

THE REVENANT SCREEN:
Cinematic Hauntings, Horror, and American Culture

Vincent D. Pisano

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Department : History and Non-Western Cultures Degree Program: MA, History

Student: Vincent Pisano 50028851
Name Student ID #

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Thesis adviser(s): Sign below upon satisfactory completion of thesis requirement.

Martha May 1 [Redacted Signature] 2
[Redacted Signature] 3 [Redacted Signature] 4

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Program Coordinator Date

Martha May May 6, 2020
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[Redacted Signature] Macricostas School of Arts and Sciences May 8, 2020
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Chapter One: Pre-Cinematic Ghosts in American Culture (1700-1895)	11
Chapter Two: The Ghosts of Silent Cinema (1895-1927)	21
Chapter Three: The Ghosts of Classic Horror Cinema (1927-1960)	40
Chapter Four: “Suppose the haunting is all in my mind.” (1961-1973)	59
Chapter Five: “They’ll nickel and dime you to death” (1974-1982)	66
Chapter Six: “You son of a bitch, you left the bodies and you only moved the headstones!” (1981-1998)	91
Chapter Seven: “It’s not the house that’s haunted...” (1999-2013)	102
Conclusion	125
Bibliography	128

INTRODUCTION

We have always been haunted. History is replete with tales of spirits besetting humanity with fear and foreboding. From the earliest recordings one sees the presence of the supernatural and its effects upon the living. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the earliest surviving great work of literature, the ghost of Enkidu, the king's close companion, returns to the living world. The ancient Egyptians feared ghosts who would devour the lives of their children and offered ritualistic prayers of protection laden with dread:

Oh, avaunt! Ye ghosts of night,
Nor do my babe harm;
Ye may come with steps so light,
But I'll thwart you with my charm.

For my babe you must not kiss,
Nor rock if she should cry —
Oh! If you did ought amiss,
My own, my dear, would die.¹

The ancient Greeks and Romans likewise believed in ghosts. Pliny the Younger (61-115 CE) writes of a philosopher who rents a house known to be haunted. The philosopher awakes at night to the sound of rattling chains and finds the ghost of a man standing in his room, beckoning him to follow. The philosopher is led to a part of the house when the ghost suddenly vanishes. The next day the spot is searched and the poor spirit's corpse is found, and the haunting thereafter ceases. The story's structure is a familiar one, told countless times in endless variety yet still recognizable. Like death itself, ghosts are an essential part of the human story. Renée Bergland's observation is apt: "Ghosts lend a glimmer of romance to history."²

¹ Quoted in Donald A. Mackenzie, *Egyptian Myth and Legend* (London: The Gresham Publishing, 1907), 177.

² Renée L. Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), 37.

Belief in ghosts persists to the present day and can be found in multiple facets of our modern existence, from personal testimonies and figures of speech to pop culture products and holiday traditions to “haunted” clauses in American real estate disclosure agreements. Despite a continuous lack of definitive proof, we remain haunted by ghosts.

Sans evidence for the supernatural, ghost stories appear to serve very real functions. While there is no single all-encompassing answer as to why ghosts are such an integral aspect of humanity, various individuals have offered compelling ideas and insights that are worth addressing briefly. Sigmund Freud in 1919 theorized that ghosts were a result of repression, that when repressed impulses emerge from the unconscious it manifests as the experience of the “uncanny” (*unheimliche*), which “belongs to all that is terrible — to all that arouses dread and creeping horror.”³ Freud states that “many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts.”⁴ Freud’s conclusion is that “an uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.”⁵ Literary scholar Renée Bergland reaffirms this position in her study of Indian ghosts in American literature when she writes that “the entire dynamic of ghosts and haunting, as we understand it today, is a dynamic on unsuccessful repression. Ghosts are the things that we try to bury, but that refuse to stay buried. They are our fears and our horrors, disembodied, but made inescapable by their very bodilessness.”⁶

However, the stories we tell about the dead returning go beyond mere psychological reaction, for they serve very real functions in helping us to learn about ourselves, our culture, and

³ Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’.” Massachusetts Institute of Technology online, January 24, 2020, 1, <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>.

⁴ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’,” 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ Bergland, *The National Uncanny*, 5.

our history. Colin Dickey, in his intelligent analysis of reputedly haunted locations in the United States, offers useful insight: “Part of the reason that ghosts stay with us is that they remain a compelling mechanism to explain so much that is unknown in our lives. They enter and reenter our lexicon to explain the unexplainable, to represent the unrepresentable, to give a word to that which we don’t understand.”⁷ Even more, they help us to approach the past in a meaningful way. Dickey goes on to suggest that “ghost stories are about how we face, or fail to face, the past — how we process information, how we narrate our past, and how we make sense of the gaps in that history.”⁸ Sometimes it is not ghosts but the crimes they represent that are scary, as reminders of crimes committed or perpetrated by them. For instance, Bergland views Indian ghosts as symptomatic of a guilty nation, one which displaced and sometimes destroyed the original inhabitants. Ghosts at times represent a certain invisibility, at least politically, of those whose voices are not heard, such as women or nonwhites who were subjugated for most of our nation’s history.⁹ For Bergland, “the interior logic of the modern nation requires that citizens be haunted.”¹⁰ In a narrative sense, ghosts represent the unfinished. Literary scholar Roger Luckhurst, in his analysis of one of history’s most enduring and recognizable ghost stories, *The Shining*, remarks poignantly that “all ghosts are signs of broken story, demanding someone takes up their narrative, in whatever spirit, and bear witness to silent wrongs.”¹¹ Arthur Redding places ghosts within the context of recent trauma theory, as a mechanism of coping: “The revenant — a ghost who returns to the scene of the crime — often figures as the stand-in for a violence that cannot be overcome, or possibly even named. The ghost has a way of speaking that which cannot be spoken; it personifies and expresses those peoples, events, or aspects of one’s own past that

⁷ Colin Dickey, *Ghostland: An American History in Haunted Places* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 283.

⁸ Dickey, *Ghostland*, 284.

⁹ Bergland, *The National Uncanny*, 69.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ Roger Luckhurst, *The Shining* (London: British Film Institute, 2013), 47.

have been violently disappeared or repressed. History itself returns as revenant.”¹² Avery F. Gordon, in her influential study *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, examines ghosts and haunting within the sociological context of the trauma inflicted by state-sponsored terror:

What’s distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I use the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alerts the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. The ghost... is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way... we are notified that what’s been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.

Haunting is a frightening experience. It always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present. But haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done.¹³

Whether willingly or through horrors unimaginable, it is up to the living to make recompense or to feel the necrotic wrath of history. It is a part of our nature; to be haunted is to be human. Gordon further remarks, “Haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it.”¹⁴ The above explanations do not represent an exhaustive explanation for why ghost stories persist, but they do offer templates that will prove useful as our exploration proceeds.

¹² Arthur Redding, *Haints: American Ghosts, Millennial Passions, and Contemporary Gothic Fictions* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2011), 4.

¹³ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

¹⁴ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 7.

Given our penchant for conjuring ghosts, it is not surprising that cinema, one of the most successful and accessible forms of popular art and entertainment, should also be haunted. Not only have ghosts appeared within film from its beginning, but critics and scholars have often spoken of the medium itself as being ghostly. From its inception, there was something otherworldly about cinema. The Russian writer Maxim Gorky offered an account (under a pseudonym) of a first-time screening of a Lumière offering in 1896 in Nizhny-Novgorod. He was struck most by the absence of life within the monochromatic moving figures, describing what he witnessed at times as “ghosts” and “evil spirits.” He writes:

Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows.

If you only knew how strange it is to be there. It is a world without sound, without colour. Everything there — the earth, the trees, the people, the water and the air — is dipped in monotonous grey... It is not life but its shadow. It is not motion but its soundless spectre...

Their smiles are lifeless, even though their movements are full of living energy and are so swift as to be almost imperceptible. Their laughter is soundless although you see the muscles contracting in their grey faces. Before you a life is surging, a life deprived of words and shorn of the living spectrum of colours — the grey, the soundless, the bleak and dismal life.

It is terrifying to see, but it is the movement of shadows, only of shadows...¹⁵

The association of cinema with ghosts continues with commentators and critics even to the present day. French filmmaker Jean Epstein noted in 1921 that “the cinema is essentially supernatural.”¹⁶ Film scholar Murray Leeder explains: “Whether or not these critics believed in ghosts personally, they found that the supernatural provided a stock of metaphors and images that allowed them to characterize the ineffable world they perceived in cinema.”¹⁷ Indeed, “hauntology” has become a major component of modern critical analysis. Coined by French

¹⁵ ‘I.M. Pacatus’ (Maxim Gorky), “*Nizhegorodski listok*, 4 July 1896,” translated by Leda Swan and reproduced in Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), 407-409.

¹⁶ Quoted in Murray Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural and the Beginnings of Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 21.

¹⁷ Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural*, 21.

philosopher Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*, the philosophical concept refers to how, like a ghost, elements of the past continually return or remain persistent. Film as a haunted medium was inevitable. As time proceeds, more and more of the figures we witness on the screen have in reality passed and moldered to dust and decay. Yet they appear to us alive and vibrant in a seemingly repetitive moment captured in time. Life's animation — its imitation — is captured for posterity, though its essence remains elusive. As Leeder states elsewhere, "Cinema does not need to depict ghosts to be ghostly and haunted. Deliberately or accidentally, it has become a storehouse for our dead."¹⁸

Both ghost stories and film, in their own ways, provide records of our past. They are cultural artifacts that leave curious remnants for modern consumers to inspect. An examination of the on-screen specters reveals the attitudes, values, anxieties, and changing cultural landscape of the people creating and consuming these pictures. American cinema and culture in particular will be explored, and the films considered will be those whose ghosts are presented as diegetic — the supernatural entities are presumed to be real within the story (as opposed to purely symbolic, for instance), or the presumption of their reality is preserved. The focus, too, will remain upon depictions of hauntings within the horror genre, films for which the exploration of negative emotions — fear, madness, grief, and similar intense distress — is the primary mission. This is a venture akin, one might say, to the traditional ghost story. Indeed, countless horror films recreate in some way the millennia-old stories recounted above. Unquestionably, no genre is more haunted than horror, and "the lesson of the history of the American horror film is clear: the things that we fear, and the ways that we express this fear, tell a great deal about us."¹⁹ Although ghosts appear in many other popular genres as well, from romance to children's entertainment,

¹⁸ Murray Leeder, "Introduction," in *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*, ed. Murray Leeder (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 3.

¹⁹ Kendall R. Phillips, *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 198.

these depictions most often derive their visual and narrative cues from the horror genre, even if the ends to their means are not the same. In the end, a synthetic treatment of existing film and literary scholarship, historical consideration, as well as my own textual analysis, will reveal the ways in which the filmic horror genre, through ghosts and hauntings, reflects and mediates contemporary American cultural and social preoccupations.

When speaking of ghosts and hauntings in horror cinema, however, it will be necessary to use the terms loosely. Strict definitions will not be applied, and the reasons have as much to do with historical differences in their uses as they do with the stylistic and artistic applications of filmmakers. Both ghosts and haunted spaces will be considered. As Steffen Hantke has written:

Visualizing the spectral presence of the ghost by registering its negative imprint on the space surrounding it is, of course, the strategy that explains why so many horror films about ghosts are really films about the space they haunt. In fact, combing through the history of ghosts in horror films, one might find more films about haunted houses — from *The Haunting* (1963) and *The Legend of Hell House* (1973) to *The Shining* (1980) and the two adaptations of Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* (1989/2012) — than about ghosts themselves.²⁰

Additionally, Lisa Morton remarks on the difficulty of distinguishing ghosts from other supernatural entities in her historical survey on hauntings, cautioning that “in some mythologies it is less clear where ghosts end and demons or gods begin.”²¹ The same can be true for cinematic spirits. For example, some films present what appears to be a traditional ghostly haunting only to have a narrative shift that reveals the real culprits to be inhuman demons. Likewise, the device of the unreliable narrator may call into question the reality of the ghosts, offering instead the possibility of delusion. In cases such as these the films will not be disqualified from consideration as they fit within the varied historical understandings and

²⁰ Steffen Hantke, “‘I See Dead People’: Visualizing Ghosts in the American Horror Film before the Arrival of CGI,” in *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*, ed. Murray Leeder (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 184.

²¹ Lisa Morton, *Ghosts: A Haunted History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 20.

interpretations of supposed supernatural phenomena and still offer valuable insight into the time period in which they were made. For similar reasons, a focus will be placed upon American films, but when foreign productions have made serious impacts into the American horror genre or in Americans' perceptions of ghosts and hauntings, they too will be considered.

However, before delving into cinema it will be necessary to briefly examine the beliefs, attitudes, and visual depictions of ghosts within pre-cinematic American culture. Only through being equipped with these understandings can the first decades of ghosts in American cinema be properly analyzed and appreciated. Just as importantly, this will assist in avoiding a teleological interpretation of ghosts in cinema during the same period, to view them not as steps to what ghosts in the horror genre would become by mid-century, but as the culminations of Victorian and Gilded Age conceptions of the supernatural.

CHAPTER ONE: Pre-Cinematic Ghosts in American Culture (1700-1895)

Throughout the Classical and medieval world ghosts maintained a frightening aspect, often foretelling death by their encounters or appearing to expose a specific injustice (as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), and as time progressed became most heavily connected with ruins. Little wonder, for as the Enlightenment dawned old decaying structures, slowly reclaimed by nature, affected contemporaries with the heavy weight of history and mortality. In 1767 the French writer Denise Diderot summed up the sentiment:

The ideas that ruins awaken in me are grand. Everything vanishes, everything dies, everything passes, only time endures. How old it is this world! I walk between two eternities. Everywhere I cast my eyes, the objects which surround me announce an end and make me yield to that end which awaits me. What is my ephemeral existence in comparison with that of the rock which is effaced... I see the marble tombs crumble into dust; I do not want to die!¹

Just three years earlier in England the Gothic literary tradition was inaugurated with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, which exploited the fears reflected by Diderot and also provided readers with the first ghost novel. The scene comes late in the book, when Frederic is forbidden from marrying Matilda by a fearsome apparition: "Pushing open the door gently, he saw a person kneeling before the altar... The marquis was about to return, when the figure rising, stood some moments fixed in meditation, without regarding him... And then the figure, turning slowly round, discovered to Frederic the fleshless jaws and empty sockets of a skeleton, wrapped in a hermit's cowl."² Though the complete passage amounts to only a paragraph it proved profoundly influential, beginning a craze of Gothic writings which has spanned centuries, save for a few lulls.

¹ Quoted in Dickey, *Ghostland*, 257.

² Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 106.

The English Gothic tradition would take on two trajectories: one which presented the supernatural occurrences in its tales as real, and the other which explained away the supposed hauntings by the end of the novel. American readers were familiar with both types of Gothic novels; the latter type, represented most strongly in the works of Ann Radcliffe, such as in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), proved most influential in the new nation. The Enlightenment age emphasized reason, and understandably belief in the existence of ghosts was held up to scrutiny. New technological forms of entertainment assisted in this endeavor, many of which utilized ghosts as a common motif. Truly, ghosts had been associated with the projected image from the beginning. In the seventeenth century, for instance, the magic lantern was popularized. The early image projector, which used a source of light to project images from transparent painted plates onto walls, often used ghosts as its subject matter. Already there were those who feared that the device might be used to fool the incredulous into believing that spirits had been conjured, figures such as Athanasius Kircher, who in 1646 urged that the magic lantern always be visible and be used to show audiences how the magic was done.

The magic lantern continued to evolve and became, by the 1790s, a highly popular form of entertainment known as Phantasmagoria, now employing smoke and other sensory stimuli in a darkened room to give the illusion of ghosts and skeletons haunting the audience. The purpose of the entertainment was to incite fear and excitement and to mystify, and still there were practitioners who cautioned against deception. Indeed, the ease with which the senses could be so easily and plainly deceived prompted a shift in how Americans came to view and talk about ghosts. This period saw a stark adjustment towards the supernatural which moved from the ruins of abbeys to become internalized in the dark recesses of the mind. Renée Bergland writes of the era: “It becomes difficult to distinguish between perception and possession, hard to know if any

perceived other is in fact other, or is merely a projection of the haunted self.”³ Bergland goes on to state that the Phantasmagoria did not dispel a fear of ghosts once one learned how the trick was done, for the risk was that it “may merely displace the fear, making audiences fearful of their own minds and bodies — their fallible perceptive abilities — rather than ghosts.”⁴ As a new nation built on Enlightenment principles, a rational control of oneself was imperative for the country’s survival: “By the last decades of the eighteenth century, American rationalism defined American nationalism.”⁵ Belief in actual ghosts, therefore, was discouraged.

