. She does what Susanna wishes to be able to do and she says what Susanna is afraid to say. The most important power that Lisa has is her ability to break her confinement. Repeatedly in the movie, she leaves her room and wanders freely in Claymoore. She leads Susanna and sometimes other patients on late night walks around the hospital. Susanna excitedly follows, relishing the rebellion that Lisa leads. Since, according to Foucault, confinement is central to the power dynamics established in the birth and rise of asylums, Lisa's ability to physically liberate herself from it reflects her intellectual, mental, and social freedom. She turns Claymoore into a hotel where she is a guest. Susanna is most rebellious when she follows her alter ego on these adventures. She rejects the 'treatment' whether in pretending to take her medication or in her incredulity towards the therapy. Only when her relationship with Lisa strains does she begin to accept Claymoore as a place of rehabilitation. This happens when Lisa and Susanna escape the hospital after Lisa is treated with electroshocks and placed in solitary confinement as a punishment for drugging the night nurse/guard and spending the night in the hall outside their rooms. Susanna and John the orderly get physically intimate. It is significant that Lisa is harshly 'treated' while Susanna and John are not even punished though their transgression is more serious. This can be read symbolically as the system taming Susanna's wild side and desires by punishing Lisa. However, true to the mechanism of asylums, rehabilitation is finalized when the patient willfully renounces this rebellious madness rather than being forced to relinquish it.

During their escape, Susanna and Lisa go and visit a former patient, Daisy who has a complicated relationship with her father. He gets her an apartment and a cat, creating a sense of normalcy that is quietly revealed as a façade by a visibly shaken Daisy. This façade infuriates Lisa who is determined to take a hammer into that performance of normalcy which she sees as a surrender to social norms/normalcy. In the movie, she is often triggered by others' 'cure' as she resists the system. She reveals that 'cured' Daisy still self-harms and accuses her of enjoying the abusive incestuous relationship with her father. Susanna is appalled by the way Lisa treats Daisy and hides in the bathroom. In the morning, she discovers Daisy hanging from the ceiling after slashing her wrists. Susanna immediately feels guilty and collapses while Lisa shows indifference and instead searches Daisy's body and room for stashed cash. Their opposite reactions to Daisy's suicide reveal their differing attitudes towards psychiatric hospitals, treatment, and mental illness. Susanna's go-to reaction is guilt. She tells us that she feels guilty for not defending Daisy against Lisa's verbal attacks, which reveals that she feels both of them are responsible for her death. However, Lisa sees Daisy's victimhood to predate their encounter. The social system has normalized the father's abuse as care which is evident when the hospital allows him to

discharge her while she is still troubled and when he houses her in a place alone like a secret mistress. Lisa reads their relationship accurately and sees the real villains. She resists self-blame and Susanna's accusations. Incidentally, she stuffs the money she steals from dead Daisy in Susanna's pocket, hoping to be able to liberate her. When Susanna refuses to leave with her, Lisa leaves penniless and alone while Susanna returns to Claymoore and succumbs to her treatment. As she detaches from Lisa, she dissociates madness from rebellion and seeks normalcy with Valerie and Dr. Sonia. In the narrative, then and there, Susanna is healed.

In *Unsane*, Sawyer's deceptively voluntary confinement seems like an insurance scam until her stalker David impersonating an orderly called George is hired at the facility. Before Sawyer meets David-as-George, she forms a friendship with Nate another patient who reveals to Sawyer that Highland Creek is running an insurance scam in which they trick people to check themselves in to get payment from their insurance. He tells her to play the role of the patient and stop resisting her incarceration until her insurance stops payment. His advice falls within the expectations that healing and freeing oneself from the asylum is the responsibility of the patient even when the patient knows that they are wrongfully confined and admitted. Sawyer plays along until she sees David and she responds traumatically to his presence and his ability to exert power over her. At this point in the narrative, the other characters and the viewers are still not sure whether George is really David, or Sawyer is hallucinating since the movie has yet to introduce him as a character rather than Sawyer's told memory. After her outburst, Sawyer is restrained to her bed and even Nate turns away from her, upset by her resistance to playing the game; thus, prolonging her confinement. Again, when Sawyer is victimized by her stalker, she is blamed for the trauma she experiences. Only when George goes to visit Sawyer's mother in her hotel room when she comes to help secure her daughter's release, we begin to suspect that he might be David and his intentions are sinister.

