Duration “in vain,” without end or aim, is the most paralyzing idea.
—Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power

Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean become soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present. . . . [T]he years no longer rise up toward heaven, they lie spread out ahead, gray and identical. The battle against dust and dirt is never won.

—Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex

Significant critical attention was expended on the connection between feminism and time in the late 1990s and first years of the twenty-first century. Various essays investigated the uneasy relationship between different feminist generations, the dangers inherent in using reproductive metaphors to signal the persistence (or lack thereof) of feminism across time, and the implications of describing contemporary feminism through an apocalyptic image of violent closure.1

With very few exceptions, this criticism pinpointed the temporal tropes at work in contemporary feminist discourse in an attempt to generate new ways to approach the current state of academic feminism.2 This joint focus on both the contemporary moment and academic feminism made perfect sense, given the steady eradication of popular feminism as anything other than the absent cause of a backlash that now seems perpetual. Devoid of any feeling of feminist propulsion, the present appeared as a crisis situation, requiring an immediate intervention by academic feminism—that is, by the only feminism that seems to be left to intervene.
In contrast, this essay argues that the current state of feminism, and by extension our current dilemmas, owes much to the role popular feminism played when it thrived, a role that I will argue had everything to do with the popular feminist temporalities evolved in the 1970s. In order to map these temporalities, I return to an iconic popular feminist text of the decade, *The Stepford Wives*, as represented by Ira Levin’s 1972 novel and the 1975 film. Although activist feminists at the time rejected the film as a “rip-off” of the women’s movement, the Stepford motif earned itself a permanent place in the pop culture lexicon, such that, even before the 2004 remake of the film, the word “Stepford” persisted as a widely understood descriptor for a person showing the effects of ideological brainwashing. The Stepford metaphor thus exemplifies the two most salient and troublesome aspects of 1970s popular U.S. feminism: its difference from activist feminism and its remarkable ability to define feminist politics in the national imagination for decades despite (and because of) that difference.

As I will argue in detail below, this popular version of feminist politics centers on the temporalized dilemmas of the white, middle-class suburban housewife. In particular, *The Stepford Wives* offers visions of housewifery reminiscent of the critiques offered a decade earlier in bestsellers by Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, in which housewives are seen as trapped in a nightmarish life of pointless repetition. While, by 1975, activist feminism showed little signs of this fixation, focusing increasingly on such issues as rape, domestic violence, and pornography, this vision of the housewife persisted in the popular imagination, becoming so embedded a feature that it has even been spoofed on *The Simpsons*: satirizing the opening of long-running soap opera the *Days of Our Lives*, *The Simpsons’* depicts a soap that begins by intoning, “Like the cleaning of the house, *It Never Ends.*” Of course, this particular understanding of 1970s feminism as primarily an antidote to the dreary life of the white suburban housewife has been questioned by various thinkers, especially because it tends to present the feminism of women of color as coming after white feminism. Yet if 1970s activist feminism was never as limited to white, middle-class women as some accounts assume, it becomes all the more imperative to consider how and why the vision of feminism offered by such texts as *The Stepford Wives* came to substitute for this more complex history in the popular imagination. In particular, I will argue
that the prominence of this strain of popular feminism must be understood not only in terms of the often painful failures of feminist politics but also in terms of the purposes this discourse served, the overarching ideological needs that it filled in mainstream American culture, some of which were only peripherally connected to gender politics.

The most crucial of these needs, I will argue, arose from the post-1960s weakening of narratives of inevitable national progress and the associated perception of a temporal dead end often referred to as "the end of history." Feminism's relationship with teleological, progressive historical time has been a topic of frequent debate since the 1970s. However, even those who warn against feminism's affiliation with this vision of historical time often assume that this temporal mode is there for the taking, persisting as a kind of siren song for a post-structuralist feminism determined to resist teleology's seductions. This assumption has tended to foreclose investigation of the coincidence of two of the signature features of postmodernity, both of which emerge at roughly the same moment in the 1970s: the absorption of second-wave feminism into popular culture, and the equally pervasive sense that the unfolding of history no longer guaranteed the same teleological progress it once did. In the discussion that follows, I suggest that this concurrence is crucial to understanding the relationship between feminism and time that so much recent work has sought to define. I argue in particular that one of the central powers of popular feminist discourse was its ability to offer the American national imagination a flexible yet ideologically charged vocabulary for allegorizing both the apparent loss of historical progress and the possibility of its retrieval.

Although this reading offers an unfamiliar approach to late twentieth-century popular feminism the United States, we are in fact quite used to interpreting feminist discourse in this allegorical fashion in other geographical and historical contexts—for example, when we read the liberation of women in the so-called Third World as an allegory for national decolonization. Yet despite our tendency to read feminist discourse as a form of national allegory when it appears outside the West, the possibility that second-wave feminism might have served a similarly allegorical function in the contemporary United States has rarely been raised. However, when feminist progress is used as evidence that the West is more advanced than other parts of the globe, we glimpse the way in which feminism can take on symbolic
freight within the West as well, becoming entangled with internal narratives regarding national development or the lack thereof. When the possibility and desirability of feminist transformation became a subject of intense interest in late-twentieth-century American popular culture, feminist discourse became increasingly available as an arena for negotiating such questions about national transformation. In particular, I will suggest that, much as the heroine’s trajectory to marriage provided a means to explore the changing class structure of England in eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century courtship novels, mainstream feminism’s fixation on the housewife’s Sisyphean labors offered a means of narrating the perceived breakdown of American progress after the 1960s.\textsuperscript{12} In offering this reading, I will ask not what historical time can (or cannot) do for feminism, but rather what feminism has done for historical time.