Troy Boone has said of the eighteenth century that gendered notions also entered into consideration, for the era’s “rationalist discourse appropriates metaphors of sexual difference in order to assign ‘proper’ values to civilization by figuring them as powerful, orderly, and masculine — and to barbarian and supernatural belief by figuring them as weak, subversive, and feminine.”⁶ Even imagination was seen as anathema to the rationality of the early republic and was gendered. The writing of novels and poetry was seen as effeminate. As a result, both men and women published anonymously, and many promising writers gave up creative writing. This included Charles Brockden Brown, America’s first Gothic novelist, whose macabre tales dealt unsurprisingly with insanity. Following in his footsteps, American Gothic tradition would more often explore the fragility of the human mind than with the outright supernatural. Literary scholar Dara Downey cautions, however, against painting American Gothic literature with too broad of a brush, reminding us that real ghosts could still be found in American ghost stories. Nevertheless, in the nineteenth century “conventional phantoms tend to be conspicuously absent from American gothic novels and stories, due to the insistence that the United States is a nation

³ Bergland, *The National Uncanny*, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶ Quoted in Bergland, *The National Uncanny*, 17.

without a past.” The nation’s youthfulness, supposedly, prevented ghosts from taking hold: “Lacking a lengthy past where secret horrors could lurk, New-World gothic texts feature a startling paucity of ghosts as such, not least because the United States’ self-defining rhetoric worked hard to dissociate the ‘new’ nation from a past that was situated as fundamentally European.”⁷

By the early nineteenth century Phantasmagoria shows were used to promote Enlightenment ideals, to frighten audiences and to then reveal how the trick was done, emphasizing thrills coupled with rationality. In 1832, for example, the Scottish physicist Sir David Brewster published a book entitled *Letters on Natural Magic* that promoted the shows as a way to combat old world delusion and repression through trickery from the likes of princes, priests and sages. Ghosts, for these rationalist thinkers, were little more than the byproduct of a weakly credulous intellect. As an example, the *Hampshire Gazette* in 1828 decried a supposed supernatural encounter with typical vitriol. After recounting stories of workmen conversing (somehow) with a headless ghost, whose bones they failed to find, the paper laments: “It is strange that any portion of the community should be so stupidly ignorant as to credit for any moment any stories about ghosts, witches and hobgoblins. When will such delusions cease?”⁸

Of course, it is in the nature of ghosts to linger after their obituary has been written. Despite the efforts of skeptics to dissuade the public of its belief and to debunk supposed haunted houses, newspapers continued to print reports of local hauntings with regularity. Judith Richardson, in her study *Possessions: The History and Uses of Haunting in the Hudson Valley*, has shown that ghost folklore persisted in even the most modern American regions in the nineteenth century. Sometimes it was the very “newness” or transient nature of American life, in

⁷ Dara Downey, *American Women’s Ghost Stories in the Gilded Age* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 173, 1.

⁸ “Ghost Story,” *Hampshire Gazette* (Northampton, Massachusetts) June 25, 1828.

which new populations continuously swelled into regions, that helped to perpetuate ghost stories. A dearth of historical memory on the part of newcomers in many cases encouraged sensationalized stories associated with, for instance, a crumbling old Dutch house whose previous owners are no longer remembered. Richardson writes, “Despite the frequent and insistent claims that American culture was (and should be) rational and pragmatic, gothic and romantic tastes began infiltrating American culture even before the end of the eighteenth century, and swelled in influence as the nineteenth century unfolded.” Washington Irving certainly took note, showing in his own writings how stories of hauntings can persist, usually as a byproduct of historical ignorance. In one example, writing as his fictional historian Diedrich Knickerbocker, Irving tells a story of old Pompey who died and was buried and forgotten. Years later, his skull is found on the property and is presumed by the locals to be that of a murder victim, thus creating and perpetuating traditions of haunting.⁹ In this way, Richardson explains, “Ghosts operate as a particular, and peculiar, kind of social memory, an alternate form of history making.”¹⁰

Just as the concept of ghosts shifted in the eighteenth century, so another dramatic turn would occur in the nineteenth century as believers in Europe and the United States sought to recapture and redefine ghosts for a new era. In 1848 the English novelist Catherine Crowe wrote a non-fiction work which proved to be perhaps the most influential ghost book of the century. Entitled *The Night-Side of Nature, or, Ghosts and Ghost-seers*, Crowe lambasts the cold rationality of the early nineteenth century in favor of a more open-minded approach to the supernatural. She writes that “the contemptuous scepticism of the last age is yielding to a more humble spirit of enquiry; and there is a large class of persons amongst the most enlightened of

⁹ Judith Richardson, *Possessions: The History and Uses of Haunting in the Hudson Valley* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 36, 54.

¹⁰ Richardson, *Possessions*, 3.

the present, who are beginning to believe, that much which they have been taught to reject as fable, has been, in reality, ill-understood truth.”¹¹

That same year two American sisters in upstate New York would change the country profoundly. Kate and Maggie Fox convinced believers that they were able to communicate with the departed through a series of rappings. Their case caused a sensation and contributed to the Spiritualist movement, a religious movement which holds that communication with the dead is possible and benevolent. Thousands of so-called mediums soon appeared, claiming the ability to contact and commune with the deceased. For Spiritualists and their sympathizers, as Leeder notes, “the ghost was no longer a creature to be feared, a wispy, chill-inducing shade associated with the gloomy remains of ruined abbeys and mansions; rather, the ghost of a deceased loved one could be reliably and safely produced by a medium (for a fee, of course) and required to answer simple questions.”¹² The appeal is understandable. Despite what its retractors argued, spiritualists did not view themselves as abandoning rationality. In fact, Spiritualism “promoted itself as a scientific religion for a new rational era.”¹³ Practitioners used modern technology — cameras, telegraphs, etc. — to communicate with the dead and pursue an inquiry into the afterlife unattached to the dogmas of established faiths. Drew Gilpin Faust has viewed the movement within the context of a readjustment of attitudes towards death during the Civil War. Americans had to contend with unprecedented human loss and soldiers’ corpses resting far from home, sometimes in unmarked graves or not buried at all, sometimes missing limbs or faces. All this went against what Americans at the time considered the “good death” where prayers could be offered to the dying person whose body would be laid at home and cared for by the family. Spiritualism offered the comforting promise that the individual continued after death, and was

¹¹ Catherine Crowe, *The Night-Side of Nature, or, Ghosts and Ghost-seers* (New York: J.S. Redfield, 1850), 9.

¹² Morton, *Ghosts*, 20.

¹³ Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural*, 5.

made whole. It was part of a trend in the nineteenth century to see the afterlife as less nebulous and more like life as they knew it, only perfect.¹⁴ Ghosts then became more identifiably and recognizably human, and therefore more relatable.

For all their popularity, however, Spiritualists who claimed to contact spirits were debunked with surprising regularity. In 1888, Maggie Fox even confessed to the sisters' hoaxing and demonstrated how it was done. A year later she tried to recant but their reputation was ruined. In 1887 the University of Pennsylvania conducted a scientific study into the movement's claims and discounted them. Despite this and many other debunkings, Spiritualism maintained a steady growth throughout the century and even saw a significant resurgence after World War I. But the skepticism that characterized the movement's critics helped to shape attitudes towards ghosts in American cinema for the first half of the twentieth century.

The rise of Spiritualism coincided with emerging technologies that complicated Americans' understanding of, and relationship to, existence and oblivion. Embalming, for instance, which emerged during the Civil War, "offered a way of blurring the boundary between life and death," according to Drew Gilpin Faust.¹⁵ Faust also shows that, as a way of easing the coldness of sudden loss, "embalming promised to transform death into slumber."¹⁶ Logic follows, however, that the thing that slumbers may also awaken.

The photograph, too, disturbed many people who first saw it. Evoking Maxim Gorky's later reaction to cinema (quoted above), Jules Michelet's comment upon seeing his portrait in 1850 is telling: "The daguerreotype. It saddens me, not to see myself thus with respect to form,

¹⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 2008), 182.

¹⁵ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 93.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

but to see myself a corpse, without my inner fire or my spirit.”¹⁷ The stiff, monochrome subjects in the photos often appeared ghostly or corpse-like. Sometimes, they were actually dead. During the mid-century post-mortem photography kept photographers gainfully employed as people were often willing to pay more money for an image of a dead loved one. Nancy West has looked at the intersection of death, photography, and the supernatural and notes:

Photography advanced at a time when two massive outbreaks of cholera and tuberculosis made death palpable, and when scientific discoveries shattered conventional religious beliefs. Fearful of their mortality, many embraced the medium as a means of counteracting death. If their lives were to be tenuous, the daguerreotypist could take a lasting portrait, preserving their bodies in the photograph’s quiet and immobile world.

This intense confusion of image and afterlife has always haunted photography, to the extent that the photographic image has persistently occupied an uneasy space between the worlds of science and magic, generating from even its ‘modern’ viewers a naive and superstitious response.¹⁸

Already imbued with these supernatural connotations, Spiritualists adopted the medium and quickly claimed to have captured the images of transparent spirits with their cameras. An act of double-exposure — simple in concept yet difficult in execution — convinced many Americans grasping desperately for evidence of the hereafter, including Mary Todd Lincoln who sat for the century’s most famous popularizer of spirit photography, William Mulmer. Murray Leeder has suggested that the impact of spirit photography goes deeper in its influence upon Americans’ perceptions of ghosts, stating that “there is plenty of evidence to suggest that, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the use of double exposure to signify the ghost was more than conventional: people actually believed that ghosts looked that way.”¹⁹ As evidence, he offers this quote from a 1903 article by E.H. Thornton entitled “Ghosts Have No Thickness.” Thornton declares that “a real ghost has only two dimensions. He may be long or short, or wide or narrow,

¹⁷ Quoted in Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural*, 102.

¹⁸ Nancy M. West, “Camera Fiends: Early Photography, Death, and the Supernatural,” *The Centennial Review* 40, no. 1 (1996): 170-206.

¹⁹ Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural*, 98.

but he will not be either thick or thin. In fact, he will be so thin that it will not be thinness at all. It won't be anything... The real ghost, the one of two dimensions, is a harmless individual. He looks more like a magic lantern picture than anything else and is about as vicious."²⁰ Leeder then comments that "so entrenched, it seems, was the relationship between the photograph (and other media) and the supernatural that even ghosts were understood as possessing the qualities of photographs."²¹ When considering ghosts in early cinema, then, it will be helpful to understand how closely what was seen on screen aligned with audience expectations of what the real thing would have looked like.

Ghosts remained a cultural obsession for late-nineteenth-century Americans (and Europeans, for that matter). They haunted popular entertainment with gusto. In literature they enjoyed a highwater mark in terms of output. The Period between 1840 to 1920 is generally considered a golden age for ghost story writing. Ghosts also dominated theater productions, such as with the optical illusion used on stage known as Pepper's Ghost. Named after English scientist John Henry Pepper, who first popularized the trick in the 1860s, the technique involved an angled glass which reflected the brightly lit "ghost" below the stage, making it appear that the ghost and stage actors were sharing the same space. Whether they were believed in or not, ghosts were an essential part of the cultural fabric.

When cinema emerged as the next popular entertainment, it was inevitable that it too would be haunted. The new medium was seen within the context of magic lantern and Phantasmagoria shows, of Pepper's ghost and spirit photography, and it was seen as a logical extension of them. It was seen as the next transitional form of these ghost shows. Once again, Murray Leeder drives the point: "The hundred years prior to cinema's debut saw a major

²⁰ Quoted in Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural*, 99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

reconfiguration of the supernatural. It was modernized and scientificized, and by 1895, the year of cinema's public debut, that process was complete."²² For Victorians and Gilded Age Americans, "cinema was one of the best feats of magic (or supernatural conjurations) to have ever come along."²³ When Maxim Gorky was reacting to cinema and describing it as ghostly, it was not because it was new. Instead, he was drawing on over a century of pre-existing associations of visual culture with ghostliness. The first decades of American cinema would see some ghosts, but the relationship between the haunted medium and on-screen ghosts would prove more complicated than the previous century would imply.

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ Ibid., 6.

CHAPTER TWO

The Ghosts of Silent Cinema (1895-1927)

On June 6, 1894, in Richmond, Indiana, Charles Francis Jenkins projected the first motion picture before an audience using his invention that he dubbed the Phantoscope (an improvement upon Edison's Kinetoscope). For Murray Leeder, "this name makes sense when we recognize cinema as the logical successor to the 'ghost show' and the inheritor of the whole haunted theory of projected media before it."¹ It also serves as an initial reminder that "early filmmakers were well aware of the paradox that cinema, in its potential for giving life and animating its subjects, even bestowing a sort of immortality, was at the same time a brand of living death."² Soulless, in the way that Gorky interpreted.

Ghosts began to appear on screens almost immediately. Gary Rhodes, in his exhaustive survey of American horror films of the first decades of cinema, remarks, "Moving pictures proved well suited to creating ghosts, in part due to the trickery that they could employ."³ Some of these early trick films were exceedingly simple, such as Frederick S. Armitage's *The Ghost Train* (1901), which is merely a negative image of a train roaring down the tracks. More impressive were the pioneering jump-cuts of filmmakers like Georges Méliès, who is credited with creating the first horror film as well as the first ghost film, 1896's *Le Manoir du diable* (released in the U.S. as *The Haunted Castle*). Made in France, the film appeared in America in 1899. Rhodes states, "As with other kinds of trick moving pictures, American filmmakers were quick to appropriate Méliès's style," most notably J. Stuart Blackton, who "came closest to rivaling Méliès for special effects."⁴ Blackton's 1907 *The Haunted Hotel* was hugely successful

¹ Ibid., 56.

² Ibid., 141.

³ Gary D. Rhodes, *The Birth of the American Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 164.

⁴ Rhodes, *The Birth of the American Horror Film*, 169.

and received enthusiastic reviews. Another influential pioneer of the trick film era was George Albert Smith, an English stage mesmerist and early participant of the Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882, which seeks to investigate claims of the paranormal. Murray Leeder has shown that “Smith was one of the first filmmakers, if not the very first, to bring the ghostly aesthetic familiar from the spirit photograph to cinema, and thus inaugurated a strategy for visualization of the supernatural that would remain standard for decades.”⁵ In addition, Smith was one of the earliest to experiment with close-ups and developed the first successful color film process, Kinemacolor. The Spanish filmmaker Segundo de Chomón should also be recognized for his role in the development of ghost films, most notably in his *La Légende du Fantôme*, or *Legend of a Ghost* (1908). Rhodes writes that Chomón is of particular importance because he “often used tricks to construct films with serious narratives... Here is a key link in the evolution of the horror-themed moving picture, with the attraction of cinematic tricks embedded logically into a dramatic narrative in such a way as to seem realistic.”⁶ This emphasis on logic would prove vitally important for American audiences, as we shall see.

Murray Leeder has also shown that another invention played a vital role in people’s conceptualization of cinema and spirits. In 1895, German physics professor Wilhelm Röntgen accidentally discovered X-rays while experimenting with Lenard tubes and Crookes tubes. Röntgen took an X-ray photo of his wife’s hand with a thick ring still distinguishable on her finger, as if floating around the bone. This new type of photography “made its debut almost at the exact same time as cinema, [and] carried profound supernatural implications in its seeming ability to transform living flesh into a *memento mori*.”⁷ Taking it further, one may see that “in the 1890s, X-rays and cinema were linked as rival novel forms of photography that jointly

⁵ Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural*, 68.

⁶ Rhodes, *The Birth of the American Horror Film*, 103.

⁷ Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural*, 97.

participated in a certain reconfiguring of the public understanding of materiality and insubstantiality, presence and absence, and life and death.”⁸ Upon seeing their X-rays, people often responded as though they had witnessed their own death, yet “early spectators were not astonished by X-rays simply because they showed skeletons but because they also reduced flesh and muscle to wraithlike parody fluttering half-visible alongside it, making depths into surfaces and surfaces into depths.”⁹ This curiosity helped to explain the proliferation of not just ghosts in trick films but also of skeletons. So it was that spirit photography, X-rays, and cinema converged into a new motif of death and the supernatural in popular entertainment as films progressed.

Though new reminders of mortality and traditional ghost imagery were certainly present during the first decade of film, ghosts in the early cinema were more often used for laughs than for frights. As Maxim Gorky’s reaction showed, early film viewers were hypersensitive to the artificiality of cinema. Despite some likely apocryphal stories of people being fooled into thinking what they viewed on screens was real, evidence suggests that the opposite was likely true. Such an audience, it could be reasoned, would be more accepting of light-hearted entertainment which did not demand a suspension of disbelief to enjoy, as opposed to a tale of the supernatural whereby obvious jump-cuts would distract an audience from emotionally investing in a serious, disturbing narrative.