At this point, the narrative changes from being about insurance scams and involuntary confinement to a horror story. Before that scene, the audience is unsure whether David truly exists or is a creation of Sawyer's paranoia. What ensues is a power play between Sawyer and David; however, the psychiatric facility remains central to this conflict as it tips the balance in David's favor since he impersonates an orderly and has control over Sawyer's body, movement, and most importantly her medication. In one scene, he gives her a large dose of methylphenidate, which is a nervous system stimulant that causes her to hallucinate and become violent. She breaks the television set in the common room and is again restrained in her bed. When David intentionally switches her medication, not only does he reinforce the display of her madness in the eyes of others, making her accusations against him unreliable, but he also exercises power over her body and mind. David clearly shows to Sawyer and to the audience that in this place, he reigns supreme over Sawyer who is already disabled by the institution that strives on patients' constructed physical and mental submission to the doctors, nurses, and administrators. The free and unchecked criminality of David is allowed by the psychiatric institutions that Foucault says assume a moral and behavioral authority over the patients. David is capable of completely fulfilling at Highland Creek what he was unable to do outside the asylum when the restraining order Sawyer took against him kept him at bay. He freely stalks Sawyer there and even gets paid for it. No one seems to suspect him; in fact, the other orderlies like him and praise him as friendly and helpful. Even when a nurse points out his 'error' in administering the medication, she covers for him. The institutionalization of Sawyer allows David, the troubled and unbalanced criminal to be seen as sane and socially agreeable.

The camerawork in *Unsane* is crucial in capturing and communicating Sawyer's position as an object of surveillance and power. Director Soderbergh, responsible for hits like *Erin Brockovich* and *Traffic*, shot the film using his iPhone (Kroll). This filmmaking method visually maintains the focus on Sawyer and transforms the cinematic gaze into a stalking one, as she is consistently chased by the camera. So even before her admittance to Highland Creek, hints of Sawyer's ordeal are felt through the camerawork which captures her from a distance through bushes as she walks towards her workplace or other places. The camera assumes a lurking eye that transforms Sawyer into the object of the gaze. Moving in between the bushes, this gaze, which we as viewers also assume, does not only create a haunting atmosphere to Sawyer's existence on screen and in the narrative, but it also sets the balance of power. She is watched and seen but we do not see her perspective nor do we see the lurker, which is at the center of the victimizing nature of stalking. The stalker maintains the power of violently grabbing the permission to watch and observe the object of their obsession. But it is also central for the stalker to make their presence felt which enhances the terrifying experience of the victim. Even when the stalker is not seen, their presence is felt by the victim who is unable to resume their lives when they know they have no control over the stalking gaze.

This construction of simultaneous visibility/invisibility of the stalker and the constant visibility of the stalked victim make this gaze panoptic. Foucault (1977b) describes the panoptic gaze as a construct of power in which the person under surveillance is seen by the gaze but cannot see it themselves. The panoptic gaze grants its possessor the power of seeing while not being seen but also by making their ability to see known to the observed. Like the prisoners who know that the guards in the watchtower can see them at any point. But the way the panopticon is constructed maintains the guards as invisible in the watchtower while their presence (the constant possibility of being there) is visible even they are not seen within the tower. For this gaze to be panoptic, the object of the gaze has to know that they are watched even if they cannot see their observer.

This fear of being constantly watched even when they cannot see their stalker makes the victims of stalking also the object of the panoptic gaze; thus, subject to the power of the stalker whose pleasure comes from this domineering

position. Even when Sawyer moves to another city to escape her traumatizing past, she never escapes this panoptic paradigm. She continues to live in fear of being observed, as she senses David's presence even when he is not visible to her or the audience. When she attempts to have a one-night stand with a man she has met through the dating app, she violently snatches herself away from him as if she is grabbed by an invisible hand. The fact that she does not see David watching her does not disprove his presence, which is what makes stalking traumatizing. The camerawork enhances this sense of helplessness around Sawyer as she is constantly observed. While we cannot see David yet, our gaze through the camera presents Sawyer as the powerless object of surveillance. When she decides to seek professional help and meets the administrator at Highland Creek, the camerawork keeps cutting between the two of them. The shots alternate between them as they exchange glances and words. After Sawyer fills out the forms and is left in the waiting room, we see her through a surveillance camera's perspective. This camerawork maintains the view of Sawyer as someone who is seen, watched, and above all unable to control the gaze that haunts her visibility because she cannot prevent the gaze or even return it.