**UNCANNY UNFREEDOM**

The decidedly mainstream *Stepford Wives*, which was written, directed, and produced by men, took evident pains to present itself as a genuine participant in the controversial discourse of second-wave feminism: author Ira Levin included a quote from *The Second Sex* as an epigraph in the novel, and the producers of the film organized a special screening for feminist “opinion makers” in an attempt to garner their support for the film (Levin, 5; Klemesrud, 29). The attempt was not a success, to put it mildly; “Feminists Recoil at Film Designed to Relate to Them” was how the *New York Times* summarized the event (Klemesrud, 29). While the article doesn’t provide many details about the critique the women offered of the film, it does recount Friedan’s insistence that the film was a “rip-off” of the Women’s Movement, suggesting that her recoil involved the distinction between authentic activist feminist politics and adulterated popular feminist discourse (29). As I will argue in more detail below, *The Stepford Wives* was in fact rather more faithful to the popular feminist discourse of its day than its critics were willing to accept at the time.\textsuperscript{13} Even the seemingly outlandish image of patriarchally brainwashed women as automatons finds echoes in Mary Daly’s contemporaneous description of such nonfeminist women as “fembots” and “puppets of papa” (Daly, 13, 12). However, Friedan’s
critique points to something crucial as well: these ideas and images are repackaged by both the novel and the film in a way that shifts their meaning and resonance: unlike Daly’s critique, both the novel and the film depict fembots as literally female robots—in this case, robots who have physically been “programmed” by patriarchy’s avatar, the generically termed “Men’s Association” of Stepford. While explicitly invoking what was by then a sophisticated second-wave discourse on gender ideology and methods for raising consciousness out of that ideology, The Stepford Wives chooses to figure those operations through a dark fantasia of bosomy robot housewives and the rich white men who secretly build them. In other words, as Friedan’s own reference to it as a rip-off suggests, The Stepford Wives operates by simultaneously referencing and reinscribing women’s liberation discourse in a much more gothic register. I’m going to suggest that this re-presentation indicates some of the ways in which popular second-wave feminist discourse served as host to a body of other concerns and ideas related to time, so I want to explore its operations at some length. Although I will distinguish between the novel and the film in some cases, my focus is less on providing a complete reading of either the novel or the film than on analyzing the way in which their signal shared tropes and narrative figures resonate with overarching concerns regarding the stasis of national time.

Fittingly enough, The Stepford Wives generates its horror-story double of women’s lib politics primarily through suggestive use of the uncanny. When heroine Joanna Ingalls moves from New York City to the suburb of Stepford with her husband and two kids, a certain eerie sameness soon suggests to her that something is rotten in the state of Stepford. While a quick glance at any hetero men’s magazine would seem to indicate that a patriarchal paradise would be inhabited by a variety of “fembot” types, from fluffy Playboy bunnies to whip-cracking dominatrixes, the most striking feature of the Stepford women is their unremitting uniformity: they are all alike in their housework obsession, soft-spoken docility, voluptuous figures, and frilly dresses. Although Joanna does find a few women to befriend who at least for a time seem to have escaped the Stepford dynamic, she is baffled and eventually truly frightened by the Stepford women’s complete conformity to gender norms and overwhelming resemblance to one another. As she becomes increasingly suspicious of this spooky sameness,
she hovers between believing it is the result of Men’s Association conspiracy and thinking that she is only in the grip of a paranoid delusion: as she puts it in the film, “If I’m wrong, I’m crazy, and if I’m right, it’s worse.” Tellingly, the climactic moment of the film comes when Joanna’s worst fears are confirmed and she must confront uncanny uniformity in its most disturbing form, coming face to face with her own robot double. In the film’s penultimate scene, Joanna has been lured to the gothic Men’s Association building, and she flees the sinister leader of the group down hallways filmed in such darkness that it is almost impossible to see the action. Finally, however, Joanna tries a door that opens into a brightly lit, perfect replica of her own bedroom. While the bright room itself appears an ideal of safety, security, and home, the perfect antidote to the preceding horror-film chase sequence, the room’s bizarre status as a displaced double makes its bland domesticity even more disturbing than the shadowy halls outside: in a fashion that reflects Freud’s famous analysis of the term’s etymology, the heimlich transforms itself into the unheimlich before our eyes (341). What is at issue in this scene, however, is not simply the unheimlich of home, but more specifically the uncanny status of doubling itself, which becomes increasingly prominent as the scene progresses. Not only is the room a copy of its original, but also the shot that finally reveals Joanna’s double is itself doubled. First, we see a point-of-view shot from Joanna’s perspective that pans the room, encouraging us to identify with her plight in classic horror-film fashion.14 Yet the image track cuts to Joanna’s horrified reaction before we see what has so disturbed her; only after another, identical pan circles the room do we see Joanna’s robot double. Driving the point home, Joanna’s double is itself sitting in front of a mirror.

In The Stepford Wives, then, the proof of patriarchy’s ascendancy appears not through the threat or enactment of all-too-evident male sexual violence (a mode common in later popular feminist films such as The Accused [1988] and Thelma and Louise [1991]), but rather through the uncanny doubling created by the secret Men’s Association conspiracy. In this pointed recourse to conspiracy, paranoia, and the uncanny as figures for patriarchal power and feminist critique, The Stepford Wives obviously continues the approach familiar from Cold War films such as Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956). As Vivian Sobchack argues, films such as Invasion and The Manchurian Candidate
(1962) use such themes to express "collective anxiety about the loss of individual identity, subliminal mind-bending, or downright scientific/political brainwashing" (123). Yet, despite being consistently linked with conspiracy and paranoia in these and other pop-cultural texts, the uncanny has received little notice as a symbol for such fears regarding ideology and social control. Instead, its political valences have more often been located in questions of self/other relationships, boundary formation, the repression and return of traumatic history, and questions of national and community belonging. However, Freud's own classic examples of the uncanny—dismembered hands that move, mirror-reflections with their own agendas, the reanimation of the dead, the omnipotence of thoughts, the evil eye—all seem to reflect an anxiety regarding potency, animation, and control.

At the conclusion of E. T. A. Hoffman's story "The Sandman," through which Freud famously works out his theory of the uncanny, it is this anxiety that sparks the haunted Nathanael's suicidal flight: his eye is drawn to the malevolent Sandman after his fiancée, Klara, points out a "strange little grey bush" that "really seems to be striding out toward us" (32). This observation, which comes as the lovers are viewing a landscape from a tower, suggests a quintessential confusion of figure and ground: what distinguishes figure and ground is precisely the figure's ability to act of its own accord, but in this instance the supposedly inert ground seems to spring to life, moving towards the viewer in a fashion that is cast as inherently threatening. When Klara, in an earlier passage, reasons with Nathanael about his fears regarding the Sandman, she provides a telling assessment of such moments: the problem, she argues, is that the "malignant power" Nathanael fears must be inside him rather than out ("it must become part of us, part of our own self") and therefore must be one he could control if he wished. Because he cannot tell inside from outside, Nathanael also cannot distinguish active from passive, manipulator from manipulated (Hoffman, 11). It is this confusion regarding who or what is making things happen that allows Nathanael to attribute to the automaton Olympia thoughts that she cannot possess, thoughts that he has in fact generated himself and imputed to her. If the epistemological signature of the uncanny is undecidability, these examples suggest the extent to which this undecidability consistently concerns the distribution of power and control between the subject and the other.
In Freud's examples of the evil eye and so on, uncanny power is associated with the perceived presence of the supernatural; or, to argue from the opposite direction, we might say that we perceive ourselves to be in the presence of the "supernatural" when something that is ordinarily inanimate, passive, and lacking intent appears animated, active, and possessed of intent. But this notion of the uncanny is not eradicated by rationality; instead, Terry Castle and others have argued, stories and images of the uncanny were a kind of "toxic side effect" of the development of Enlightenment (8). As Joan Copjec points out, the uncanny double was linked in particular to the conception of individual and social freedom offered by the Enlightenment social contract:

... [T]he eighteenth century detached a double of the subject which it made inaccessible to annihilation; this double, unlike older notions of the immortal soul, allowed the subject to become detached from the world without becoming attached to some other-worldly principle. ... Rather than as another principle, the Enlightenment double was conceived as nothing, nothing but the negation of the subject's attachment to the world. This double, then, guaranteed the autonomy of the subject, its freedom from a pathetic existence in which it could be manipulated by other things, persons or traditions. (40)

In her opposition of the Enlightenment double's extra-worldly "autonomy" to the subject's "pathetic" availability for "manipulation," Copjec gestures towards the binary of activity and passivity that I have argued shadows the uncanny. Lodged within the world, the subject is both active and manipulated, instrumental and an instrument. Representing the subject in the "detached" zone of "freedom," the double, on the other hand, is both free and free of effect; as a mere limit to the subject's insertion in and manipulation of the world, the double is undetermined but by nature determines nothing. While the double possesses the freedom to control his or her own actions but lacks a world in which to act, the subject has the ability to produce effects in the world but not the freedom to be the sole determinant of those actions.

For Copjec, the eighteenth-century fixation with the uncanny double functions as a symptom of cultural dis-ease with this foundational opposition. For instance, when the uncanny double appears in Gothic fiction, he or she possesses both a freedom from determination that
the subject lacks (usually symbolized by supernatural powers of some sort) and the ability to act in “our” world rather than the “mirror” world. At the same time, the actions of this empowered double are inevitably so disastrous for the subject (even and especially when the double carries out the subject’s unconscious wishes) that the fantasy rapidly transforms into a nightmare. As this example suggests, the uncanny thus encodes a dangerous deformation of what is felt to be the proper relationship between domination and freedom, determination and self-determination that is ultimately always at the expense of the subject.

In its depiction of robot doubles that are built to take the place of and, at least in the film, literally kill their originals, The Stepford Wives draws on this uncanny nexus to depict patriarchal domination as transgressing our most deep-seated understanding of the necessary balance between individual and social power. In so doing, it shifts the preexisting sexual politics of the uncanny significantly: for Freud, the uncanny reflects castration fears and thus, in Nathanael’s specific case, “the automatic doll can be nothing else than a personification of [his] feminine attitude toward his father in infancy” (Freud, 232 n. 1). Theorists such as Hélène Cixous have resisted this reading by refusing to allow women to remain the passive inscription of male fears of castration, asking: “What if the doll became a woman? What if she were alive?” (538). Yet The Stepford Wives doesn’t do away with the automaton in favor of the living woman, but instead uses the automatized figure to emphasize the distinction between the two. As Rey Chow points out, “being ‘automatized’” tends to mean “being subjected to social exploitation whose origins are beyond one’s individual grasp,” such that, in comparison, the normal individual appears immune to such ideological manipulations (Writing Diaspora, 61, 64). The automatized other thus serves to highlight the free will that feminism has supposedly bestowed on Joanna: for Joanna, the Stepford wives both symbolize the threat that patriarchal ideology makes to her perceived capacity for self-determination and provide the reassurance that, unless and until she is physically automatized, her immunity to patriarchy’s manipulations remains intact. Rather than deploying the female automaton either as the site of the castration complex for the male subject or as a new feminist subject come to life, The Stepford Wives thus uses it to figure a gendered threat to the autonomy of women in particular.
"THE TOWN THAT TIME FORGOT"

As becomes increasingly clear as both the novel and film progress, this threat to women’s autonomy is inseparable from women’s experience of time. At the beginning of both the novel and the film, Joanna, her husband, and her two children move from New York City to the suburbs, and at first the novel follows the classic regionalist conventions in which the city dweller explores an unfamiliar rural landscape. In the regionalist chronotope, the remote country locale is customarily marked as an idyllic temporal backwater, both a throwback to an earlier time, and a zone where the pace of everyday life seems comparatively slow. References to Stepford as being “out of step” with the times suggest that the Men’s Association has found a way to turn back the tide of feminist progress while simultaneously substituting its own version of dark futurity, as symbolized by the men’s use of specialized knowledge gained from their high-tech jobs to build their robot wives (Levin, 19). In the film, Joanna’s continual insistence that the women in Stepford have “changed” and her fear that she will “change” next suggests that the Men’s Association has created a kind of evil inversion of the feminist consciousness-raising process, which turns women back into the brainwashed fembots they were before women’s lib. And, once this reversal has taken place, the Stepford wives become permanently locked into the frozen temporal landscape of “The Town That Time Forgot,” as Joanna’s friend Bobbie puts it (42).

In the novel, this characterization appears in large part through references to the local newspaper, the print form Benedict Anderson has argued has special potency in constituting community through time: in particular, Joanna and Bobbie have a running joke that, given the lack of change in the town, the Stepford Chronicle should really be called the Chronic III (Levin, 34). In the play between “chronicle” and “chronic,” the novel indicates that in Stepford the passage of time does not produce significant change or generate new events worthy of being recorded; rather, time for the women of Stepford seems to be a marker of an unhealthy inability to change, a version of the town’s uncanny uniformity that possesses a decidedly temporal character.

The uncanny has been connected to time through the idea of haunting and memory, but such versions usually focus on the idea of return. For Freud, in particular, the temporal aspects of the uncanny lie in the
way in which the return of the repressed exists on the boundary of past and present, familiar and strange, known and unknown. But the uncanny time of the Stepford automatons has less to do with the return of a disavowed and seemingly unfamiliar past than with actions that all too clearly and obviously repeat as time moves forward. For example, when Carol, Joanna’s Stepford-wife neighbor, malfunctions at a garden party in the film, she approaches the guests in turn, cooing to each one, “I’ll just die if I don’t get this recipe!” Even in Stepford, where it otherwise appears perfectly normal to experience the need for a recipe as a life-or-death situation, this repetition attracts the attention of the guests: we see the growing alarm of the Stepford men as the camera follows Carol in her circuit of the party, and eventually we watch as her husband strong-arms her away from the other guests. In its reliance on repetition as a sign of the unnatural and absurd qualities of such obsessive domesticity, this scene gestures towards what might be called the other half of the compulsion to repeat: not the return of the seemingly unfamiliar, but what Freud calls the “daemonic” nature of such repetition, its hint that the return is somehow always beyond the subject’s control (Levin, 238). That is, repetition appears to be uncanny not only because something recurs that is simultaneously familiar and strange to us but also because the subject’s repetition signals a lack of self-control—the creepy suggestion of an invisible force at work that has much in common with the Sandman’s “sinister power” (11).