Another reason presents itself when one considers that magicians played an integral role in the creation of trick films, Georges Méliès providing the most obvious example. Scholars have shown that at the time skepticism regarding Spiritualism was a strong component of the culture of late nineteenth century magicians, and this incredulous attitude towards the supernatural and mediums’ claims seeped into American cinema at the earliest stages. The nickelodeon era (1905

⁸ Ibid., 119.

⁹ Ibid., 124.

to 1913) saw a further pushing aside of real ghosts in film as Americans sought to embrace their own national cinema which emphasized realism, moral clarity, believability, and in the case of Westerns, showcased the domination of white males. This resulted in muscling out the trick films most heavily associated with European filmmakers. French films, in particular, were seen as dangerous to the progressive cause. Americans began to demand more logic and realism in their films. In 1911, *Motography* explained: “Tricks popular a few years ago are being abandoned. Sophisticated audiences demand that the ideas be worked out in a logical way.”¹⁰ In 1910 *Moving Picture World* declared that “the number of critical and sharpeyed [sic] fans is increasing every day.”¹¹ Audiences were becoming more astute, recognizing errors and inconsistencies, and demanding more realism as a result. Americans even began to demand more scientific realism in their cinema by the mid-1910s. They wanted science that looked more like Thomas Edison and less like Méliès’s wizards. This attitude affected, especially, films dealing with ghosts and the supernatural, those things which scientific materialism disallows. This was also a time of influence in the arts by the novelist and literary critic William Dean Howells who promoted realism, which he defined as “nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material.”¹² He presented realism as a democratic aesthetic, in keeping with American ideals, and insisted that “the arts must become democratic, and then we shall have the expression of America in art.”¹³ Realism was no less than “an ethical commitment to American democracy.”¹⁴ Once again Dara Downey cautions against emphasizing too strongly the influence on the era’s literature, “characterized by a continuum between ‘realist’ fiction and the ghost stories found in

¹⁰ Quoted in Rhodes, *The Birth of the American Horror Film*, 103.

¹¹ Quoted in Rhodes, *The Birth of the American Horror Film*, 376.

¹² W.D. Howells, “Criticism in Fiction,” reprinted in *W.D. Howells: Selected Literary Criticism. Volume II: 1886-1897*, ed. Donald Pizer and Christoph K. Lohmann (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 319.

¹³ Howells, “Criticism in Fiction,” 339.

¹⁴ Redding, *Haints*, 31.

popular magazines... indeed, it is debatable whether such strict divisions existed at all beyond the incensed imaginations of those who perceived themselves as usurped by their inferiors.”¹⁵ In this, Downey points to the outcry of male writers against women writers (who were writing such ghost stories) and notes that so-called ‘realist’ writers also dabbled in supernatural fiction.

Nevertheless, America was inventing its character, and Spiritualism and emotionality were upset by a new emphasis on scientific rationality and expertise. A fear of superstition sabotaging this progress is reflected in the films and commentary of the times. Trepidation of immigrants, in particular, prompted filmmakers to use movies as a tool to Americanize the population. Gary Rhodes states that in this era “the horror-themed moving picture in America was ‘irrevocably enmeshed’ in the project of Americanization.”¹⁶ By way of contrast, the term “weird” began to see wide use with regard to horror films, and its application reveals American perspectives and prejudices. “Weird” not only came to mean the presence of skeletons, ghosts, and other supernatural elements, but also came to signify that which was foreign and, ultimately, un-American. When the supernatural was present, the stories usually took place either in the Orient, in the distant past, or on the American frontier — all suggesting a sense of distance from modern America. Rhodes observes that “the camera assumed a position of superiority on behalf of white spectators.”¹⁷ E. Ann Kaplan has shown that cinema’s invention coincided with the height of nineteenth century colonialism. Rhodes expands upon the premise: “Drawing on long-standing racial stereotypes in popular culture, early filmmakers created a cinematic ethnoscape that paraded a farrago of Others... Their purpose was to entertain and to frighten white viewers, whose interest in seeing these depictions of them was potentially more sickening and horrifying

¹⁵ Downey, *American Women’s Ghost Stories*, 10.

¹⁶ Rhodes, *The Birth of the American Horror Film*, 108.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

than the fictional stories in which they appeared.”¹⁸ Native Americans, for instance, appeared with relative frequency in serious ghost films of the era such as 1914’s *The Legend of the Phantom Tribe* which showed the wraiths of massacred natives attacking their killers.¹⁹

Above all, however, the supernatural was most strongly associated with Europe, constituting a two-fold threat: firstly, European immigration; and secondly, a poisoning of American progress by way of its outdated superstitions. Arthur Redding’s analysis of ghosts in fiction at the turn of the millennium also offers the likely mentality of early twentieth century Americans, observing that “to become American is to seize your own destiny and assume responsibility for your identity and your future; to become American, *ideally*, is to give up your ghosts, by becoming future-orientated instead of past-orientated, and so to have the debts of the past written off.”²⁰ Ghosts were not merely a tie to the past but a caution against an unwanted future. Film historian Kendall R. Phillips paints a picture of a nation in search of its character and struggling with its destiny: “America at the time was a place steeped in dualities — the split between immigrant heritage and the emerging American national identity; the split between rural past and the industrial future; the split between religious and spiritual beliefs and the promise of scientific certainty.”²¹ For Phillips, the nation was haunted by its past: “In the American struggle to repress the unruly collection of cultures, languages, races, and identities that constituted the young nation, these repressed past [European] identities were returning as uncanny spectres to trouble the dominant narrative of American exceptionalism and progress.”²²

These “spectres,” therefore, were defeated in the cinema with the very tools that Americans championed. This is why, until 1931, the supernatural in American films was

¹⁸ Ibid., 259.

¹⁹ Such exploitative works did, however, give the horror film genre its first credited star: Thundercloud.

²⁰ Redding, *Haints*, 27.

²¹ Kendall R. Phillips, *A Place of Darkness: The Rhetoric of Horror in Early American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 125.

²² Phillips, *A Place of Darkness*, 75.

regularly given a mundane explanation and ghost belief was criticized or used for comic effect. One 1914 reviewer in *Moving Picture World* put it plainly, “Ghost stories nowadays are not taken seriously and the job that the old trickster puts up is a huge joke.”²³ These supernatural occurrences that turn out to have natural causes are what Phillips has dubbed the “American Uncanny.”²⁴ During the 1910s, Phillips notes that American cinematic experience “entailed the crafting of a preferred viewing ethic of incredulity: audiences were encouraged to view the apparently marvelous and the weird through the rationalist lens of skepticism... In this narrative logic, supernatural entities were almost always explained away as tricks, hoaxes, or dreams.”²⁵ During this time, American protagonists were made to be incredulous to such Old World beliefs.

Of course, exceptions may be found, yet these exceptions largely stem from the same concerns. Starting in the 1910s, public and political pressure arose to cast movies as potentially dangerous to those easily susceptible, a category in which both children and immigrants were included, and this prodding persuaded filmmakers to self-censor and create more uplifting movies. They began to adapt literature especially as a means to raise the artistic perception of films. One motion picture executive remarked in 1910, “When the works of Dickens and Victor Hugo, the poems of Browning, the plays of Shakespeare and stories from the Bible are used as a basis for moving pictures, no fair-minded man can deny that the art is being developed along the right lines.”²⁶ This movement could be found in Europe as well, and though not based upon a single literary piece it helps to explain the fanfare for the artistry of films such as *The Student of Prague*. For American horror filmmakers, this meant that they could wrap their sensationalism in the protective cocoon of respected literature and high art. Phillips finds that, “as early as 1908,

²³ “A Deal in Real Estate,” *Moving Picture World*, March 28, 1914, 1695.

²⁴ Phillips, *A Place of Darkness*, 86.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁶ Quoted in Rhodes, *The Birth of the American Horror Film*, 337.

the subtle equation of literary source material and cinematic artistry was evident.²⁷ This might explain why *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820) was adapted twice, in 1908 and 1912, and plot synopses of these films make clear that the ghostly horseman is in fact Brom Bones, opting for the explained supernatural rather than Washington Irving's more ambiguous ending. Gary Rhodes notes: "Here again the screen seems to have 'Americanized' an American story."²⁸ While films adapted literature as a means of acquiring respectability, often filmmakers tacked on titles of famous works rather than actually adapted them.

Just because filmmakers ridiculed ghost belief with their scripts does not mean that they shied away from ghost pictures or supernatural storylines. D.W. Griffith became the first major director of American horror-themed pictures during this period, and other filmmakers like Alice Guy Blache were prolific in their horror-themed output. Ghosts still proved popular, yet they were most often shown as part of a balanced ticket as a reflection of vaudeville variety entertainment. Gary Rhodes's analysis of an advertisement for an 1908 showing of Segundo de Chomón's *Legend of a Ghost*, discussed above, reveals how exhibitors prepared audiences for horror-themed pictures and how these pictures were seen in conjunction with a series of other types of films. The Des Moines ad reads:

Don't let it 'skeer ye,' for it's only a moving picture, but it's mighty interesting at that. It portrays a young woman passing through a cemetery at night; [it] shows how she is suddenly startled by a ghost at her side! And—
But why startle you now — see the picture — get 'skeered up' a bit, and then forget about it when you laugh over the vaudeville a few minutes later.²⁹

As a testament to that ghost film's popularity, Rhodes writes that "over five thousand viewers watched *Legend of a Ghost*... at the Shubert Theatre on a single evening in New Orleans in

²⁷ Phillips, *A Place of Darkness*, 121.

²⁸ Rhodes, *The Birth of the American Horror Film*, 344.

²⁹ Quoted in Rhodes, 383.

1908.”³⁰ In most of these films, however, the ghosts were fake and played for laughs. They were little more than the result of superstition. They were sometimes the result of misunderstandings but were most often the work of pranksters, such as those with plots similar to that of the Roman play by Plautus called *Mostellaria*, in which a man fakes a haunting in order to scare the father of the girl he loves.³¹ Fake ghost plots also involved criminals using a supposedly haunted house for a hide-out, or were about people pretending to be ghosts in properties they desired so that the values would diminish; these are the same kinds of stories that appeared in the nineteenth-century press and would have already been familiar to audiences. By the 1910s, houses with “mysterious mechanical contrivances” began to appear as well.³² Rhodes’s work has shown that “in dramatic moving pictures, real ghosts rarely haunted the living... More often, real ghosts in dramatic narratives attempted to assist the living characters they loved.”³³ Real ghosts were generally not used to frighten and real haunted buildings and trappings of the Gothic, such as ruins, were likewise rare in dramatic films.

The post-nickelodeon era entered yet another phase regarding the relationship between ghosts and cinema. While skepticism regarding ghosts and Spiritualism was ever present, examples of credulity can still be found, though they are relatively few. For instance, *The Bishop of the Ozarks* (1923), presumed lost, appears to have presented a pro-Spiritualist plot. *Moving Picture World* wrote of the film that “mysticism has been resorted to in several instances. There is a spiritual séance, a persistent strain of mental telepathy and a definite instance in which the occult powers of evil are demonstrated.”³⁴ During this time some performers even became

³⁰ Ibid., 387.

³¹ “Dating back to the second century BCE, [it] is probably history's first well known humorous ghost story.” Morton, *Ghosts*, 31.

³² Rhodes, *The Birth of the American Horror Film*, 175.

³³ Ibid., 165.

³⁴ Quoted in *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States*, ed. Kenneth White Munden (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 62.

associated with horror-themed pictures and, perhaps by association, with the supernatural. For instance, Claire Whitney in 1914 was reported to be “interested in spiritualism, and now refuses to sleep in a room without a light burning and spends most of her spare evenings listening to the rappings of a tired spirit on a rickety table.”³⁵

Yet anti-Spiritualism overall remained dominant within American cinema and ghosts in particular began to be seen, not unlike the concerns expressed over the Phantasmagoria shows in the late eighteenth century, as symbolic of delusion. Simone Natale has written of the link between the stage magicians of the late nineteenth century who exposed Spiritualist hoaxes as live entertainment to the skeptical films of the silent era that in some ways served the same function by pushing an incredulous stance. Natale suggests that it is within this tradition that “one might include films that represent the ghost as the fruit of hallucination and delusion. In fact, by equating ghostly apparitions to perceptual delusion and depicting the haunted house as a space of deception and trickery, these films take up several elements from the rationalizing discourse of spiritualist exposé.”³⁶

One influential film in particular displayed ghosts as the product of a troubled mind. D.W. Griffith, in the year before he transformed American cinema with *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), adapted Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) and his poem “Annabel Lee” (1849) into the film *The Avenging Conscience: or “Thou Shalt Not Kill”* (1914). Though the movie takes initial inspiration from Poe, it ultimately embodies an undoubtedly Victorian sensibility, substituting Poe’s psychological claustrophobia with a focus on Christian redemption. In this way, the film is far more Griffith than Poe. Nevertheless, it proved an

³⁵ Quoted in Rhodes, *The Birth of the American Horror Film*, 389.

³⁶ Simone Natale, “Specters of the Mind: Ghosts, Illusion, and Exposure in Paul Leni’s *The Cat and the Canary*,” in *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*, ed. Murray Leeder (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 65.

important work. Murray Leeder sees it as “a bridge between the trick film and the emerging conventions of the silent horror film.”³⁷ As run-times lengthened, filmmakers could make use of more sophisticated storytelling. Griffith’s tale is of a young man (Henry B. Walthall) who murders his uncle (Spottiswoode Aitken) in order to clear the way for a love affair, but is then plagued by the uncle’s spirit. As the title suggests, here the ghost is a manifestation of guilt, and in the end we find that the young man had been dreaming. He awakens with a newfound appreciation for his living uncle. Griffith uses symbolism to effectively communicate the inner workings of the main character, such as a spider eating a fly to show his growing murderous intent. Likewise, he uses editing and close-ups in effective ways, such as when the main character is being questioned by a detective, amplifying the paranoia as the audience is subjected to the young man’s fearful hypersensitivity, much as the narrator of Poe’s tale. The techniques worked, for critical reception was generally positive, sometimes enthusiastic, and the connection between a frail mental state and visions of ghosts was not lost to contemporary viewers. In 1914 *Movie Pictorial* wrote, “*The Avenging Conscience* reminds us that it is good most men’s minds are not projecting machines.”³⁸

While American filmmakers were mocking or explaining away the supernatural, employing realism to exorcise ghosts from a national credulity, European filmmakers were readily working to conjure them. The Germans, whose cinema was to have the greatest impact on horror in the early decades, offer a prime example. With the rise of Neo-Romanticism, the first decade of the twentieth century saw a growth of German language horror literature, and with the nationalist fervor of the war years, these works, film historian Casper Tybjerg explains, were embraced by a wide audience “because it was felt to be peculiarly German, thanks to the

³⁷ Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural*, 161.