The panoptic eye of the camera is significant because it implicitly inserts David into the narrative even before he makes his first actual appearance. The audience senses his effect on Sawyer before she is admitted to Highland Creek. David, thus, only exists through the symptoms she is exhibiting, that is until he begins to murder people around her like her mother and Nate, which reveals him as the psycho killer and the stalker Sawyer has accused him of being from the outset. When the audience begins to believe Sawyer, the panoptic gaze gradually shifts. In several scenes, we observe David's panoptically gazing at Sawyer; for example, when he watches her from afar laughing with and confiding in Nate. As David loses his panoptic power at least in the visual construction of the film, that is we no longer see her through his stalking panoptic gaze, his demise begins and his power fades. The camerawork begins to show him like other characters without privileging his gaze. This tips the balance of power in Sawyer's favor, as with his loss of panoptic power, she is freed from his dominance and she begins to manipulate him.

This is clear in the solitary confinement scene where David, for the first time, confesses to the audience that he is Sawyer's stalker. Visually, David's loss of power is exhibited through showing part of their interactions through the surveillance camera in solitary confinement. Both Sawyer and David become the object of the asylum's surveillance and gaze. They are both patients. Once David loses his grip of power, enabled by the psychiatric institution, Sawyer is empowered and fights back until she kills him. This empowerment is allowed by the reduction of David from an orderly into another patient subject to the system.

Like Susana, Sawyer begins to regain power and the upper hand over David when she plays her role in the system. First, she tells David that she feels the same towards him and accepts his obsessive passion. She demands that he have sex with another woman in front of her to prove that he is capable of sexual connections. This demand also switches the panoptic power between them. While David has been subjecting her to the panoptic gaze, she now subjects him to a voyeuristic gaze of which she is in total control. She suggests Violet, a fellow patient who has been antagonizing Sawyer throughout her stay. She brings two of her victimizers into solitary confinement and controls them like a director of a terrifying play. When a petrified Violet resists David's sexual assault, Sawyer tries to calm her down and then grabs the shiv Violet once showed Sawyer to scare her and which she hides in her clothes. The shiv is usually used by prisoners in jail to attack other inmates, which creates a correlation between the experiences of psychiatric institutions' patients and prisoners. Sawyer uses the shiv to attack David and grab his keys to release herself from the locked room and lock them both in it. As she makes a final glance, she sees David snapping Violet's neck. The significance of Sawyer sacrificing Violet to free herself reveals the division of power in the asylum of captives/captors, controllers/controlled, and victims/victimizers. As David kills Sawyer's mother and Nate because he feels that they stand in the way of them being together, Sawyer discards of Violet by forcing her to take her place temporarily as the object of David's invasive sexual interest and then leaving her with him to be killed. When Sawyer succumbs to the rules of the institution, she is powerful enough to defeat David but by becoming as brutal.

However, before Sawyer overpowers David, she has to submit to his fantasies and obsessions even in pretense. She tells him she is to blame for not reciprocating his love and interest in her. She confesses that she has been ungrateful in not appreciating his sincerity. This performance of subjugation can be interpreted as an admittance of the incel narrative that women's rejection of insecure and undesirable men is the cause of their anger and misogyny. It reinforces the belief that women must play along to gain power and appear sane again. Throughout the movie, Sawyer is seen as either aloof and cold towards men or hysterical and unstable. She is grounded only when she plays the role of the desired and pursued. She is able to attack and wound David only when she performs the roles which he has designed for her. His passionate yet obsessive pursuit of her is contrasted with her coldness and inability to engage with others. When she yields, she wins while when she resists, she is overpowered. Both Susanna and Sawyer have to assume the role of docility in order to regain their 'sanity'; Susanna by rejecting Lisa as a rebellious role model and Sawyer by succumbing to David's stalking.