From this perspective, the “compulsion to repeat” is almost a redundant phrase, since such repetition seems both to require and display compulsion, providing a perfect encapsulation of what Rita Felski has called modernity’s tendency to “equate repetition with domination and innovation with agency and resistance” (Doing Time, 84). A too-perfect recurrence of the same actions or events over time offers de facto evidence that the supposedly free subject has been “automatized” or “programmed” by the forces of social control. For example, The Matrix (1999) relies on much this set of associations when its hero learns that déjà vu functions as a sign that the evil computer conspiracy has been at work, manipulating reality for its own benefit. In its depiction of the repeating wife, The Stepford Wives depends on just this sort of representational strategy; it relies on its viewers possessing an implicit sense that things ordinarily differ over time (that is,
change) if left to themselves—and that their failure to do so indicates that some malevolent agency has intervened, controlling the actions of the subject. In so doing, this scene uses our visceral recoil from the uncanny to make the unjust take on all the connotations of the unnatural. Yet the temporal problem at issue here is not that time has been stuck in some sort of abnormal perpetual loop (as in *Groundhog Day* [1993] or innumerable episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) but rather that the political subject apparently feels time to be stagnant and “ill” when significant change is foreclosed and actions are in consequence highly limited. For this reason, the perception of unfreedom that I have argued is associated with the uncanny registers in *The Stepford Wives* primarily as a mode of temporal experience, as something that happens not only in time but also to time as the subject perceives it. I refer to this structure of feeling, this despairing perception of uniformity, domination, and temporal inertia, as *static time.*

**STATIC TIME, HOUSEWORK, AND THE END OF HISTORY**

Although *The Stepford Wives* highlights the specularity of hyperfemininity as a mode of domination, particularly in its filmic version, both the novel and the film consistently associate the domination of women’s time with housework. While it might take hours to achieve the faultless hairdos and perfectly accessorized outfits modeled by the women of Stepford, the time-consuming nature of these efforts doesn’t become an issue in the way that housework does. Instead, I want to suggest, *The Stepford Wives* depicts the temporality of housework as by nature a form of static time. In the novel, for example, when Joanna tries to get to know the women in town, she quickly finds that the vast majority of Stepford women are much too busy with housecleaning and cooking to be interested in friendship; she is particularly astonished to learn that the women of the town labor well into the evening, scrubbing their floors while the Stepford men relax over highballs at the Men’s Association clubhouse. As Joanna finds herself remarking, “They never stop these Stepford Wives. . . . They work like robots all their lives” (Levin, 102). The singsong quality of Joanna’s chant mirrors the perpetual motion of the Stepford women, attributing to their actions all the rhythmical compulsion of a nursery rhyme. Moreover, the film
explicitly links this experience with feminist critique: when Joanna and her friend Bobbie attempt to start a consciousness-raising group, woman after woman insists that she simply doesn’t have enough time to do such things.

While the consciousness-raising session does finally take place in the film, it only serves to underscore this fixation on the link between time and housework that structures the lives of the women of Stepford. After Joanna and her friend Charmaine begin the meeting by exchanging confessions about the state of their marriages, one of the Stepford wives, Kit, pipes up with her own worries, which are directly linked to the relationship between housework and time: the previous day, Kit admits miserably, she had been so busy ironing that she didn’t have time to bake! We are cued to see this unwavering fixation on the time of housework as eerie and threatening not only by the entrance of the film’s horror theme but also by the depiction of Kit as she makes her contribution. When the image track cuts to Kit, the shot seems to be in mid-pan, beginning slightly to her left and immediately moving towards her. However, as the shot reaches Kit, she begins to turn her head in the same direction as the pan, moving at the same rate as the shot itself. In synching Kit’s motion and the movement of the camera, this shot links her predictable confession of housewifely inadequacy with the smooth, mechanical motion of the camera, suggesting that both she and it are inhumanly automatic. Moreover, because Kit begins to move at the moment when the pan reaches her face, it is as if the motion of the camera has brought her to life as well: not only is she mechanized but also her motion is begun and controlled by an outside entity. As if their own on-switches had been tripped by Kit’s introduction of domestic labor into the conversation, the other Stepford wives come to life as well, and one of them begins rhapsodizing about the timesaving nature of Easy-On Spray Starch, trilling, “If time is your enemy, get Easy-On!”

The inability of the Stepford women to grasp or participate in the basic premise of the consciousness-raising session clearly functions to suggest the intransigent nature of ideology: even in the face of a method purposely evolved to reveal and eradicate patriarchal discourse, the Stepford women merely keep chirping that discourse with broken-record predictability. But what is at issue in this scene is clearly a very particular version of this ideological control, one that links uncanny automatization and housework’s repetitive, Sisyphean time.
In its suggestion that time is the enemy of the housewife, *The Stepford Wives* echoes the 1960s mainstream, liberal feminist discourse from which it draws its major ideas and images. As de Beauvoir points out in the passage I have used as my epigraph, there is something distinctly Sisyphean about housework when viewed from a critical perspective (425). Friedan’s 1963 bestseller *The Feminine Mystique*, for example, includes a chapter entitled “Housework Expands to Fill the Time Available” and consistently argues that women’s oppression is primarily experienced as a temporal problem. (In case we might have missed the parallel, the novel references Friedan’s critique by name: Joanna discovers through an old newspaper clipping that, shortly after *Mystique* was published, Friedan visited Stepford and “[o]ver fifty women applauded [her] as she cited the inequities and frustrations besetting the modern-day housewife” [Levin, 62–63].) As Friedan’s own description puts it,

The housewives who suffer the terror of the problem that has no name are victims of this same deadly “dailyness.” As one of them told me, “I can take the real problems; it’s the endless boring days that make me desperate.” Housewives who live according to the feminine mystique do not have a personal purpose stretching into the future. But without such a purpose to evoke their full abilities, they cannot grow to self-realization. Without such a purpose, they lose the sense of who they are, for it is purpose which gives the human pattern to one’s days. (302)

Stuck in the same repetitive drudgery, these women trudge through the “endless boring days” that constitute static time. Yet this “deadly dailyness,” which would seem to constitute a pattern if ever there was one, still doesn’t count as a “human pattern” in Friedan’s eyes; for Friedan, human patterns require “an idea, a vision” that is used to “shap[e] a future different from [the] past” (60)—in other words, the meaningful organization of difference over time that we usually refer to as plot.