³⁸ Quoted in Rhodes, *The Birth of the American Horror Film*, 2.

widespread contemporary acceptance of the idea that the German national character was particularly attuned to ‘twilight’ and the supernatural.”³⁹ In Germany in particular, the “fantastic” films remained popular and respected up through the 1920s. In fact, there was a widespread belief among German filmmakers that fairy-tales and fantastic stories were the ideal domain of cinema, which did not suffer the limitations of reality that beset the stage. Tybjerg sums up a common attitude among Germans at the time, regarding the perceived duality of the German soul, which helps to explain their ready embrace of the unreal in cinema: “On the one hand, an openness to spiritual experience allows the self to escape a narrow and stifling materialism... On the other hand, mystical realities may turn out to be frightening and dangerous and the divided soul faces the risk of unhealthy domination by one side or a rupture threatening the complete dissolution of the self.”⁴⁰ Considering this, it is unsurprising that 1913’s *The Student of Prague*, which tells of a young man in the 1820s who is terrorized by his doppelganger, was “promoted as the first true German art film,” a claim with which contemporary critics agreed.⁴¹ The main character was played by Paul Wegener, who was an outspoken proponent of the concept of *Autorenfilm* and “fantastic” filmmaking and continued to have a profound impact on the genre and on German film, in general. However, the Germans were not alone in the cinematic embrace of the fantastical and supernatural. For example, in 1923 French film theorist Ricciotto Canudo wrote: “Cinema permits, and must further develop, the extraordinary and striking faculty of *representing immateriality*.”⁴²

The contrast of attitudes between American and European cinema would become most stark following the horrors of World War I. Sociologist Pierre Sorlin has written, “In Europe, the

³⁹ Casper Tybjerg, “Shadow-Souls and Strange Adventures: Horror and the Supernatural in European Silent Cinema,” in *The Horror Film*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 31

⁴⁰ Tybjerg, “Shadow-Souls,” 35.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴² Quoted in Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural*, 22 (original emphasis).

years following the end of the Great War saw the rise of the motif of a cataclysmic, apocalyptic horror that had marked the end of any idea of historical progress or possible improvement on the human condition.”⁴³ Before the guns were cold, French filmmaker Abel Gance in 1919 made what historian W. Scott Poole has labeled “the first horror film of the postwar world,” *J'accuse*.⁴⁴ The final act of the film depicts the ghosts of war-dead rising and returning home to confront their families. Europeans turned to the avant garde such as dadaism and surrealism to express their trauma. German cinema nearly became synonymous with Expressionism, which sought to express emotions over realism. This style influenced the art of filmmaking worldwide, and the artform was largely the result of the effects of the Great War, with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) perhaps the greatest example. Expressionism often understandably dealt with madness and matters of the psyche, not surprising as Germany had just witnessed a war-torn world seemingly gone insane. The highly stylized movement, with its absurdly piercing angles, bold shadows, and leaning architecture that looks poised to crash down upon the inhabitants, signified an unreal existence. Realism this was not. Thus during the 1920s golems, vampires, witches, devils, and even animated waxworks stalked across European screens. Sweden, for its part, offered a masterpiece of the ghost genre in 1921 with Victor Sjöström’s *Körkarlen*, or *The Phantom Carriage*, which had a profound influence upon subsequent filmmakers — the axe-chopping sequence would later influence Stanley Kubrick in *The Shining* (1980) and Ingmar Bergman considered the movie a prime inspiration.

In the United States, however, the trauma of World War I took on a different form. The war signified a violent confrontation with the nation’s European roots, and this brief but

⁴³ Pierre Sorlin, “Cinema and the Memory of the Great War,” in *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present*, ed. Michael Paris (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 13.

⁴⁴ W. Scott Poole, *Wasteland: The Great War and the Origins of Modern Horror* (Berkeley, California: Counterpoint, 2018), 60.

harrowing suspension of isolationism hardened the resolve of Americans to forge their own distinct way in the world. Kendall R. Phillips explains that American films continued to embody “the cultural values of Progressivism, including individuality, progress, and masculinity” while also placing an “emphasis on rational cause and effect, linear narratives, [and] attention to realism in narrative and cinematography.”⁴⁵ American cinema largely put the ghost aside and focused on the material. Universal produced the horror-spectacles *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), both of which starred “The Man of a Thousand Faces,” Lon Chaney. Part historical drama, part macabre exhibitions, these films “were presented not simply as horrific spectacles but also as spectacles of realism. They did not embrace a return to the supernatural spectacles of an earlier era but rather expanded the horrific and gruesome potential in American realism by focusing not on the marvelous but on the graphic.”⁴⁶ The “graphic” largely took the form of deformities and mutilations, convincingly recreated by the makeup and contortions of Chaney. Whereas German Expressionism focused more upon the psychological costs of the war, such as was seen in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, American post-war cinema dealt more directly with the obvious physical costs of the conflict.

Ghosts, however, would not be entirely forgotten, and a few examples can be found from the postwar period. These films follow the general trend of the explained supernatural in the previous decade. In 1921 Buster Keaton entered *The Haunted House*, a two-reel comedy in which the actor plays a bank teller who enters a building rigged with booby traps by bank robbers to make the house appear haunted. Like the nickelodeon films, this one is played purely for laughs. More serious is James Young’s 1926 version of *The Bells*. The popular Victorian melodrama, originally translated by Leopold Davis Lewis, had already been adapted to the

⁴⁵ Phillips, *A Place of Darkness*, 127.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

screen several times before. In the nineteenth century it was one of the greatest successes of British stage legend Henry Irving, and here it was the turn of Lionel Barrymore, himself a noted actor, to bring the lead role to the American screen. Barrymore plays Mathias, an innkeeper drowning in debt who hopes to be elected the town's burgomaster. On one snowy Christmas day a Polish Jew arrives at his inn with a belt pouch filled with gold. Mathias tracks the Jew in the snow and kills him with an axe, using the gold to relieve his debts and raise his standing in the community. However, a Mesmerist at the village fair, played by Boris Karloff, claims to be able to make criminals confess their crimes, and his seemingly knowing smiles to Mathias begin to drive the new burgomaster insane with guilt. Mathias hears phantom bells, like those of the Jew's sleigh, ringing a "discordant, jangling accusation." Spectral symbolism is effectively employed such as the images of nooses appearing in ordinary objects or Mathias believing his hands are covered in blood as he counts the gold pieces. The ghost of the Jew haunts the innkeeper, and at one point an unhinged Mathias plays cards with him to win the money he stole fair and square. Once again ghosts serve as manifestations of a delusional, guilt-ridden mind.

While explicit ghosts remained scarce, another trend in American cinema became popular during the latter half of the 1920s that served as an unlikely entrance for the supernatural. The mystery thriller, often referred to as the subgenre of the Old Dark House, so named for its frequent setting, exploded in popularity. Unlike the literary adaptations of the horror-spectaculars, these films took place in modern America, and with the postwar nation prospering Americans sought their thrills on the big screen. Two factors resulting from the Great War may help to account for why the Old Dark House films struck a cultural nerve. Firstly, these mystery melodramas nearly always depicted a killer whose identity was not known until the end. As Kendall R. Phillips writes, "In the years following World War I, Americans were particularly

attuned to pursuing mysterious figures lurking within their midst... Anxieties over the infiltration of Bolsheviks and anarchists into various segments of American society — especially labor unions and nascent African American civil rights groups — had become part of the national discourse.”⁴⁷ Additionally, the Great War had renewed the American public’s interests in Spiritualism and the supernatural. Though these films did not betray the American ideal of skepticism, they did push its boundaries and began to bend its resolve, and unsurprisingly, European influence could be credited for denting that armor. In the late 1920s many European filmmakers, and Germans in particular, were being courted by Hollywood to add their unique artistic styles to American cinema. Paul Leni, who had directed the 1924 German horror film *Waxworks*, came to work for Universal and directed what many regard as the quintessentially classic example of the Old Dark House film, 1927’s *The Cat and the Canary*. Because of this and many other examples, the visual pastiche for the mystery thrillers was inspired not by Universal’s spectacles but by German Expressionism. Even *The Bells* showed some Expressionist influence with Mathias’s dream sequence or the appearance of Karloff’s mesmerist seeming to owe much debt to Dr. Caligari.

German Expressionism readily accepted the marvelous and fantastic, and in important ways this attitude rubbed off on American horror in the silent period. In early examples of the “American Uncanny” the supernatural had always been given a mundane explanation. In those first decades of cinema the audience was in on the joke from the beginning; they knew what was causing the seemingly supernatural occurrences before the frightened character did. But in the late 1920s filmmakers kept the reveal until the end, allowing viewers to experience the same anxieties and fears as the characters as the characters were experiencing them. In this way,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 152.

Phillips states, “mystery thrillers were the first to make fear one of the primary objectives.”⁴⁸ The seemingly supernatural was not explained away until the end, allowing the audience to consider otherworldly possibilities. These mystery thrillers had profound repercussions, for “although never breaking the bonds of incredulity, these films introduced audiences to the pleasures of suspending their own personal incredulity and entertaining — even if only momentarily — the prospects of the horrific and marvelous.”⁴⁹

A prime example is the above mentioned mystery-thriller *The Cat and the Canary*. The plot involves relatives gathering to read the will of Cyrus West, their uncle, on the twentieth anniversary of his death. Meanwhile, an escaped lunatic known as “the Cat” is on the prowl. Paul Leni utilizes an Expressionist sensibility in his directing, an approach that would be followed by key horror films of the following decade. Just as Expressionism explored ideas of perception and delusion, so Leni allows ghosts to fill the imaginations of viewers. The “spirits” are no longer depicted in the double-exposure technique of spirit photography, but through the suggestion of noises and events not easily rationalized. Superimposition, in fact, is reserved for such sounds or as representations of characters’ thoughts. Simone Natale explains:

Ghosts are in fact not represented visually at all, but rather embedded in visual or aural events that can be explained rationally or exchanged for supernatural phenomena. The film, in other words, creates the possibility for the choice whether to believe in ghosts or not: the spectators, as well as the film’s fictional characters, choose whether to “see” or “hear” a ghost, or to give another interpretation to what they see, hear and feel.

Rather than representing ghosts as something external, *The Cat and the Canary* posits ghosts as a matter of interpretation, a choice that is taken at the level of our mind.⁵⁰

Calling back to the Phantasmagoria shows, the ghost once again haunts our perceptions. Natale further writes, “The ghost plays thereby a double role: on the narrative level, it provides the film

⁴⁸ Ibid., 159.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 173.

⁵⁰ Natale, “Specters of the Mind,” 70.

with a supernatural and occult aura that has the potential to fascinate the audience; on the metaphorical level, it embodies broader cultural concerns regarding the deceitful nature of sensory perception and, more broadly, of the human mind.”⁵¹ Leni’s film keeps fidelity with the “American Uncanny,” yet allows the audience to consider the supernatural. More importantly, Leni’s film allows the audience to share in the characters’ realizations as they come, for “as the guests in West’s old mansion, we feel chilled and tense despite the rationalist assurance that ghosts exist only in our imagination. The characters in the movie refuse the existence of the supernatural, and yet, like us, become anyway the victims of the fear and the fascination that the supernatural evoke.”⁵² *The Cat and the Canary* was a smashing success for Universal and had a lasting influence on the studio’s horror aesthetic. *The New York Times* declared, “This is the first time that a mystery melodrama has been lifted into the realms of art, for this feature is something that those who rave about cinematics will find delightful and those who are only anxious for a movie probably will find almost blood-curdling.”⁵³

At the end of the 1920s, the two paths of American and European horror began to meet and then converge. By the next decade, American audiences were ready to accept the supernatural in their horror films. Much of this can be credited, certainly, to the brilliant work of German directors such as Leni lending their artistry to American horror. As W. Scott Poole writes, “Although American folklore was replete with monsters, supernatural horror probably would have found little purchase in popular culture without European influences.”⁵⁴ However, the weird and the supernatural continued to be associated with foreignness just as it had earlier in the American cinematic consciousness. Indeed, most of the Gothic supernatural horrors of the

⁵¹ Ibid., 66.

⁵² Ibid., 66.

⁵³ Mordaunt Hall, “The Screen,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 10, 1927.

⁵⁴ Poole, *Wasteland*, 34.

1930s take place in ill-defined European locales. Therefore, Europe continued to be associated with untold dangers and incursions of the past into progressive modernity and of dangers still developing under fascism and totalitarianism. Though Americans had come to embrace a European acceptance of the marvelous and the supernatural within its horror cinema, it was not yet ready to embrace Europe itself. Still, that continent represented a danger to its identity, and the trauma of World War I, which had cost the lives of thousands of its citizens, hung heavily upon the American consciousness.

CHAPTER THREE:

The Ghosts of Classic Horror Cinema (1927-1960)

As it would turn out, it was not due to deft direction alone that American viewers were thinking of ghosts in 1927. Those moving images flickering on the screen were no longer the soundless specters described by Maxim Gorky. Hollywood began to incorporate synchronized sound into its motion pictures, to varying effect. Film historian Robert Spadoni has shown that there have been two times when movie audiences were acutely aware of the artificiality of cinema: when the medium was inaugurated in the late nineteenth century (one may refer once again to Gorky's reaction) and when sound was introduced. Though sound was intended to increase the realism of the experience Spadoni suggests that the opposite often occurred, sometimes due to synchronicity issues or the incongruity of the sound's origin with where it was supposed to be occurring on the screen, for instance. To explain this phenomena, contemporary audiences once again turned to the metaphor of ghosts. According to Spadoni, evidence "suggests that a countercurrent of sensations ran underneath the exclamations of realism. In particular, something seemed to be wrong with the status of the human figure on sound film. This figure could seem ghostly — or uncanny — a perception founded on the return to the foreground of general viewer awareness of cinema's artificial nature."¹ Spadoni further explains, in reference to on-screen actors, "The bloodless faces could appear ghostly. Ghostliness suggests a lack of physical substance, the semitransparent wispieness of an apparition. Impressions to this effect probably were helped along by the period's increased screen awareness, which would have made the figures seem as flat as shadows."² For example, film critic Alexander Bakshy wrote in 1929, "for reasons which it is difficult to discern, the total effect of the talking picture is

¹ Robert Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 6.

² Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies*, 25.

generally thin, lacking in substance... In the talkies, much as you may be moved by the drama, you feel it is a drama in a world of ghosts.”³

Ghosts once again haunted the minds and language of filmgoers. Yet though the supernatural, in the form of reanimated corpses, vampires, and zombies, began appearing on American cinema screens in the 1930s, real ghosts in horror films continued to see surprisingly little purchase. In fact, until 1960 it was exceedingly rare to see real ghosts portrayed in horror films, save for the few examples discussed below. The reasons for this are not immediately obvious. Spadoni has also shown that filmmakers in the early 1930s were acutely aware of the effect that sudden or disembodied noises could have on audiences. In fact, many were called for in the shooting script for *Dracula* (1931), America’s first real foray into true supernatural horror, but few made it into the finished film.⁴ This may be due to the inadequate sound equipment of the era or filmmakers’ discomfort with the new medium. Nevertheless, it does reveal that the characteristics of traditional haunted house narratives (spooky or sudden sounds from beyond) — techniques which had worked well on the stage — were known to and considered by filmmakers in the earliest years of sound as a method of generating fright in audiences. Certainly, too, there continued to be some resistance towards the European influence of American cinema, including the acceptance of the supernatural (Carl Laemmle, Jr., head of production at Universal Studios, wanted German Expressionism kept out of *Dracula*, for instance), though with the successful arrival of James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931) Expressionism would become a dominant characteristic of the American horror aesthetic for the remainder of the decade. Horror films instead focused on corporeal monsters and generally relied on scientific explanations, however unrealistic, to account for their presence.

³ Quoted in Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies*, 24.

⁴ Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies*, 56.

Outside of Hollywood horror, however, spirits were still active. Judith Richardson has shown a connection with historical preservation efforts in the 1930s and 1940s with a renewed interest in local folklore, including ghost stories. Putting “ghosts to tangible social use,” hauntings were used to attract tourism and employed to protect endangered sites by tying them closely to the fabric of local history and character.⁵ In addition, the trauma of World War I, with so many lives lost so suddenly, resuscitated an interest in Spiritualism. Lisa Morton notes that “mediums continued to collect headlines in the 1930s, although they were debunked with such increasing speed and frequency that Spiritualism finally began to ebb.”⁶ American cinematic horror’s sole foray into ghosts in the decade reflects this waning credibility about Spiritualism while still presenting ghosts as real and frightening, although in keeping with the era’s horror paradigm the malevolent spirit is explained as a product of science. Brothers Victor and Edward Halperin followed up their successful *White Zombie* (1932) with 1933’s *Supernatural*, in which the spirit of executed murderer Ruth Rogen (Vivienne Osborne), by means of a scientific experiment gone awry, possesses the body of a wealthy heiress (Carole Lombard). Meanwhile, a charlatan medium (Alan Dinehart) tries to convince the heiress that her dead twin brother is trying to contact her from beyond the grave. The film was not as financially successful for the filmmakers as *White Zombie*, though the *New York Times* gave it a lukewarm review:

Notwithstanding the incredibility of many of its main incidents, "Supernatural,"... succeeds in awakening no little interest in its spooky doings. It not only depicts the various tricks of a charlatan spiritualist but also undertakes through camera wizardry to show the spirit of a dead murderess entering the body of a wholesome girl and causing her to behave like a savage. The story... is worked out shrewdly and the scenes are for the most part pictured in a fashion suited to the eerie happenings.⁷

⁵ Richardson, *Possessions*, 175.

⁶ Morton, *Ghosts*, 79.

⁷ Mordaunt Hall, “Allan Dinehart, Carole Lombard and H.B. Warner in a Film Dealing With Evil Spirits and Fake Mediums,” *The New York Times*, April 22, 1933.

The “camera wizardry” spoken of refers by and large to the double-exposure effect of presenting ghosts as transparent entities, much in the fashion of the previous century’s spirit photography.