## V. CONCLUSION

This article concludes with a discussion of the conclusion of the two movies. *Girl, Interrupted* ends with the release of Susanna from Claymoore and her narrative voice reminiscing about the friendship she forged there. She remembers that period of her life fondly during which she anchored her life in emotional stability. She represents the asylum as a

place of rebirth and female bonding even when Susanna ‘recovers’ by betraying Lisa and subjecting her to the medical gaze. According to Foucault (1973), the medical gaze is used by doctors to objectify the bodies of the patients as spaces of illness and abnormalities. The medical gaze dehumanizes the patients and reduces them into faulty organs. Foucault sees the medical gaze as institutional rather than individual. In Claymoore, Dr. Melvin listens to the patients and translates their narratives into diagnoses. He looks for abnormalities and flaws in their stories rather than reflections of their feelings, vulnerabilities, and fears. In one scene, Lisa leads the gangs on a nightly wandering in the institution and they break into Dr. Melvin’s office and find his files on each one of them. Lisa distributes them like homework but as they begin to read their respective ‘diagnosis,’ a disempowering quiet descends on them. They look depleted and defeated as they see themselves through the medical gaze. Their intimate stories and confessions are reduced to flaws and deficiencies. Even their act of empowering flipping of the balance of power through acquiring Dr. Melvin’s notes and files leaves them still captive of the medical gaze.

Susanna reproduces that medical gaze through her journal which she uses to diagnostically describe the flaws of her ‘friends.’ On her last night in Claymoore, Lisa steals the journal and reads out Susanna’s judgmental view of them, as she did on their nightly invasion of Dr. Melvin’s office. This time it is Susanna who betrays Lisa by looking at her and understanding her through her flaws only. Her judgment reduces the formidable Lisa into a wail. Lisa is not defeated by Claymoore but by Susanna who adopts their gaze in seeing and constructing Lisa’s rebellion against social expectations and particularly the medical gaze. Susanna is healed when she accepts her place in the system and by rejecting the likes of Lisa who challenge it.

In *Unsane*, Sawyer defeats her victimizer when she kills David and inadvertently exposes Highland Creek scam. The movie’s final scene shows Sawyer having lunch with the same colleague who earlier called her cold but this time, Sawyer is her boss as she has been promoted at work. She has not only regained her sanity but also her career. She is confident and brutally firm in firing inadequate employees, displaying corporate strength. However, these moments are interrupted when Sawyer sees a man in the restaurant who looks like David. She grabs a knife and walks slowly towards him before she realizes that he is not David. In a moment, the façade of normalcy, sanity, and professional prowess crumples, as we realize that Sawyer is still haunted by David and his traumatizing memory. Both movies end with memories but while Susanna paints hers as uplifting, Sawyer’s is destructive. *Unsane* ends as it begins with Sawyer being chased by the camera, haunted and dispossessed. She gives us one final glance as she looks at us through the camera, and frame freezes and we are left with that final look that is frantic and disillusioned. Sawyer might have killed her tormentor but she is still tormented. As we gaze back at her, the camera sees her through the medical gaze, as a clinical condition.

The two movies end on different notes and with different technique, the fact that allow for us to perceive two examples of ‘mad’ women. As Vera Chouinard (2009) notes, *Girl, Interrupted* has a complicated relation with cultural expectations as it seems to trouble them only to reaffirm them later on. Susanna accepts her diagnosis and sees herself through the medical gaze. She succeeds and moves on in her life. Sawyer sees the asylum as a place of confinement and exploitation of the weak. She assumes the medical gaze to understand David’s vulnerability and uses it to free herself and kill him. She is not ‘healed’ by the system but temporarily uses it to conquer her stalker. Sawyer does not receive or accept the indoctrination that Susanna receives, and the film leaves her without any resolution. The still image of her disturbed gaze at the camera does not give her any resolution. She stands for the Lisas of the social structure, rather than the Susannas.

Through this comparative analysis of *Girl, Interrupted* and *Unsane*, this article views gender politics as inextricable from the representation of mental illnesses when it comes to women. Using Foucauldian concepts, such as the panoptic gaze, the socialization and moralization of psychiatry, and the medical gaze, we posit that the two female protagonists’ true diagnosis is their resistance to social norms and refusal to accept their roles in society. Their sexuality is seen as the primal symptom of their diagnosis. Susanna’s promiscuity and Sawyer’s so-called lack of femininity are seen as medical flaws that require admittance to psychiatric facilities and compulsory medication. Their submission to the social male gaze determines whether they are cured, such as in the case of Susanna, or remain troubled as the audience clearly realizes in the case of Sawyer.

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