Rather than an ongoing plot, the “deadly dailyness” that constitutes the static time of the housewife seems to have more in common with the state that follows a plot’s conclusion. As narrative theory suggests, the achievement of narrative telos brings about a simultaneous epistemological and temporal closure; to the extent that we understand plot as the meaningful organization of events over time, events after the telos will not produce any new meaning, but merely
echo ad infinitum the meaning determined by the narrative end. Given that the acceptance of a marriage proposal or exchange of vows conventionally culminated the heroine’s plot, for the housewife this echo boils down to married, married, married. In the 1980s, feminist literary critics frequently made a similar point in their critiques of the marriage plot, pointing out that the lives of female characters only possessed a trajectory until marriage, after which nothing of interest—no meaningful change, in other words—was expected to happen to them. But feminist literary critics who discussed the marriage plot were by and large investigating the ways that this plot constrained women authors when they attempted to narrate the lives of female characters and the ingenious and/or ambivalent ways they dealt with this impasse.\textsuperscript{25} Popular feminist theorists such as Friedan, on the other hand, were talking about the static time that follows teleological closure as the way American white, middle-class suburban women lived their lives in the 1960s and 1970s. The problem that has no name turns out to be caused by the life that has no more plot: a life stuck in the permanent epilogue-space that follows plot’s conclusion.\textsuperscript{26}

Although it requires something of a dramatic shift in registers, I want to suggest that there is a crucial resemblance between this state and that described despairingly by several theorists concerned with history’s end. Of course, many versions of the end of history exist, but, as Lutz Niethammer points out, in the twentieth century, these theories have tended to share certain key characteristics despite ranging across the political spectrum: in Niethammer’s words, “From [Alexandre] Kojève through [Arnold] Gehlen to [Jean] Baudrillard, the end of history . . . is proclaimed as the fantasy of a meaningless but ever continuing course of events” (144). Niethammer isolates several recurring motifs and precepts across the diverse body of work he terms posthistoire, which he views as less a developed theory than “a symptomatic sensibility” (143). Most of these characteristics can be traced to one root vision: the imagination of the world as “crystallized” or frozen in a permanent and isomorphic shape that either arises from or creates the “end of . . . qualitative changes” (143). This petrified, “self-reproducing structure,” moreover, contains no internal differences, but instead is stuck in that crystallized and isomorphic form. In this permanent, uniform, and predetermined world, human behavior is reduced to a “lifeless structural compulsion,” a situation that thus
produces “the end of freedom” and the “reanimalization of man” (57, 143). As Perry Anderson points out, this state of “degraded animality” specifically involved the emptiness and impotence of time: when the end of history is conceived as the achievement of desire (in the fashion of traditional narrative), after this desire has been achieved there is simply “nothing more to do” with the time remaining (324, 315). Even Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History and the Last Man, a celebratory post-Hegelian story of capitalism’s global triumph, bemoans the absence of human striving after history’s culmination in the worldwide spread of liberal democracy.

While innumerable arguments have been made pointing out the absurdity of suggesting that historical events have actually ceased, the postmodern moment in general has been marked by “a wholesale liquidation of futurity of which the revival of Hegel’s ‘end of history’ was only an intellectual symptom,” as Fredric Jameson puts it (“End,” 704). More particularly, the perception of having outlived our narrative of national progress has been a prominent part of postmodern American cultural landscape, a view whose inception is often tracked to much the same chronological moment as the publication of The Stepford Wives novel.27 Given the genocidal effects that narrative of national progress has usually wrought, this demise has been more cause of celebration than despair on the Left. But the perceived defeats of the late 1960s also generated a joint sense of epistemological and historical closure on the Left, a sense that still crosscuts the body of contemporary theory today. We can read the long struggle between post-structuralism and Marxism as a result of a different prioritization of precisely this twofold struggle on the Left—post-structuralists battling epistemological closure, Marxists battling historical closure, and both groups battling each other.28 Despite the all-consuming nature of these problems, however, we have tended to assume that only those cultural tropes previously associated with the narrative of national progress, especially the war hero and the Western outlaw, served as a zone for working through this philosophical and political conundrum in popular culture. Feminism has appeared related to such concerns primarily through its ability to critique such narratives, especially their reliance on remasculinization as a means of retrieving national futurity.29

In contrast, I want to argue that the uncanny resemblance between
1970s popular feminist images of the housewife and the post-1960s despair about historical progress suggests another key arena where such negotiations took place. In its particular focus on the negative associations that accompany the perception of narrative closure (in this case, the end of the über-narrative of history itself), posthistoire repeats many of the signature tropes that I have associated with static time. Although the cause of and solution to static time diverge between the discourses of popular feminism and that of the end-of-history theorists, both describe the way in which the achievement of narrative telos, far from being fulfilling, creates an ongoing and seemingly permanent uniformity that they present as necessarily unpleasant. Both discourses share the conviction that the tasks one performs amount to nothing if they do not lead to the ability to create a different future, and the belief that to live without such an ability is to sink below the level of human functionality, to lack a "human pattern," in Friedan’s words, or to be forced into "reanimalization" in Niethammer’s (Friedan, 302; Niethammer, 143). Finally, and most importantly, both discourses return again and again to the simultaneous emptiness and weightiness of time in this situation, the way temporal experience becomes itself an index of oppression when the passage of time does not contain this signature "human" ability to plan for and create a different future. Uncannily enough, the position of humanity after history’s end appears in each of these instances strikingly similar to that of the suburban housewife after her marriage.

The wrench in registers that I noted above, the dissonance that may be perceived when I speak of The Stepford Wives in the same breath with Niethammer and Jameson, is itself a significant element in this relationship: my point is not that popular feminism was part of post-1960s end-of-history discourse, but rather that it offered another register in which the same concerns were addressed. In other words, we might say that both discourses explored the same problem in different ways, for different audiences, and with different results. It is precisely this difference in registers, I want to suggest, that enabled popular feminist temporalities to offer other stories about and solutions to static time. To put it another way, the life of the housewife as depicted by popular feminism can be understood to metaphorize the end of history, and thus to offer all of metaphor’s capacity to exploit simultaneously the sameness and the difference between an entity and that
for which it substitutes. Some central aspects of *The Stepford Wives* gesture towards the metaphorical richness of popular feminists’ arguments about women’s time, the most obvious being the uncanny itself. I have argued that the psycho-social structure of the uncanny automaton uniquely encapsulates the key features of static time: uniformity or the erasure of epistemological differences, repetition of this uniformity over time, and perception that such a state causes and/or results in a severe reduction in human freedom. I have also suggested that the use of this neat, widely understood shorthand makes feminism’s critique of women’s time translatable; it serves as a means of conveying women’s oppression even if the reader or viewer doesn’t know or wouldn’t actually accept the major tenets of feminist analysis. That is, the uncanny renders feminism comprehensible by presenting its critique as merely a variation on a freestanding social theme—the theme of a subject who has been automatized to match a uniform and permanent pattern at odds with both change and human agency. But the translatability of the uncanny works both ways: it both makes women’s time understandable and suggests that women’s time is only one version of a problem with which we are already familiar. From this perspective, Friedan and others were astute in perceiving *The Stepford Wives* as somehow a flattening of feminist analysis. Both the film and the novel push second-wave feminist discourse through the sieve of the uncanny, and what comes out the other side is in essence a “feminist” remake of a preexisting story of social domination at the intersection of temporal and epistemological closure.