British cinema also flirted with Spiritualism in 1935’s *The Clairvoyant*, directed by Maurice Elvey and starring Claude Rains. It told of a charlatan stage mind-reader who finds he has a real gift of prophecy. The film was not well-received when it appeared in the U.S. *The New York Times* was particularly critical: “Had the producers elected to stress the danger of knowing too much about the future, rather than building so long upon the issue of the wife’s jealousy, ‘The Clairvoyant’ would have been more effective drama. In its present form it is a rather meandering melodrama which would be utterly unimportant except for Mr. Rains’s [sic] presence.”⁸

Nevertheless, Alison Peirse, in her study of the decade’s horror, considers it a historically important film, viewing the mining disaster it depicts within the context of Britain’s industrial heritage. Peirse writes: “Perhaps *The Clairvoyant*’s wayward and obstinate nature accounts for its lack of attention in existing histories of the horror film. Its value here then emerges in two ways: its contribution to an important horror tradition that explores spiritualism’s relationship with British cinema, and from the way it locates its traumas within a specifically British social and industrial milieu.”⁹

While Spiritualism per se was once again on the decline, serious investigations into the paranormal by researchers and parapsychologists maintained a degree of momentum begun by groups such as the Society for Psychical Research in the late nineteenth century. The findings of these researchers and theorists often came into conflict with Spiritualists, though they had the effect of helping to transform American perceptions of ghosts and how the entities were depicted and understood on the screen. The British-born American investigator Hereward Carrington

⁸ Frank S. Nugent, “At the Roxy,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 1935.

⁹ Alison Peirse, *After Dracula: The 1930s Horror Film* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 137.

wrote extensively on parapsychology during the first half of the twentieth century and was involved in high-profile cases of examining Spiritualists' claims, including Eusapia Palladino and Mina "Margery" Crandon. Though a believer himself, he was quick to debunk fraudulent claims. His ideas were influential in the ways in which they attempted to incorporate psychological explanations. For instance, in 1930 he disagreed with the assessment that the activity of poltergeists (German for “noisy ghosts”), associated with physical disturbances in haunting cases, was no more than trickery because it was so often linked with young people. Instead, “he believed that blossoming sexual energy in adolescents might be ‘externalized beyond the limits of the body’.”¹⁰ Another prominent writer on the subject was Hungarian-born psychoanalyst Nandor Fodor, who worked in both Britain and the United States. Beginning in the 1930s he wrote extensively on paranormal phenomena, his primary concern being whether ghostly experiences were rooted in objective or psychological causes. In the 1940s he published his theory that poltergeists were external manifestations of a disturbed subconscious. He hypothesized that ghosts may be attracted to “those who put themselves in an unguarded psychological position.”¹¹ While his ideas about psychokinesis drew criticism, the psychological underpinnings of ghostly phenomena proved attractive.

Lisa Morton sees this grounding of ghosts in the living experience as an influence upon Hollywood, for

by the 1940s — thanks, perhaps, in part to Fodor’s psychological laying of ghosts — society’s attitudes to the spirit shifted again. With noisy, rapping spirits demystified, literature and cinema turned once again to the shimmering Gothic ghost, although the spirits were now romanticized: the films *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947) and *A Portrait of Jennie* (1948) were typical of 1940s fare in which the ghost seemed to have been rendered safe by having nearly all its more frightening aspects removed.¹²

¹⁰ Morton, *Ghosts*, 84.

¹¹ Quoted in Morton, *Ghosts*, 82.

¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

The malevolent ghost portrayed by Carole Lombard is without kindred spirits for the remainder of the 1930s and into the first years of the following decade. Yet, not without irony, the ghost was to become more popular than ever, haunting screens not as subjects to be feared but as innocuous entities of comedy or romance. This dramatic turn was a striking departure for ghost narratives. Lee Kovacs in an examination of such films in *The Haunted Screen: Ghosts in Literature and Film*, writes: “The 19th-Century Gothic horror that lived in the tower and the graveyard evoked a sense of confinement, entrapment, and finality. And the spectre that emerged from these places was empowered to frighten, torment, and cause misery. In the romantic ghost story genre of the 1930s and 1940s, the ghost sheds the horrors of the graveyard and the tomb to interact lovingly with its earthbound counterparts.”¹³ These movies were in keeping with the fantasy films of the period that “served to contrast the bleak view of man and his environment that characterized the noir genre,” and, by extension, the horror genre.¹⁴

While not horror, these film ghosts bear some consideration, for they provide context by which later horror entries would be understood. Real ghosts continued to be present in such literary adaptations as *A Christmas Carol* (1938) and *Wuthering Heights* (1939). Kovacs sees a thematic link between the two films: “*Wuthering Heights*, both novel and film, take up the issue of the flawed hero or anti-hero. The ghost genre, almost from its inception, appears to emphasize and draw on man’s weakness. Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* is one example of how the ghost story is utilized to depict man’s fall from grace” (though he famously regains it in the end).¹⁵ This theme, interestingly enough, would return in ghost horror films in the 1970s and 1980s. Also of note is 1938’s metatheatrical play *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder, which was adapted to

¹³ Lee Kovacs, *The Haunted Screen: Ghosts in Literature and Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1999), 50.

¹⁴ Kovacs, *The Haunted Screen*, 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

the screen in 1940. Wilder uses ghosts to depict a passionless life in a clear contrast to the romantic and uplifting ghost stories mentioned above. Kovacs notes: “There is a dystopic aspect to this play, a sense of hopelessness and despair that is especially evident in this community of ghosts who are as earthbound in death as they were in life. The play contradicts the aura of excitement, suspense, and passion that is the hallmark of the traditional ghost story. In Grover's Corners, life and death are indistinguishable.” Written towards the end of the Great Depression and before the dawn of the Second World War, Thornton’s work was somber, even if his intention was, as he wrote, “an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life.”¹⁶ Kovacs continues:

Our Town, both play and film, introduces a new and innovative dimension to the traditional ghost story, the concept of a community of ghosts who remain bound together in death as they were in life. Although the setting is a realistic one... the concept of a community of the dead who coexist comfortably with their living counterparts speaks to the notion of a single unbroken universe where living and dead are indistinguishable...

No one ever leaves Grover's Corners and, more important, no one wants to. Passion, excitement, creativity, and agency have died, as well as beauty, hope, and redemption. Gone as well is the lone haunter, both Gothic and romantic. These ghosts have no place in the unimaginative stultifying atmosphere of Grover's Corners. They are left behind, buried in their own cornerstone of history, perhaps to be resurrected in some future time.¹⁷

The idea of communities of ghosts, in particular, would be revisited in future ghost horror films, such as William Castle’s *13 Ghosts* (1960) or Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*.

More popular than these literary ghosts in the late 1930s and early 1940s was the comedy-fantasy ghost film. Though there were many imitators, the most successful of these were the *Topper* films, of which there were three: *Topper* (1937), *Topper Takes a Trip* (1938), and *Topper Returns* (1941). *Topper* follows the story of a rigid man who is haunted by a fun-loving

¹⁶ Quoted in Mervyn Rothstein, “A New Face in Grover's Corners,” *The New York Times*, December 4, 1988.

¹⁷ Kovacs, *The Haunted Screen*, 144. Contrary to Kovacs’s claim, other plays before *Our Town*, like 1936’s *High Tor*, featured a community of ghosts.

married couple who, predictably, teach him how to live along the way. The film was a box-office hit and skyrocketed the career of Carey Grant. Also of note is the 1945 British production *Blithe Spirit*, in which a man and his new bride are comically tormented by the spirit of his previous wife. Robin Roberts, in her study, *Subversive Spirits: The Female Ghost in British and American Popular Culture*, sees a dynamic gender transition at work within the ghosts of these films:

The female ghosts in *Topper* and *Blithe Spirit* provide more powerful female figures than those in contemporaneous screwball comedies, in which living women end up being domesticated, marrying at the end. Using wit, sarcasm, and playfulness as weapons, comedic female ghosts successfully destabilize gender roles. Like other female ghosts, the apparitions in *Blithe Spirit* and *Topper* challenge the power of male authors to script and control the lives of women. They reflect the fact that gender roles were changing due to the need in England and the United States to have women replace the men who were away fighting in World War II.¹⁸

Roberts's connection to the war makes more sense for *Blithe Spirit* than for the *Topper* films, as the first two films in that American series were released more than two years before Pearl Harbor. Nevertheless, Roberts strikes upon the importance of female characters in these ghost films, and just as important for consideration is the female audiences which filled the theaters during the war years for it was their preferences which facilitated the ghost's brief return to horror.

Tim Snelson has effectively argued for the importance of female viewers and performers in the direction horror took in the 1940s. In *Phantom Ladies: Hollywood Horror and the Home Front*, Snelson examines the effect of female viewers who flocked to theaters in large numbers during the war, for the first time unescorted. With so many men away fighting and more and more women working, resulting in both greater independence and increased disposable income, countless women occupied their time within the darkness of the cinema. Snelson notes, "In

¹⁸ Robin Roberts, *Subversive Spirits: The Female Ghost in British and American Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 12.

focusing upon the bloodshed and misery, film scholarship has missed the excitement, adventure, and fun that wartime cinemagoing provided for women.”¹⁹ Many of these women shunned war movies and even romances — understandable with so many couples separated due to the conflict — and instead chose horror as their preferred escapist genre. *Variety* wrote, “The chillers are cleaning up in most spots around the country, even getting first-run and downtown bookings in unprecedented manner... Chalk it up to the war!”²⁰ Studios quickly took notice of their new audience and created content to fit their interests. RKO, in particular, used Gallup polling to determine that female audiences would be attracted to films with women featured prominently on the advertising.²¹ People liked seeing others like themselves on screen. This accounts for the increased frequency of female horror leads that began to emerge, beginning with 1942’s *Cat People*, produced for RKO by Val Lewton, which set the standards for so many of the female-orientated horror films which followed. The horror film was notable for the time because it was set in modern day New York and featured recognizably ordinary modern people, one of whom even visits a psychiatrist. It was a departure from the popular Universal horror pictures which generally took place in ill-defined European locales. Universal, however, also soon began to incorporate female leads in its horror films. The change did not go unrecognized for pressbooks for *Son of Dracula* (1943) attributed female horror leads as being partially a result of wartime manpower shortages.²²

While women were dominating the horror genre, wartime also brought about another significant shift. Snelson’s research observes “a wider interest in spirituality in 1943 and 1944 that the media put down to anxieties about loved ones overseas and to a search for meaning in

¹⁹ Tim Snelson, *Phantom Ladies: Hollywood Horror and the Home Front* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 10.

²⁰ Quoted in Tim Snelson, *Phantom Ladies*, 56.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²² *Ibid.*, 67.

the horror of wartime.”²³ Beginning in mid-1943, media outlets reported on “the popularization of all manner of spiritual psychic practices and practitioners, including séances, astrology, telepathy, spiritualist mediums, and tea leaf readers. This revival in occult rituals was not attributed to a desire for escapism; rather, it was understood as an attempt to engage with the emotional and epistemological uncertainties of war time.” For instance, in September 1944 the *New York Times* reported that one New York department store had sold more than 50,000 Ouija boards to believing customers. This article and others proposed that the main practitioners of these boards were women who were acting out of wartime anxiety, looking for evidence of the safety of their men abroad.²⁴

These various threads culminate in a film which is a landmark in the American ghost horror film, 1944’s *The Uninvited*. Lisa Morton claims that in many respects it is “the first *real* ghost film”.²⁵ American cinema generally shunned real ghosts in horror films, preferring spirits either explained away or placed within comical or romantic, non-threatening contexts. 1933’s *Supernatural* was more of a science-run-amok possession film, and what haunting was seen was shown through the lens of debunked Spiritualism. Other films certainly followed, but for various reasons did not strike the chord of paranormal terror. 1938’s *A Christmas Carol*, while moderately well-received, tones down the grimmer aspects of the Dickens tale and interweaves a romantic subplot so as to make it more family friendly. 1940’s *Beyond Tomorrow* (a b-picture) was a sincere Christmas ghost story that was poorly reviewed as being preposterous. *A Guy Named Joe* (1943) and *Between Two Worlds* (1944) used ghosts as dramatic explorations of the afterlife but also propagandized by promoting the fittingness of dying for a cause during

²³ Ibid., 88.

²⁴ Ibid., 91.

²⁵ Morton, *Ghosts*, 160, my italics.

wartime. *The Uninvited*, then, appears to be the first genuinely disturbing ghost film that took its spooks seriously and that was well-received by audiences and critics.

Curiously, *The Uninvited* was viewed as a horror picture in its day but has since been lumped in with what have been termed “women’s films” in film scholarship and largely excluded from the horror genre.²⁶ To an extent this is understandable, as the film knowingly plays with elements of women’s films while interweaving moments of dread. Lee Kovacs writes that “*The Uninvited* is an amalgam of terror, romance, and comedy presented as one of the favorite film genres of the 1940s, the ghost story. Instead of adhering to the traditional escapist aesthetic, this film parodies many of the genre’s characteristics in order to create an uneasy contrast. By doing so, *The Uninvited* is able to offer the viewing public an alternative to the purely romantic depiction of the ghost story.”²⁷ Directed by Lewis Allen, and “targeting wartime women’s preferences for adaptations of books with supernatural themes, *The Uninvited* was adapted from Dorothy McArdle’s novel *Uneasy Freehold* (1941), the Christmas bestseller for 1942.”²⁸ The plot, set on the Cornish coast, follows Roderick Fitzgerald (Ray Milland) and his sister, Pamela (Ruth Hussey), who buy the spacious Winward House. Unfortunately, the home is haunted by the ghost of the mother of their neighbor, Stella Meredith (Gail Russell). The ghost, it seems, inexplicably means to harm Stella. By the end a twist is revealed: the home is inhabited by not one but two ghosts, one of whom is actually trying to protect Stella. Elizabeth Russell, who plays the evil ghost Mary Meredith, was a fixture in Lewton’s horror films, connecting it directly with the female monster cycle begun with *Cat People*.²⁹ *The Uninvited*’s advertising posters exploited

²⁶ Snelson, *Phantom Ladies*, 90.

²⁷ Kovacs, *The Haunted Screen*, 87.

²⁸ Snelson, *Phantom Ladies*, 96.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

the film's similarities with Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940), but emphasized both the supernatural and lesbian overtones regarding the character of Miss Halloway (Cornelia Otis Skinner).³⁰

As suggested by the advertising, *The Uninvited* references plot devices which audiences would have recognized from popular ghostly romances and slightly subverts them while adding its own innovations. Kovacs places these elements within the context of wartime:

This restructuring of the basic characteristics of the romantic ghost story combines other new elements as well — it permits the comedic element to be interjected in a heretofore semitragic genre, and it thrusts the ghost story into the immediate present. The Fitzgeralds are a brash, young, down-to-earth team who take on the task of solving a particularly disturbing mystery. This rearrangement of priorities — battle first, reward second — mirrors the timeframe of the 1940s in which a global war is being fought. In this film, the ghost story is no longer pure fantasy, set in a time period far removed from the present, but fantasy juxtaposed with current social and global issues.³¹

Kovacs further explains, “The film adaptation of *The Uninvited* parodies the very popular romantic ghost story of the 1940s by introducing the innovative concept of the ghostfighter (the new warrior) to the screen... *The Uninvited* subverts the romantic ghost story by reenacting scenes from several revered ghost films and then placing the brother-and-sister team of detectives/ghostfighters within the scene.”³²

From the dawn of the American Gothic, the supernatural had been gendered female. This trend continued through the nineteenth century and, as the previous examples have shown, continued into the first half of the twentieth century. *The Uninvited* is no exception, but it does innovate by depicting this gendering as a strength rather than as a weakness. Pam and Stella immediately believe in their supernatural encounters while Rick and Stella's grandfather (Donald Crisp) attempt to scientifically rationalize it away, dismissing the perceived female emotionality. Pam suggests that they use an ouija board to perform a séance; Rick at first scoffs at the idea

³⁰ Ibid., 96.

³¹ Kovacs, *The Haunted Screen*, 87.

³² Ibid., 98.

before agreeing to it as a means of tricking Stella by faking the results, hence reflecting the skepticism surrounding Spiritualist practices. The female characters, it turns out, are the more reasonable and open-minded, as the séance reveals, and the supernatural is not only validated but viewed as a tool for untapped female potential. Snelson writes:

In this scene the séance is clearly demarcated, therefore, as a mode of female communication that is closed off to or denied by men. This could be potentially seen as a counterhegemonic strategy that disrupts, perhaps even short-circuits, the dominant (patriarchal) belief system; in the film it is the rational that is clearly irrational. This representation of the occult as an alternate female language system draws historically on essentialist ideas — women’s intuition and the female irrational. It also offers a microreversal of the power dynamic that could be seen very much to relate to the wartime shifts in women’s roles in the workforce and leisure. Wartime necessity had showed dominant beliefs about women’s capabilities and social wants to have been an elaborate ruse.³³

Kovacs also sees a reflection of women’s wartime independence in the character of young and vibrant Stella: “She is first depicted as a shy child afraid of her grandfather, then a disobedient girl who defies her grandfather, then Rick’s lover, and then a woman who is able to confront a ghost and vanquish her.”³⁴

Reviewers praised the film’s seriousness and restraint and held it up as a horror film for adults, like Lewton’s films. It was certainly unlike Universal’s horror offerings that appealed to younger audiences, one of which, 1942’s *The Ghost of Frankenstein*, even featured the eponymous spirit, albeit briefly. *The New York Times* wrote of the film’s effectiveness: “Proceed at your own risk, we warn you, if you are at all afraid of the dark. For this fiction... is as solemnly intent on raising gooseflesh as any ghost-story weirdly told to a group of shivering youngsters around a campfire on a dark and windy night.”³⁵ Overall, the positive reception of “these reviewers suggest that seriousness and the supernatural were no longer mutually

³³ Snelson, *Phantom Ladies*, 102.

³⁴ Kovacs, *The Haunted Screen*, 104.

³⁵ Bosley Crowther, “The Screen,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1944.

exclusive, thus permitting adult audiences to” engage with questions of ghosts “without feeling stupid, or childish.”³⁶ Furthermore, the approach to the ghost was to understand it, not simply to attack it with holy water. It represented a more reasoned, mature mindset.

However, not everyone welcomed *The Uninvited*, or at least the newfound possibilities the film seemed to suggest. These concerns reflected the larger anxieties surrounding women’s wartime independence and what it meant. Tellingly, the Catholic Legion of Decency conveyed apprehension with the ouija séance scene and that the lesbian subtext of the film might attract lesbians to the theater. Snelson explains:

These concerns around female audiences of a ‘questionable type,’ and around the séance scene’s ‘invitation’ to occult practices and ungrounded emotions, indicate the moral fears around what wartime women were getting up to while men were away. The communities of women involved in war work, and their increasing disposable income, meant that many women came into contact with lifestyles, options, and support mechanisms that they had not encountered before. This resulted in the early war years not only in shifts in women’s attendance practices at urban cinemas but also in a burgeoning lesbian scene in major cities such as New York, where the Legion’s concerns were raised.³⁷

Without question these female ghosts represented a freedom for women that all were not ready or willing to accept. Robin Roberts suggests that the female ghost “provides an alternative to the masculine supernatural that often merely reifies the world as it is: misogynistic and oppressive. Even though the female ghost is deceased, her existence and her actions provide reason for optimism. By exposing sexism and misogyny, the female spirit in popular culture models a trajectory of knowledge that is relevant for her living readers and viewers.”³⁸ As the war wound down horror subsided from cinema screens, and with it the female ghost. After the very real and very human atrocities of war, the horror genre appeared tame by comparison. Additionally,

³⁶ Snelson, *Phantom Ladies*, 99-100.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁸ Roberts, *Subversive Spirits*, 162.

Snelson writes, “while censorship loosened up on urban crime drama, the policy on horror became increasingly tight, largely in response to its perceived reckless approach to scientific and psychological issues.”³⁹ Ultimately, the female monster pioneered by Lewton and apexed by *The Uninvited* “was overtaken by the secular femme fatale of film noir, who seemingly gave the Hays Office far less concern.”⁴⁰

The Uninvited, therefore, stands as a rare exception to American depictions of ghosts in horror cinema for the specters are real and both the story and viewer reception are taken seriously. While the film certainly impacted the horror genre, its seeds would take more than a decade to germinate. In the meantime cinematic ghosts continued to be either ignored or diminished in their power to frighten. As Lisa Morton notes, “In 1945 on-screen ghosts were tamed by the arrival of Casper, whose first cartoon short, *The Friendly Ghost*, set up the iconic character as a child ghost who is more interested in befriending humans than frightening them. By the 1950s interest in ghosts seemed to have waned overall, as they seem largely absent from both cinemas and newspapers; paranormal investigation turned mainly to flying saucers.”⁴¹ By the late 1950s into the 1960s ghosts began appearing once again, though on admittedly smaller screens. The television show *One Step Beyond* ran from 1959-1961 and presented many stories of the supernatural. It was a docudrama anthology series directed and hosted by John Newland in a manner popularized by Alfred Hitchcock in *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-1965) and subsequently by Rod Serling in *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964). In the first episode Newland, often credited as “your guide to the supernatural,” tells audiences, “The amazing drama you are about to see is a matter of human record; you may believe it or not.” Other shows, including Serling’s and *Boris Karloff’s Thriller* (1960-1962), also presented audiences with ghost stories.

³⁹ Snelson, *Phantom Ladies*, 137.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴¹ Morton, *Ghosts*, 85.

As more families gathered before their television sets each evening, filmmakers of the late 1950s felt the need to devise new ways of getting audiences' attention to bring them back to the theaters. Just as women became the target demographic during wartime, the teenager emerged as the frequent drive-in and theater-goer, with money to spend and the time to spend it. One director with a showman's flair was William Castle whose gimmicks excited young audiences and drew them into the theaters in droves. Castle's first foray into the world of promotional gimmicks was for 1958's *Macabre*, for which a \$1,000 life insurance policy from Lloyd's of London was given to each customer in case they should die of fright during the film. His next film proved to be one of his most successful, *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), starring Vincent Price. A decidedly campy offering, the film calls back to the Old Dark House films in which the supernatural occurrences, at least most of them, are explained away in the end. Price plays Frederick Loren, an eccentric millionaire who throws a party for his wife in an allegedly haunted house, inviting strangers to stay the night. If they survive, they will be awarded \$10,000. However, duplicity and deception are continuously at work and Loren is aware that his wife (played by Carol Ohmart) is plotting to kill him. Loren manages to turn the tables, using a marionette skeleton to scare her and to make her fall into a vat of acid. Castle dubbed his gimmick this time as "Emergo" and entailed a fake skeleton flying over the audience. Not everyone was impressed. *The New York Times* dismissed the film:

In "House on Haunted Hill," a stale spook concoction from the William Castle-Robb White production team, an eccentric millionaire, Vincent Price, offers five strangers \$10,000 each to stay in the joint overnight. It's quite a place. Chandeliers crash, human heads casually turn up in table boxes, a couple of cackling ghosts scoot around (on roller skates, apparently), and downstairs in the cellar a pool of acid yawns invitingly. This bore also introduces "the amazing new wonder, Emergo." What is it? Not much of anything. As a skeleton entered the proceedings yesterday (the remains of poor Carol Ohmart), the house lights of the R. K. O. Fifty-eighth Street Theatre dimmed and a luminescent counterpart appeared suspended next to the screen. With a whistling of wires, and

considerable audience snickering, it slid straight forward to the balcony, blankly eyed the first-row customers, and slid back. Here was one performer who obviously couldn't wait to meet the public and instantly regretted it.⁴²

In his memoir, Castle recalled the first sneak preview of the film in which an elderly gentleman whispered to him, “The biggest piece of shit I've ever seen.” Nevertheless, ever the crafty entertainer, Castle knew his target audience and designed his films to their tastes. Castle continues, “*The House on Haunted Hill* was sneaked for the wrong audience. For the next preview, I made sure there was a young audience present, and the results were just the opposite — the response was wildly enthusiastic and the comments on the preview cards were excellent. We knew we had a hit.”⁴³ For the opening sequence of the film, Castle leaves his audience in the dark of the theater with only the sounds of screams and ghostly moaning to keep them company, giving the impression that the theater is itself haunted. For cultural historian David J. Skal, however, the “real, if unintentional, spook... is postwar affluence.” Skal sees the film as a critique of classist abuse and capitalist greed: “An American microcosm of haves and have-nots assemble in a modern ancient house, with a wealthy eccentric... exerting a malign influence over the lives of his guests... No indignity is too great — in boom-time fifties America, anything is enduring in the pursuit of financial reward.”⁴⁴ The movie was a success. Alfred Hitchcock even took notice, seeing the large profits earned by the low-budget film, and set out to make his own horror offering, 1960's *Psycho*.

William Castle next made *The Tingler* (1959) and followed it up with a film offering the experience of real ghosts. 1960's *13 Ghosts* featured a child protagonist and many winking comical moments, such as casting Margaret Hamilton as the housekeeper suspected of being a

⁴² Howard Thompson, “Screen: New Double Bill; ' Legion of Doomed' and 'Haunted' House Here,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 1959.

⁴³ William Castle, *Step Right Up! I'm Gonna Scare the Pants Off America* (William Castle Productions, 1976), 162.

⁴⁴ David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1993), 257.

witch. Murray Leeder writes that “Castle consciously drew on the iconographies of the trick film in order to position himself... as a master horror showman, albeit with his tongue placed firmly in his cheek.”⁴⁵ Castle utilizes the double-exposure techniques of early cinema to show his ghosts, and knowingly drew from cinematic history to create a sense of fun. The gimmick this time was “Illusion-O”, essentially modified 3D glasses which forced the viewer to look through either all red cellophane lenses or all blue. One intensified the images of the ghosts on screen via a coloration process while the other removed them, hence daring the audience to be brave and see the ghosts. While most critics remarked at how un-frightening the movie was (its tone is light and kid-friendly) it nevertheless marked a return of the real ghost to American horror cinema for the first time since *The Uninvited*.

However, the 1960s began the dawn of a new era for horror. Thanks in part to Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, an emphasis on “modern horror” emerged. Horror filmmakers began to look *within* for the monster rather than *without*. Though ghosts proved slow to find their place in this new arena, they ultimately showed themselves to be the perfect monsters for which to explore the decay of the mind and of the family unit. The American dream it would reveal is a nightmare haunted by the revenants of guilt, stress, and mistrust.

⁴⁵ Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural*, 161.

CHAPTER FOUR:
“Suppose the haunting is all in my mind.” (1961-1973)

Psycho is not a ghost film, but in a sense Norman Bates could be said to be haunted. It is not the spirit of his mother that plagues him, but his psychological reconstruction of her. Nevertheless, the results are not much different than a possession film, such as the ghost of the murderous Ruth Rogen who possessed Carole Lombard's Roma Courtney in 1933's *Supernatural*, nearly driving her to commit homicide. Had Hitchcock chosen to remove Robert Bloch's reason and to explain Norman's situation at the end in spiritual rather than psychological terms the preceding scenes would not have needed to be different. As it was 1960s audiences were generally more interested in seeing psychoses in horror films than ghosts, but that does not mean that ghosts were not present. Rather, it means that these spirits came to be viewed through the lens of psychosis, harkening back to the early American Gothic concerns about sanity, viewing the experience of ghosts as symptomatic of mental instability.

The two films which best express this, and which have come to be highly regarded within the ghostly horror subgenre, are Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961) and Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963). While both films are British productions, both are also based upon American literature. Just two years earlier Jack Clayton helped to inaugurate the British New Wave movement which used black and white cinematography in a *cinéma vérité* style. *The Innocents* was adapted from a play by the Trinidadian-born William Archibald (who was living in New York), with a script by Truman Capote, of course based on the American novella by Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Robert Wise was an American director associated with Orson Welles and Val Lewton. His directing debut had been 1944's *The Curse of the Cat People*, in which the ghost of *Cat People*'s Irena befriends a little girl and helps to save her life. Despite

the sensationalist title, it was a subdued drama which was in keeping with the 1940's depictions of benevolent ghosts, and it was the "film that marked the critical (if not the commercial) turning point in Lewton's reception as a producer and establish his films as cinematic classics to the present day."¹

Whereas William Castle was employing the newest gimmicks to attract audiences to his movies, Clayton and Wise looked to the sensibilities of 1940s ghost films for their aesthetic pastiche and in doing so attempted to establish themselves as makers of prestige horror films. Many of the prestige horror films of the era harkened back to the war years, especially to the female-centered films; some revitalized the careers of stars such as Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. Mark Jancovich explains that "in the early 1960s, horror was not simply a low-end game, and the period was witnessing a significant boom in major studio horror productions, particularly in the aftermath of *Psycho*. The prestige horror films of this period were a diverse and complex group."² Supernatural horror, it turns out, was still something of a hard sell in the 1960s, particularly if the film took place in a contemporary setting. Barry Forshaw, in his survey *British Gothic Cinema*, cautions that such films should be viewed in the context of their "then-modern 1960s settings when the supernatural would have been far less easy to accept for cynical audiences (period-set horror films allowing the viewer to cut more slack for the implausible, and the distancing accoutrements of the past — with their fairy-tale associations — making the contract of suspension of disbelief between filmmaker and viewer easily fulfilled)."³ In order to get around audience incredulity and to gain a sense of legitimacy, Clayton and Wise connected their films to earlier respected works, both literary and cinematic. Jancovich writes that these

¹ Mark Jancovich, "Antique Chiller": Quality, Pretension, and History in the Critical Reception of *The Innocents* and *The Haunting*," in *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*, ed. Murray Leeder (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 128.

² Jancovich, "Antique Chiller," 123.

³ Barry Forshaw, *British Gothic Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 117.

“aspirations to quality meant that these films (through their use of literary, theatrical, and other materials, through the personal, both stars and directors, and through stylistic features such as their use of black and white) were linked to earlier classic texts, particularly the quality horror films of the 1940s.”⁴ He explains that “both *The Innocents* and *The Haunting* used black and white photography, not only because they had less to prove in terms of their market position but also because of the connotations of color at the time. If color was important for Hammer and AIP to break into the middle-bracket, highbrow cinema was still associated with black and white. In the art film, black and white was often associated with realism... or with restraint and respectability.”⁵ *The Innocents*, at least, with its historical setting and beginnings on stage, made the ghosts more palatable. Both films abandon the double-exposure technique of classic Hollywood, and used by Castle in *13 Ghosts*, and instead opt for negative space to suggest its spirits. Negative space was used in some of the classic 1940s films like *The Uninvited* (until the end staircase scene) or in the spectral suggestions of *Rebecca*. *The Haunting*, in fact, showed no ghosts at all, but relied solely on disorientating angles and disembodied sounds to generate its scariest scenes. *The Innocents* showed its ghosts, not in the double-exposure manner of the past, but as fully corporeal entities (a tactic later directors would use, such as Stanley Kubrick in *The Shining*).⁶ Nevertheless, these efforts at first backfired, for initial critics responded coldly to both films due to their attempts to recapture an earlier aesthetic: “The chief complaint about them was precisely that they were hackneyed and predictable; that they were not just formulaic or overly familiar but even old-fashioned.”⁷

⁴ Jancovich, “‘Antique Chiller,’” 117.

⁵ Ibid., 126.

⁶ Hantke, “‘I See Dead People,’” 183-190.

⁷ Jancovich, “‘Antique Chiller,’” 117.

However, in terms of their subject matter both films were solidly contemporary. Lisa Morton notes that “in the 1960s a new era of permissiveness in storytelling allowed filmmakers to uproot the psychosexual subtext of classic ghost books,” most especially in *The Innocents* and *The Haunting*.⁸ Both *The Innocents* and *The Haunting* can be read as narratives of female psychosis with undercurrents of sexual repression/frustration. The 1950s saw an emphasis on mutual sexual satisfaction within marriage, with adverse psychological problems resulting especially from dissatisfied wives.⁹ Even worse, as Elaine Tyler May explains, “individuals who chose personal paths that did not include marriage and parenthood risked being perceived as perverted, immoral, unpatriotic, and pathological... Most theorists believed that women married to strong men who assumed their rightful economic and sexual dominance in the home would channel their sexual energy appropriately into marriage.”¹⁰ At a time when Americans were marrying in their late teens, the central female protagonists of *The Innocents* and *The Haunting* are plainly played by actresses who are past their prime marriage years; in fact, they are old enough to have children of marrying age themselves.

In *The Innocents* a new governess, Miss Giddens, played by Deborah Kerr (who was forty), is charged with caring for two young children, however, she soon suspects that their lives are in danger from the ghosts of two former inhabitants, their former governess Miss Jessel (Clytie Jessop) and the late groundskeeper Peter Quint (Peter Wyngarde). It is never clear whether the ghosts are real, or are a product of Miss Giddens’ fragile psyche. This approach to the source material is a result of the writings of critic Edmund Wilson who in the 1930s suggested that the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw* did not exist. Rather, he supposed that they

⁸ Morton, *Ghosts*, 85.

⁹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 102.