While this use of the uncanny encourages us to read feminism as a stand-in for an extant fear, popular feminism’s unadulterated forms enabled this relationship between popular feminism and the end of history as well, especially through what can probably be considered this discourse’s identifying characteristic: its fixation on the oppression of the white, middle-class suburban housewife. To the extent that the end of history is conceived as the achievement of narrative desire, the animalistic inertia of history’s last man is the state of humans who have everything but narrative, everything but the ability to strive towards a future goal. That is, humans after the end of history are in the position not only of having outlived their plot but also of having supposedly been fulfilled by their plot’s conclusion, only to find this fulfillment strangely empty. This was much the problem for middle-class
housewives as defined by popular feminist theorists such as Friedan. As she puts it, "part of the strange newness of the problem [that has no name] is that it cannot be understood in terms of the age-old material problems of man: poverty, sickness, hunger, cold. The women who suffer this problem have a hunger that food cannot fill. . . . It is not caused by lack of material advantages: it may not even be felt by women preoccupied with desperate problems of hunger, poverty or illness" (22). In her assumption that "desperate problems" on the material level foreclosed the problem that has no name, Friedan indicates that popular feminism did not merely focus incidentally on the white, middle-class housewife; rather, it conceived of the defining mode of female oppression as something that only existed when women's material needs were met. The aspect of popular second-wave feminism that has been more problematic than any other, its focus on women who were in many respects incredibly privileged thus functions to direct our attention to the one thing these women didn't have: a meaningful, positive trajectory from present to future. Pop feminism distilled gender oppression in such a way that it offered a close corollary for that other situation caused by the absence of narrative teleology and the presence of everything else—that is, the problem of the end of history.

Once history's last men have been recast as last women in this fashion, the end of history becomes available for a feminist solution that, by releasing the housewife from her Sisyphean labors into the career trajectory of the public workplace, simultaneously offers the nation a solution to its own. However, wage labor already had a longstanding connection to the issues of static time that I've been discussing, as Marx's own recourse to such uncanny figures as the vampire and the werewolf in his description of "The Working Day" suggests (245, 233). As Marx describes it,

[A] bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labor-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the laborer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no
mone monetary act. Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the pro-
cess demands that, during the whole operation, the worker’s will be
steadily in consonance with his purpose. (174)

The part of a person’s behavior that guarantees his or her freedom is
the part that resides in the mind, in the “structure” raised in the “imag-
ination”; as in the Enlightenment vision of the double, that is, freedom
resides in a distanced zone of reflection—in the sense of both mirror
image and thought activity. Yet the distance between the image and
the outcome is not only one of kind but also one of time: the image of
the worker preexists and shapes the eventual outcome, providing a
meaningful “stead[y]” and “consonan[t]” organization of the time from
beginning to end—a plot in miniature, in other words. Labor is the
glue that holds this little plot together; by culminating in the object
whose image began the journey, it does the work of making the end-
ing consonant with the beginning. However, without an image of our
own envisioning that predates the product of our labor, we become
like insects, trapped in work that does not express our will but ex-
presses instead an inexorable pattern imposed from without. Like the
Stepford women, like Friedan’s housewives who lack a human pat-
tern, laborers without this preexisting mental image have sunk into
the insect-like animality that haunts the theorists of posthistoire.

For Marx, of course, capitalism eradicates the laborer’s ability to
create the object that reflects his or her own vision, thereby contrib-
uting to capitalism’s reduction of labor to a rote, repetitive function-
ality akin to animal instinct. In a striking contrast to this conception
of work, however, The Stepford Wives instead attaches this animalistic,
automatized quality to unpaid labor, as symbolized by the horror of
housework, and assigns the human pattern of plot to paid labor outside
the domestic sphere. Whereas theorists who analyzed the relation-
ship between labor and time, such as E. P. Thompson, tend to valorize
the untimed, seamless “task-oriented” labor that predated industrial
capitalism and that still characterized women’s labor in the home, The
Stepford Wives insists that the lack of “demarcation between ‘work’ and
‘life’” is, from the women’s perspective, a horrific, uncanny uniformity
that simultaneously eradicates difference, change, and humanity (60).
Both the novel and the film consistently equate Joanna’s self-possession
(in the most literal sense of the term) with the temporal organization
provided by the relationship between paid work and leisure: her interest in photography, for example, is carefully distinguished from amateur “Polaroids of the kids,” and Joanna consistently demonstrates her independence through the way photography structures her time, by going out to take pictures while the Stepford wives stay home cleaning, by insisting her husband watch the kids because she can’t leave her darkroom until her film is developed, and so on (37).

Radical and Marxist feminism often focused on the material oppression that resulted from the unpaid status of women’s labor, analyzing problems such as the status of married women as property or women’s financial inability to leave abusive husbands. In contrast, however, The Stepford Wives neatly sidesteps these questions regarding the material necessity of paid labor for women, transforming such labor into a form of psychic fulfillment expressly linked to futurity. In the film, when Joanna produces some photographs that a gallery owner is willing to show, the owner asks her, “But what do you want from all this?” The answer has nothing to do with financial independence or invulnerability to her husband’s whims; rather, Joanna insists that what she really wants is for someone, someday, to be able to look at a picture and say, “It’s an Ingalls.” It is this combination of self-determination and futurity, the polar opposite of static time, that The Stepford Wives attaches to labor outside the home.