¹⁰ May, *Homeward Bound*, 83-84.

were symptoms of the governess's neurosis. Though this interpretation came decades after the novella's release it has proven an influential lens through which to view the tale (and also the film adaptation). Barry Forshaw writes that *The Innocents* "is able to mix the various elements into a whole that functions both as a genuinely disturbing supernatural story or (for those who wish to adopt a more rational view) the projection of a frustrated woman's sexual neurosis onto her two innocent childish charges — bringing about the destruction of one of them."

Additionally, the "unsparing results may be read as the consequence of the projection of the governess' own psyche (her own repression is hinted at in her one [sexually] charged encounter with her employer, played in charismatic but chilly fashion by Micheal Redgrave)."¹¹ There is also the disturbing suggestion that Miss Jessel and Quint had performed dark sexual acts and that the children may have been involved.

The Haunting is based upon Shirley Jackson's well-regarded *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), and follows four individuals who seek to explore the supernatural claims of the opulent Hill House. Jackson's work suggests that the house is inherently wrong, that it was malevolent from its conception. In a case of nature versus nurture, Hill House was born bad. Jackson's opening paragraph (and, in part, it is also its closing one,) is one of the most famous in all of literature:

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.¹²

¹¹ Forshaw, *British Gothic Cinema*, 120.

¹² Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 1.

This idea of an inherently haunted space eroding the psyche of its inhabitants would prove influential for ghost films of the following decade, as will be seen in later films such as *Burnt Offerings* (1976), *The Amityville Horror* (1979) and *The Shining*, for “in the modern gothic, a house is generally much more than a house: rather, it can be taken to have a direct connection with the psychological landscape of the persons who inhabit it.”¹³ In *The Haunting*, one sees psychosexual frustration in Eleanor (Julie Harris, in her late thirties). Eleanor begins a friendship with Theo (Claire Bloom) which contains a lesbian subtext (at least on Theo’s part), but Eleanor soon feels rejected by everyone, especially the males in the house. Writing about the novel, but with an observation relevant to the film, Laura Miller writes that “Eleanor’s dilemmas are those of a prepubescent child, not an adult woman; sexuality requires an autonomy and a self-knowledge she hasn’t got yet.”¹⁴ Eleanor is depicted as someone of stunted maturity due to the long years spent caring for her sick mother, and is now searching for a place to belong. She finds it in Hill House, the walls of which have scrawled upon them “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME”. Eleanor’s mental and emotional stability are increasingly called into question, and her death at the end is left open to interpretation — was she crazy, or haunted?

Richard Matheson would put his own sordid spin on Jackson’s formula by ramping up the psychosexual tension with his script for *The Legend of Hell House* (1973), directed by John Hough (and based upon Matheson’s 1971 novel *Hell House*). Once again, four individuals enter a reputedly haunted mansion to investigate and meet their untimely ends (most of them). The British production moves Matheson’s Belasco House from Maine to England. In the decade between Wise’s restrained work and the release of Hough’s film the American landscape — cinematically, politically, and socially — was severely altered. Social mores were changed by

¹³ Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 107.

¹⁴ Laura Miller, “Introduction,” *The Haunting of Hill House*, xviii.

counterculture, the conflict in Vietnam, and the sexual revolution. Whereas *The Haunting* purposefully subdued its sexual elements, especially in regard to Theo's sexual orientation, *Hell House* is overt in its exploration of erotic tension as the spirits here do far more than simply hold your hand at night. As Ann Barret (Gayle Hunnicutt) seethes through clenched teeth, barely able to contain her lustful desire as whatever is in the house affects her sleep, "You... me... that girl... Lionel... all together... naked... drunk... clutching... sweating... biting..." There's never a doubt that a supernatural force is at play, assaulting the investigators and playing upon their weaknesses. The cinematography explores odd, disorientating angles, uses frequent close-ups and makes a habit of introducing characters on reflective surfaces. Much like *Hill House*, the Belasco-haunted *Hell House* becomes its own character as the camera sweeps across its interior. The sets are cluttered with gaudy Victoriana, making even the most expansive enclosures feel pressing and claustrophobic. The decor also serves to help resurrect nineteenth-century Spiritualist practices into the ghost film, such as ectoplasm emitting from the medium Florence Tanner (Pamela Franklin, who also played Flora in *The Innocents*). Unlike the black and white cinematography of Clayton and Wise, Hough uses bold colors, including associating red with the medium.

Like with *The Uninvited*, the ghost once again became a storytelling monster for adults, reflecting mature anxieties about identity, sanity, and self-control. These spirits that began tapping into the darkest recesses of the human mind would continue to excavate even blacker nightmares in the 1970s. However, the ghost would largely leave behind the remote and cavernous mansions, symbols of an old and disconnected opulence, and enter the familiar family home. The unsuspecting suburb, and the working class families that occupied them (or sought to), would become haunted by economic insecurity, social pressures, and their own self-loathing.

CHAPTER FIVE: “They’ll nickel and dime you to death” (1974-1982)

Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* ushered in a new age of horror, replacing the classic horror of the monster-from-without to the modern, or neo-horror, of the monster-from-within. Modern horror is steeped in pessimism; it often lacks the comforts of hope and community with which the classic horror of the 1950s and prior abounded, with few exceptions. Roger Luckhurst writes that late twentieth-century “horror is secular in a way the Gothic is not, because the Gothic clings to a Christian metaphysic of good and evil, justice and punishment. Secular horror instead offers a glimpse of the absolute black nothingness that lies beneath the maze of appearances, a revelation that there is no transcendent reality, only the final death of meaning.”¹ Modern horror emphasized the fallibility of the mind and soul, and a laxing of censorship meant that filmmakers could indulge in more graphic, gory spectacles. Directors like Wes Craven, John Carpenter, George Romero, and David Cronenberg reinvented the genre for a new age, but during the 1970s they seemed largely uninterested in ghosts as their subjects. Steffen Hantke writes that “as so-called neo-horror upped the ante on graphic abjection, it is hardly surprising that films about ghosts were never a significant part of this new wave. To find a neo-horror ghost film, one must turn to a director removed from canonical neo-horror auteurs.”² This chapter will therefore at first discuss directors like Dan Curtis, Stuart Rosenberg, and Stanley Kubrik, with the neo-horror auteurs Carpenter, Craven, and Tobe Hooper finally making their contributions to the ghost film in the first half of the following decade.

Not only did the location of the monster change (within as opposed to without), but the location of the story changed as well. The ghost moved from the echoing halls of aristocratic

¹ Luckhurst, *The Shining*, 87.

² Hantke, “‘I See Dead People,’” 190.

excess to the familiar surroundings of the family home (with few exceptions, such as 1980's *The Changeling* and *The Shining*). Literary and film scholar Bernice M. Murphy explains this process, which was long in the making:

The most notable conventions of the European gothic form were clearly ill-suited to the moral, intellectual and emotional climate of the New World. The vast wilderness, isolated Puritan settlements and fledgling cities of colonial America would not support the entirely old-world structures of castles, abbeys, ancient ruins and underground passages associated with the European gothic, nor the specific cultural context under which they had been deployed. In order to overcome the inevitable shortcomings of the European formula, the American Gothic would have to look to its own landscape to provide substitute settings. Consequently, in the American gothic, the family home replaced the castle as the central locus of terror.³

Historian Elaine Tyler May writes, “The sexually charged, child-centered family took its place at the center of the postwar American dream. The most tangible symbol of that dream was the suburban home — the locale of the good life, the evidence of democratic abundance.”⁴ The suburban home became a primary setting in horror in the 1950s, however, those seemingly tranquil neighborhoods were plagued by aliens, blobs, and giant insects, not ghosts. 1960's *13 Ghosts* took place in a suburban home, albeit one more akin to the Old Dark Houses of the 1920s and 1930s, with hidden compartments filled with cash and beds that suffocate their inhabitants at the push of a button. Murphy shows, in her study, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, that the newly established suburbs became both a source of and a location for emerging anxieties, that the rapid change in lifestyle was dangerously altering not only the landscape and the national psyche, but the very minds of its residents:

Suburbia itself was blamed for the sudden and undesirable change in the national character, as though the environment itself had exerted some sort of mysterious force over its unwitting inhabitants. For some cultural commentators during the 1950s (and since) suburban development had become a genuine evil; its inhabitants alienated, mindlessly materialistic zombies, its cozy, cheap houses as

³ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 105.

⁴ May, *Homeward Bound*, 143.

disturbing in their own way as any haunted castle. No wonder then that the post-war era also saw the rebirth of the horror and gothic genres: the time was right for a new variety of fictional unease, and it was fitting — as well as predictable, given the ubiquity of the suburban landscape in post-war America — that suburbia should become a significant setting for such narratives.⁵

The suburbs are distinguished as being a place in-between, much as ghosts are, making them in a way perfect for tales of the supernatural. As Renée L. Bergland explains, “Ghosts haunt the frontiers between the visible and the invisible worlds, partaking of both, belonging to neither. In some sense then, ghosts can be understood as frontier beings.”⁶ Suburban advertisers depicted customers as pioneers of a new frontier. Add to this the suburban inefficient use of natural resources, of its damage to the environment, and of its dependence upon oil as a means of transportation, and many wondered (and still do) if the whole enterprise was doomed from its conception, destined to abandonment and ruin, that it had all been a terrible mistake.⁷ John Keats, in his 1956 diatribe against suburbia, *The Crack in the Picture Window*, offers a telling hyperbolic condemnation, writing that “we offer here for your inspection facts relative to today’s housing developments — developments conceived in error, nurtured by greed, corroding everything they touch. They destroy established cities and trade patterns, pose dangerous problems for the areas they invade, and actually drive mad myriads of housewives shut up in them.”⁸ Furthermore, because suburban tracts were largely indistinguishable from one another the actual location of the suburb mattered little, freeing monsters and then ghosts to manifest anywhere across the country. The cinematic specter was no longer tied to ancestral abodes (though as we’ll see they do not sever themselves from history); they followed Americans to the

⁵ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 16.

⁶ Bergland, *National Uncanny*, 50.

⁷ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 4.

⁸ John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1956), 7.

suburbs, which by 1970 held more people than the cities or farms.⁹ From all of this comes an inversion of the American suburban dream of comfort, hope, and security, a gothic mirror that distorts and warps each facet with nightmarish clarity. Murphy sums the contrast nicely with her own opposing-binary list:

The Suburban Dream:

1. Homely
2. The chance to at last have a home of one's own
3. Nice neighbors
4. The utopian setting for a better life
5. A safe place for children
6. A place in which to make a fresh start
7. A bucolic refuge from the overcrowded and polluted cities
8. Family focused
9. An opportunity to live amongst like-minded people
10. White picket fences and neatly mown lawns
11. A place insulated from the dangers of the outside world

The Suburban Nightmare:

1. Haunted
2. The chance to fall into debt and financial entanglement
3. Neighbors with something terrible to hide
4. A place of entrapment and unhappiness
5. An obvious hunting ground for paedophiles and child murderers
6. A place haunted by the familial and communal past
7. Destroyer of the countryside and devourer of natural resources
8. A claustrophobic breeding ground for dysfunctionality and abuse
9. A place of mindless conformity and materialism
10. Basements, crawlspaces and back gardens
11. A place in which the most dangerous threats come from *within*, not from without¹⁰

⁹ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the “American horror film since 1960 has consistently used suburbia as a setting for narratives in which the concepts that allegedly lie at the very heart of the national psyche — the privacy and safety of the home, the sanctity and inherent moral worth of the nuclear family, and the superiority of the capitalist, consumption-driven way of life — are systematically (and at times) gleefully deconstructed. The threat in these films almost always comes not from without, but from within.”¹¹ As will be seen, the ghost horror films of the 1970s and 1980s explore/exploit each fear found within Murphy’s “Suburban Nightmare” list.

The success in 1968 of Roman Polansky’s adaptation of Ira Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby* caused studios to look to make domestic horror films that appealed to women in their thirties, once again targeting female audiences as they had in the 1940s. This resulted in a more consistently adult-orientated horror industry which generated some of the most deeply held favorites of the genre, including films like William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1973), which was the first horror film to be nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards. Though a young girl was possessed, the drama revolved around the crises of two adult protagonists, the girl’s distraught mother and a priest/psychologist riddled with guilt and losing faith. This mature focus lasted until the late 1970s when the industry again turned its attention to teens after the surprising financial windfall of slashers like *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980). In the meantime, terrifying screen-ghosts finally saw their heyday. They entered American horror cinema seemingly for good, their popularity sometimes waning but continually seeing occasional, yet significant, resurgences along the way.

The first of these films is Dan Curtis’s *Burnt Offerings* (1976), based upon the 1973 novel by Robert Marasco. It tells of a working class family — Ben Rolf (Oliver Reed), his wife

¹¹ Ibid., 136.

Marian (Karen Black), their 12-year-old son Davey (Lee H. Montgomery), and Ben's elderly Aunt Elizabeth (Bette Davis) — who rent a bedraggled but impressive house for their summer vacation, allowing the family an opportunity to enjoy a level of comfort beyond what their modest income normally allows. The owners are two elderly siblings, Roz (Eileen Heckart) and Arnold Allardyce (Burgess Meredith), who have one odd request while they are away: that the family bring food to their old mother who lives upstairs, a woman who supposedly prefers privacy and who they will never see nor speak to. Despite this strange caveat the Rolfs find the chance too good to pass up. Though the grand old house is in need of repair, Roz assures the family, “The house takes care of itself.” In fact, she tells them, “God, when it comes alive — tell them, Brother. Tell them what it's like in the summer.” “Well they'd never believe it — it's beyond *anything* that you have *ever* seen in your life,” Arnold says. Roz adds, “There are centuries in this room, Mrs. Rolf... there are years, years in this house.” Arnold finishes, “Oh yes, and this house will be here long, long after you have departed. You'll believe me.” Indeed, the house does “take care of itself”; like a psychic vampire, the house drains the inhabitants of their sanity, repairing itself as it strips the Rolfs of their identity and security. Elizabeth, once active and vivacious, grows sickly and confused and passes away suddenly. Ben becomes prone to violent outbursts and nearly drowns Davey in the pool during a bout of horseplay. Everyone grows fearful and suspicious of the house except for Marian, who obsessively busies herself with housework and becomes more concerned with the home than with her family. Marian becomes the film's crux, an avatar for the house itself. It is the treatment of Marian, in particular, which sets *Burnt Offerings* firmly within the “brief yet significant period in which older, married, domestically positioned women's concerns were seen as central to mass market, big budget horror films.”¹²

¹² Dara Downey, “Locating the Specter in Dan Curtis's *Burnt Offerings*,” in *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and*

Dara Downey places *Burnt Offerings* within what is termed “marital Gothic” (a concept first suggested by Michelle Massé), which differs from conventional Gothic which ends when the woman weds and instead begins after the marriage. Husbands are generally seen as oppressive authorities who use the privacy of the home and their economic dominance to suppress their wives. Certainly, the domestic tranquility promised by suburbia bred its various frustrations and feelings of unfulfillment. May’s writing of 1950s suburbia is instructive in understanding the attitudes of housewives and suburban mothers of the following generation, especially those who would have been raised but these dissatisfied mothers: “As with expectations for exciting sexuality or fulfilling child rearing, the suburban ideal often promised more than it delivered,” for instance, women “often complained about feeling trapped and isolated, facing endless chores of housekeeping and tending to children. For them, suburban life was not a life of fun and leisure but of exhausting work and isolation.”¹³ Downey further explains that the “rise of suburbia and the explosion in single-family housing following the Second World War transformed the housewife, arguably even more completely than nineteenth-century ideology had, into little more than an extension of the house itself, put on display by and as a vital component of the disciplinary mechanism that it was her job to maintain.”¹⁴ In particular, “Curtis’s film is unusually explicit about the imprisoning and dangerous qualities of domestic space, the structure of its plot drawing attention to the ways in which the cinematic and critical foregrounding of mentally unhinged individuals actively obfuscates the domineering nature of a house.”¹⁵ Both men and women appeared to be at risk, according to this and other horror stories of the era: “What if the critics are right, many such texts suggest, and living in the

Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era, ed. Murray Leeder (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 146.

¹³ May, *Homeward Bound*, 155.