While the life of the housewife perfectly metaphorizes the experience of life after plot, her position as a woman ripe for liberation thus positions her in the space before plot, before her entry into the public, shared time of the workplace. By supplying us with a new protagonist of politics who has not participated in the static impasse of history that characterized national narratives after the 1960s, the story of the housewife offered a means of retrieving our vision of the public sphere as one of teleological development rather than stasis or decline, providing a deeply desired vision of commingled freedom and futurity. While the newly liberated woman seems a belated participant in a shared version of public time that is already in progress, it is precisely her exit from the house that rejuvenates public time, giving us a new protagonist who has not already reached public history’s static end. Through its gendered metaphors, this discourse promises that static time can be held at bay and historical development reclaimed, provided we can liberate the Stepford wives.
HURRIED WOMAN SYNDROME AND THE PROBLEM OF POSTMODERN FUTURITY

In conclusion, I want to offer a few observations about the fate of the allegorical relationship between the housewife and the end of history after the 1970s. The novel and the original film offer their own prediction regarding this future, which is symbolized by the one black couple we see in Stepford. Although their presence is limited to a glimpse in the film’s last scene, the novel zeroes in on the wife of the couple, Ruthanne, in its final chapters: the novel’s third and last section is focalized through Ruthanne, and it is to her that Joanna reveals her Stepford self, declaring that she “doesn’t do much photography anymore” since “housework is enough for [her]” (Levin 187, 188). The final scene in the novel depicts Ruthanne asking her husband, Royal, to take care of dinner while she continues working on the children’s book she is writing. While Royal declares that he doesn’t mind, such declarations clearly place Ruthanne exactly where Joanna was at the beginning of the novel, a position thus suffused with dramatic irony: blithely believing that her husband prefers a liberated wife, Ruthanne appears in our final glimpse of her as both unsuspecting and endangered, much like the classic horror-movie heroine directly before she is attacked by a monster only viewers know is there.

This overt separation of the Men’s Association conspiracy into clear phases—first all the white women are to be replaced, then the African-American women—relies on an integration narrative to continue its recreation of historical progression: just as the suburbs are represented as becoming gradually and marginally more integrated, the Men’s Association’s malevolent machinations become marginally integrated as well, sharing both upward mobility and misogyny across races. This production of narrative phases suggests that, much as the American promise is imagined to gradually include more and more of the country’s citizens, the white women’s liberation movement’s potential for promoting futurity will come to work across races as well, moving forward not only in terms of progress but also in terms of sweep. When Ruthanne becomes a victim of the problem represented by the conspiracy, she also becomes available as another marker for the putative solution offered by feminist futurity.

While I would argue that the woman of color did come to the fore
as an allegorical figure for national time through the popular multicultural feminism of the 1980s and 1990s, these shifts did not take place in the way the original *Stepford Wives* texts predicted, as is amply proven by the 2004 remake of the film. Packaged as comedy rather than horror, this version of *The Stepford Wives* offers an almost cookie-cutter backlash-ification of the original plot, right down to the obligatory casting of Glenn Close as the too-powerful woman whose punishment provides the film’s catharsis. Women viewers of the film will learn that earning money, power, and status through a career “ma[kes] people want to kill you” and doesn’t really make you all that happy anyway. In fact (to spoil the film’s only major plot twist), the conspiracy to retake the world for patriarchy turns out to be master-minded by the Glenn Close character, a former career woman who found herself overworked, unfulfilled, and manless and decided to rewind the clock to a “time before overtime, quality time, a time before women were turning themselves into robots.” While the *Stepford* story retains its white, financially secure heroine, it thus shifts from representing the housewife who is trapped in static time to the working woman who is always racing against the clock—the fevered, overburdened sufferer of what has been called “hurried woman syndrome.” In a fashion reminiscent of Friedan’s “problem that has no name,” the focus on white, middle-class heroines in such hurried-women tales serves to highlight problems of teleology in particular: by casting work outside the home as a zone of futurity and fulfillment rather than financial necessity, backlash discourse could insist that careers were worthless if they did not provide a trajectory of personal growth and transformation along with a substantial paycheck. From this perspective, a woman who is always hurrying forward but getting nowhere but the corner office might as well go home.

As the 1975 and 2004 versions of *The Stepford Wives* make clear, the story of women’s exit from static time could thus be told from two precisely opposed perspectives: as our only chance at retrieving positive futurity, or as a sign of a future that was different in all the wrong ways, changing everything without offering real positive advancement. Yet I would argue that the backlash depiction of feminism’s drive towards futurity has equal allegorical resonance to the feminist narratives of the 1970s, offering an ongoing register for problems in national time.
as they continued to evolve. By the late 1980s, for example, American culture had changed profoundly since 1970 in ways that ranged from the movement to a service economy to the creation of the personal computer. However, because these changes did not produce a new conviction of positive political fulfillment, they were not of the sort to shift the perception of static time that accompanied the end of the 1960s. As the 1980s turned into the 1990s, this perceived discrepancy between rapid transformation and actual political change came to take center stage in Left academia through the tremendous proliferation of discourse on postmodernism, which came to the fore in much the same period as antifeminist backlash discourse. On the one hand, the concept of postmodernism is said to reflect a paradigm shift, a transformation in capital that led to a new cultural dominant in the post-1960s landscape; on the other hand, the most crucial transformation brought about by this paradigm shift is its dissolution of positive futurity: as Jameson puts it, the postmodern world is characterized by “a gleaming science-fictional stasis in which appearances (simulacra) arise and decay ceaselessly without the momentous stasis of everything that is flickering for the briefest of instants or even momentarily wavering in its ontological prestige” (Seeds, 16–17).

If the housewife’s static time encoded the post-1960s perception of historical closure, her release into a world of endless labor gestures towards this debased postmodern futurity, particularly its distance from genuine positive transformation: in both the backlash and postmodernist versions of futurity, the only alternative to perpetual stasis seems to be the equally entrapping option of pointless and superficial perpetual motion. In both discourses, we are granted a form of epochal cultural transformation that gives us every sort of change imaginable—except the teleological fulfillment we most desire. Viewed from this perspective, the cultural fixation on the question of whether the scurrying of overloaded career women really signifies progress appears as a sign not only of dissatisfaction with feminist politics but also of feminism’s long-running function as a register of a temporal breakdown in the national imagination—a marker of the ways in which the battle to achieve positive futurity in the last decades of the twentieth century registered in and as a struggle with women’s experience of time.
Notes

This essay was revised with support from a postdoctoral fellowship at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University. For their comments on various drafts, I would like to thank Rey Chow, Elizabeth Freeman, Theresa Geller, Heather Gilligan, John David Rhodes, and Katherine Sugg. All errors are of course my own.

1. See, for example, Roof and Wiegman. For a collection of work in this area, see Laird.

2. For one exception, see Heller. For a different approach to the question of feminism's persistence over time, see Freeman.

3. A brief word on citational practice in this essay: I make it clear in the surrounding text whether the phrase "The Stepford Wives" refers to the novel or the film version (understood to mean the 1975 film). When the phrase appears without such designations, I mean it to refer to themes or incidents that occur in both versions. The 2004 film is always accompanied by its date.

4. Such usages abound, even in materials written for younger readers/viewers decades after the film was released—see, for example, the teenage-witch film The Craft (1996).

5. The other central figure of popular feminism was the young, attractive, "liberated" woman engaged in various sexual adventures—for example, as described by Helen Gurley Brown's Sex and the Single Girl. On Brown and related 1960s texts, see Whelehan, 21–41.

6. I mean "activist feminism" to refer to the vast body of feminist analysis and action—radical, Marxist, and cultural—taking place outside of and often under the radar of the mainstream, popular media.

7. See Simpsons' episode "Pygmoelian." Days of Our Lives begins with a voiceover stating, "Like sands through the hourglass, so are the Days of Our Lives."

8. For a historical account of black women's feminist organizations that were contemporaneous with more well-known, largely white women's liberation organizations, see Springer; for a history that surveys the simultaneous emergence of black, Chicana, and white women's feminist movements, see Roth. For an extended critique of the standard narrative of feminist phases, see Sandoval, 41–64. For a critique of feminist historiography as necessarily invested in whatever version one tells, see Friedman.

9. See, for example, Kristeva, "Women's Time"; Roof; and Friedman.

10. On the loss of historical continuity and futurity as a key aspect of postmodernity, see, for example, Jameson, "'End of Art' or 'End of History?'" and Postmodernism, particularly 21–31; and Harvey, especially 54–58.

11. For examples from two different geopolitical contexts, see Felski's argument that modern ways of figuring and imagining past, present, and future in a European context are complexly intertwined with what she terms the "inescapable presence and power of gender symbolism" (The Gender of Modernity, 1), as well as
Dickinson's analysis of the relationship between unveiling as an allegory for national liberation in Egyptian cinema. In both of these examples, the issue is not simply that the body of the woman stands in for the body of the nation, as has so often been the case, but rather that the liberation of women stands in for the liberation or transformation of the nation—in other words, it is feminism in particular that provides the allegory, rather than the figure of woman in general. On the woman-as-nation and woman-as-land paradigms, see, for example, Boehmer. On national allegory in general, see Jameson, “Third-World Literature.” Jameson's argument has been extensively critiqued and defended. See, for example, Ahmad.

12. See, for example, Armstrong, who argues that “narratives which seemed to be concerned solely with matters of courtship and marriage in fact seized the authority to say what was female, and that they did so in order to contest the reigning notions of kinship relations that attached most power and privilege to certain family lines” (5).

13. On the overlap between The Stepford Wives and contemporaneous activist feminism, see Silver.

14. On point of view and gender in film, see Hedges, 72–87; see Linda Williams for a consideration of these issues specifically as they relate to horror.

15. For a range of analyses of political dimensions of the uncanny, see, for instance, Bhabha; Kristeva, Strangers; and Young.


18. This link between the uncanny and questions of power and control can also be traced in Lacanian accounts: the Lacanian uncanny occurs because of the threatened return of objet a, the primal object of desire whose loss undergirds the consistency of the subject and the symbolic. Because of its importance to subjective boundaries and symbolic functioning, the impending return of objet a produces uncertainty regarding boundaries of inside and outside, self and other, of the sort that is familiar from most accounts of the uncanny. Yet, the return of objet a also threatens to restore the phantasmic sense of potency the subject experienced in the mirror stage, thereby disturbing the balance of subjective and symbolic powers instituted by castration. Thus, the epistemological effects that arise from the threatened return of objet a may involve terrifying fantasies of power and control. For a particularly useful account of the Lacanian uncanny, see Dolar.

19. Emphasis in the original. Rey Chow argues that such readings are First World variants that shift the burden of automatization onto Third World women. See Chow, 65–72.

20. See, for example, Bakhtin on the provincial town: “Such towns are the locus for cyclical everyday time. Here there are no events, only ‘doings’ that constantly repeat themselves. Time here has no advancing historical movement; it moves rather in narrow circles: the circle of the day, of the week, of the month, of a person’s entire life. A day is just a day, a year is just a year—a life is just a life.
Day in, day out the same round of activities are repeated, the same topics of conversation, the same words and so forth” (247–48).

21. This remark plays on the title of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s novel The Land That Time Forgot (1925), about World War I soldiers who find a place where dinosaurs and Neanderthals still exist. Although a film adaptation was made of the novel, the film was not released until 1975 (after The Stepford Wives novel, which contains this reference).


23. On déjà vu as an example of the uncanny, see Royle, 172–86. On the uncanny aspects of current technology, especially the sensation of being “programmed,” as an aspect of globalization, see Johnson.

24. On structures of feeling, see Raymond Williams, 128–35.

25. See, for example, DuPlessis.

26. For an analysis of the complex relationship between women, everyday life, and teleological time, see Felski, Doing Time, 76–98. For a critique of the way in which second-wave feminists such as Friedan positioned themselves against a convenient image of the home as a place of “emotional dis-ease and even stasis,” see Johnson and Lloyd, particularly chapter 5.

27. Popular discourses regarding the failure of American progress after the 1960s took several forms between the late 1960s and the end of the twentieth century, forms that were inevitably shaped by the political views of the authors and audiences in question. While progressives lamented the failure of 1960s revolutionary aspirations and the rise of the Right in the 1980s, conservatives depicted the hopes of the 1960s as all too successful, destroying American promise through the poisonous doctrines of liberalism. That each side of the debate saw its opponents as having eradicated the possibility of progress suggests something of the intransigence of the discourse of American decline: from precisely opposite vantage points, both camps perceived the same dire fate for America. For a conservative account of America’s decline, see Bork; for an account by a (former) Leftist, see Gitlin. Although this sense of defeat waxed and waned in the changeable political climates of the 1980s and 1990s—for example, the Reagan era produced a surge in conservative optimism that lasted for most of the 1980s—underlying economic factors contributed to the persistent sense that American progress could no longer be expected after 1973, including the decline in real wages, the dissolution of the industrial economy, and the growing disparity between rich and poor. For a description of these underlying economic trends, see, for example, Levy and Michel.

28. The resistance to the epistemological closure associated with totalizing systems is a signature feature of post-structuralism. For a critical account of such logic and its connection to May 1968, see, for example, Starr, 1–34. The contemporary Marxist perspective on totalization is usually exemplified by Jameson, who has linked the overriding sense of historical closure on the Left to the loss of Left totality in postmodernism. See especially Postmodernism, 297–418.
29. For one such critique, see Jeffords.
30. On the Last Man, see Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, 17–18.
31. For more on this relationship, as well as the allegorical function of the career woman's temporal dilemmas, see my Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory: Representing National Time (Palgrave, 2008).
32. The phrase was coined by Bost in his pop-medical treatise, Hurried Woman Syndrome (2005).

Works Cited