¹⁴ Downey, “Locating the Specter,” 152.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

suburbs does make one a mindless, materialistic zombie? Are they a particularly dangerous place for wives and mothers left at home all day? And does the white collar lifestyle erode masculinity?”¹⁶ Downey notes that the “house in *Burnt Offerings* exploits gendered stereotypes in order to conceal the extent to which it actively enforces certain kinds of gender roles, particularly for women.” Marian seeks to escape her sexually aggressive husband by becoming lost in household tasks, “however, both film and novel imply that doing so is in fact not merely futile but contradictory, binding Marion more tightly within the confines of middle-class domesticity, even as it transforms her into an avatar of monstrous femininity.”¹⁷ Downey continues, explaining how the house itself becomes a symbol for oppression:

The house in *Burnt Offerings* therefore serves as a powerful symbol for the ways in which domestic ideology effectively tricked women throughout the twentieth century in the United States (and indeed in Europe), enticing them with the promise of privacy, self-determination, and meaningful work. Faced with such appealing possibilities, *Burnt Offerings* suggests, middle-class American women became the dupes, not of individual men, or of their own damaged psychologies, but of a wider system of patriarchal ideology, of which the house was the most insidious and ubiquitous avatar. Under its seductive sway, like Marian, who is ultimately transformed into the living ghost haunting a mansion that she loves better than her husband and son, millions of women threw themselves willingly and enthusiastically into self-forged chains.¹⁸

Murphy agrees, for *Burnt Offerings* (and films of its ilk) “[o]bliquely acknowledges the fear that has been there since the beginning of mass suburbanization: the terrible feeling that perhaps by finally having almost all of their material wants satisfied, Americans — and in particular American women — have unwittingly sacrificed something far more valuable and completely irreplaceable.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 4.

¹⁷ Downey, “Locating the Specter,” 144.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁹ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 102.

Nevertheless, women were not the only ones whose traditional roles were being reexamined and skewered in ghostly horror films. The entire enterprise of the family was called into question. The toxicity of patriarchy and its connection to the issue of child abuse are to be found in *Burnt Offerings* and in the next two films which will be discussed, *The Amityville Horror* and *The Shining*. Certainly, children were viewed with a level of suspicion in the most popular horror films of the era, from *Rosemary's Baby* (“What have you done to it? What have you done to its eyes?”) to *The Exorcist* to Richard Donner’s *The Omen* (1976, “He's killed once, he'll kill again. He'll kill until everything that's yours is his”). Roger Luckhurst writes that the 1970s were a time ripe with conversations about the breakdown of the American family:

In the 1970s, the divorce rate in America peaked, and a conservative backlash in defence of the family was wracked with anxiety over teenage pregnancy, youth crime, inner-city violence and ‘stranger abductions’... Panics about sexual abuse of children begin to surface as a result of feminist activism in the late 1970s: Florence Bush’s *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* appeared in 1980.

Conservatives blamed permissive parenting: the child-centered world of Benjamin Spock’s self-help manuals had produced a generation of privileged brats resenting any discipline or authority. Children could even be feared by family values campaigners. In 1970, Richard Nixon’s psychotherapist, Dr. Arnold Hutschnecker, gained notoriety for writing a memo to the president that allegedly proposed that all seven- and eight-year-olds should be tested for violent homicidal tendencies. Even without this panic narrative, the medicalisation of child behaviour problems accelerated in the 1970s. Ritalin became a popular drug to manage ‘attention deficit’ and children. The kids were revolting.²⁰

The domestic dream espoused in the 1950s’ flight to suburbia appeared to be breaking down amid social revolutions, the effects of the war in Vietnam, and economic instability. The family, once seen as the cornerstone of America’s strength, was seemingly experiencing the symptomatic rot of national decay. The nuclear family was no longer an aspiration; it became a cautionary tale. Luckhurst continues: “In keeping with 1970s paranoia about family collapse, this was the era of the ‘anti-psychiatry’ movement, when figures like R. D. Laing argued that the

²⁰ Luckhurst, *The Shining*, 33.

normal behaviours defined by society were driving western families insane. Laing's ally David Cooper wrote in *The Death of the Family* that the 'bourgeois family unit' was a 'suicide pact' which generated only rage, alienation and inauthentic living: it demanded 'sacrificial offering' and 'passive submission to invasion by others'.²¹ Men had seemingly grown soft, their assured authority compromised and questioned, and the patriarchal figures in *Burnt Offerings*, *The Amityville Horror*, *The Shining*, and later, *Poltergeist* (1982) and *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* (1986), are either child abusers, threaten to become abusers, or are without the means to stop the abuse done to their children. Furthermore, as we have seen, the supernatural and susceptibility to it had long been gendered female, and the seeming breakdown of masculinity can account for the newfound vulnerability of men toward the otherworldly in horror films (a move that is taken further in the new millennium). *Burnt Offerings*, *The Amityville Horror*, *The Shining*, and *Poltergeist*, remarks literary scholar Kimberly Jackson, were "all produced within a few years of each other, during the rise of neoconservatism and the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency. A period of economic depression, a perceived decline in the position of the United States as a military powerhouse, and a lack of confidence in the presidency contributed to an overall crisis in patriarchy and a desire to rebuild the image of masculine authority in the face of it. All... [these] films feature families besieged by demons representative of economic unrest and paternal impotence or instability."²² Other ghostly horror films of the time period, which are not examined in depth in this work, such as *Don't Look Now* (1973), *The Haunting of Julia* (1977, starring *Rosemary's* Mia Farrow), and *The Changeling*, also feature themes of child deaths and the parents who are unable to prevent them.

²¹ Ibid., 39.

²² Kimberly Jackson, *Gender and the Nuclear Family in Twenty-First-Century Horror* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 66.

As has been briefly mentioned already, these films are also deeply immersed in contemporary working-class economic anxieties. This is to be expected. As Colin Dickey suggests, in his thoughtful analysis of American hauntings, “The archetypal haunted house story is fundamentally about class: new money who doesn’t understand the land or the people or the history blunders into the landscape, attempting to buy his way into a community, blithely oblivious to the locals. A legend goes unheeded, a terrible secret is unearthed, sacred land is disturbed, and so forth.”²³ *Burnt Offerings* is as much about class as it is about gender and domesticity. The Rolfs rent the Allardyce mansion in order to experience a summer outside of their working-class experience, ignoring the warning signs that the house is an investment that will cost them far more than the \$900 the Allardyce siblings are asking. Murphy, in looking at the novel and film, writes that Marian Rolf “spends her days in New York longing for the day when her family can finally trade up to a suburban idyll of their own... By summer’s end, most of the family are dead, killed by a kind of psychic vampirism; the house has mysteriously been restored to pristine perfection; and... [Marian] finally has her house in the country, but at a terrible price. Her desire to advance socially and economically has cost her everything of real importance.”²⁴

More than *Burnt Offerings*, however, *The Amityville Horror* is more clearly about class and the dread of bankruptcy. Directed by Stuart Rosenberg, the film is based upon the supposedly true haunting of 112 Ocean Avenue in Amityville, New York, novelized by Jay Anson for his book of the same name, subtitled “A True Story” on the cover of its first edition print. While experts generally suspect the account of George and Kathy Lutz to have been a hoax, certain elements are factual. On November 13, 1974, Ronald (“Butch”) DeFeo Jr. shot and

²³ Dickey, *Ghostland*, 268.

²⁴ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 108-109.

killed six members of his family at the home and was convicted of second-degree murder in November 1975. The following month, George and Kathy Lutz and their three children moved into the house and left after 28 days, claiming to have been besieged by malignant paranormal forces within the home. Murphy rightfully observes that “Anson’s book gained notice not because it was particularly well written (it isn’t) but because it purported to be *true*.”²⁵ However, in an interview with *People* magazine in 1979, the year of the film version’s release, DeFeo’s lawyer, William Weber, admitted that he and the Lutzs had made the whole thing up. “I know this book’s a hoax,” he said. “We created this horror story over many bottles of wine... George was a con artist.” Weber, it appears, had planned to use the haunting to gain a new trial for his client. Despite the doubts, the promotion of the story as a true one helped the film find considerable financial success. The same article declared that the public controversy built “a master hype campaign that has already made the movie the shlocky [sic] shocker of the summer (\$40 million gross in one month)” and American International Pictures chief Sam Arkoff declared, “If there were an Academy Award for a publicity campaign, we should get it for this.”²⁶

The veracity of the Lutzs’ claims aside, there were elements of the story that rang very true for audiences in 1979, and these had more to do with money than with monsters. In the film, George (James Brolin) and Kathy (Margot Kidder) are in a similar position as the Rolfs had been, except that instead of renting they find themselves able to purchase a home that would normally be well-beyond their working-class means. From the beginning, when George feels the first cold draft, he has money on his mind. “This house is supposed to be insulated,” he says. “They’ll nickel and dime you to death.” Just as in *Burnt Offerings*, there are no wandering

²⁵ Ibid., 109.

²⁶ Paul Lester, “Oh, The Horror!,” *People*, September 17, 1979.

specters — it is the house that is sentient and malevolent, for “whereas earlier haunted house” stories “usually featured a protagonist who is tied to the house in question by familial, historical or, latterly, psychological bonds, here (as will often be the case in the suburban hauntings of the 1970s) the connection is viewed from the outset in largely material terms.”²⁷ It is all about the “stuff” they own, which, like Marian Rolf, ends up owning them. Unlike the ghost stories of the past, the protagonists are now blue-collar every-persons, their lives tied up in their investments. They cannot simply walk away without damaging their economic security, perhaps irreparably. The Amityville house’s ghostly activity manifests itself not just in flies, disembodied voices (“Get out!”), bleeding walls, and red eyes staring from the darkness (though all these occur), but more importantly and relatably in broken doors, plumbing that overflows with black ichor, unexpected medical costs, and in a telling incident where the \$1,500 in cash reserved for a wedding caterer vanishes, leaving George distraught and teetering on a knife’s edge. Stephen King, writing within two years of the film’s release, recognized almost immediately that “the picture’s subtext is one of economic unease,” and was a subject that “could not have come along at a more opportune moment.” King focuses his analysis on the scene where the money goes missing:

[George] says he’ll write a covering check, which he does, and later he stands off the angry caterer, who has specified only cash. . . . After the wedding, Lutz turns the living room of the Bad House upside down looking for the lost money, which has now become his money, and the only way of backing up the blank paper he has issued the caterer. [George’s] check may not have been 100 percent Goodyear rubber, but in his sunken, purple-pouched eyes we see a man who didn’t really have the money. . . . regardless. Here is a man tottering on the brink of his own financial crash. He finds the only trace under the couch: a bank money-band with the numerals \$500 stamped on it. The band lies there on the rug, tauntingly empty. “*Where is it?*” [James] Brolin screams, his voice vibrating with anger, frustration, and fear.

²⁷ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 116.

For King, the real horror of the house was the financial cost: “little by little, it is ruining the family financially. The movie might as well have been subtitled *The Horror of the Shrinking Bank Account*... At the conclusion, the house seems to literally tear itself apart... and I found myself wondering not if the Lutz clan would get out alive but if they had adequate homeowner’s insurance.”²⁸ Whereas the Allardyce mansion rebuilt itself as it fed off its inhabitants, the house on 112 Ocean Ave. seems to be disintegrating before their eyes and bringing their fortunes down with it.

Early in the film, Kathy remarks to George that she will be the first person in her family to actually own a home. “We’ve always been a bunch of renters,” she tells him. Murphy writes of the couple: “Having grown up in a climate of apparently unstoppable economic progress believing, as millions upon millions of Americans of the previous generation did, that a home of their own in a quality neighborhood was nothing more than their due, George and Kathy Lutz buy into the suburban dream without fully considering whether they can actually afford to do so... The apparently limitless economic growth of the postwar era had come grinding to a halt by the early 1970s.”²⁹ Agreeing with King, she continues: “The true horror in the Amityville story lies... in the material repercussions of the alleged haunting: the repair bills, the huge mortgage, the business that goes under and the possessions left behind. Ultimately, it is as if the Lutzes are being ejected from a milieu they were categorically unsuited for (in terms of both class and financial reach) in the first place.”³⁰

The paranormal troubles affect not only the Lutzes’ bank account, but their bonds as a family. Just as Ben Rolf nearly drowns his son in a swimming pool in *Burnt Offerings*, George Lutz is also plagued by psychological assaults and is nearly driven to homicide. Early on the film

²⁸ Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Gallery Books, 1981), 152.

²⁹ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 112.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

establishes the character as a warm stepfather, attentive to the children's needs and desiring that they think of him as their father. The daughter, Amy (Natasha Ryan), even wears a shirt matching his as a symbol of their bond. However, as the troubles mount, George becomes more explosive and intolerant, declaring to Kathy, "These kids of *yours* need some goddamn discipline!" Kathy has a nightmare that George has chopped Amy in her bed and then plants the ax head in her own skull, with conspicuous blood spray. He loses sexual interest in Kathy and resorts to striking her. As the chaos mounts George howls the desperation of a man unraveling physically, psychologically, and financially: "I'm coming apart. Oh, Mother of God, I'm coming apart!" Eventually George is prowling the house with an ax, chopping at the bathroom door where the children are hiding, tricked by the house into thinking a pig-demon awaits within. (The scene is reminiscent of the next film that will be examined, *The Shining*.) Fortunately, however, George is broken from his spell, and the family manages to escape with the dog in tow. Significantly, however, they leave their possessions behind. What signifies danger more than Americans who are forced to leave behind their "stuff"?

Jack Torrance serves as the example of what George Lutz could have become. Stephen King's novel *The Shining* was released in 1977, the same year as Anson's account of the Amityville haunting. As has been suggested, the men central to both stories share remarkable similarities, for both effectively tap into the period's anxieties regarding masculinity, family, economic security, and the relationship with history. King's vision, however, is decidedly more grim, and in Stanley Kubrick's hands the character grows darker still. There is no hope of redemption or rehabilitation for Jack. The Overlook Hotel works its magic on him, and whereas George (and Ben Rolf, for that matter,) fear and ultimately reject the structure's malign psychological influence, Jack embraces and wallows in its promises.

The 1980 film's version of the story, one of the most well-known and recognizable of modern ghost tales, changed in a few significant ways from King's work, follows Jack (played in an iconic turn by Jack Nicholson), his wife Wendy (Shelley Duvall), and his young son Danny (Danny Lloyd) as they spend a winter in the empty, echoing Overlook Hotel high in the snowy Rockies, for which Jack has been hired as the seasonal caretaker. Once again, financial restraints are the impetus for Jack needing to take the job that will be the cause of his family's undoing. The isolated Torrances are soon beset by the hotel, once again an evil, sentient structure, this time through the manifestations of the ghosts of those who died within the hotel. Danny and Jack in particular are targeted: Danny, for his psychic gift, which the hotel's chef, Dick Hallorann (Scatman Crothers), calls "shining"; Jack, for his dissatisfaction with family, money, and the lack of prestige and privilege which he believes is his due.

The Overlook tempts Jack sexually (through the beautiful female ghost in the bathtub, before taunting with its true visage) and by playing to his ego as the ghost bartender Lloyd (Joe Turkel) serves the bitter alcoholic his desired spirits, so to speak. Soon Jack is convinced that his family needs "correcting" after the ghost of Delbert Grady (Philip Stone), the former caretaker who axed his wife and two daughters, advises him. Grady, however, "is not a person, but a panoply of ghosts", he is but one of many avatars for the hotel.³¹ Jack will need to prove his commitment to The Overlook if he wishes to become a part of its time-honored jetset. In the 1950s the family unit was seen as protecting, but by the late 1960s and early 1970s it was seen as corrupt. During this time the blame fell on mothers, and the children were often seen as that which was corrupted. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, the blame began to shift towards the father and the children became their victims.³² The women's movement, certainly,

³¹ Luckhurst, *The Shining*, 67.

³² Jackson, *Gender and the Nuclear Family*, 7.

had an effect on perceptions of masculinity and the criticism of traditional patriarchy. Roger Luckhurst writes that Kubrick “seemed to have a parodic or subversive approach, turning Gothic conventions on their head, locating the horror not in supernatural threats to the nuclear family but erupting from its domestic heart.”³³ The film “is full of subversive commentary on the power of the patriarch, as so much horror of the 1970s seems to be.”³⁴ Indeed, in examining both the novel and film, Dara Downey writes, “Both versions of *The Shining* explicitly associate deviant masculinity — masculine behavior at odds with familial and social norms — with monstrosity.”³⁵ Additionally, literature and philosophy writer John Lutz claims, “One of the most powerful messages of the film involves the revelation that so-called masculine virtues are indistinguishable from the abusive exercise of power in practice.”³⁶ Once again, family “is not a retreat but a sprung trap.”³⁷ When Jack is finally taking an ax to the apartment door where his family is hiding (sound familiar?), he chooses to invoke a time when family was seen as far more innocent: “‘Wendy, I’m home’ is of course stolen from Ricky Ricardo’s catchphrase in *I Love Lucy*, chosen to subvert that jolly 1950s family sitcom.”³⁸

The Shining, as well as most of the ghostly horror films of the era, evokes a forced confrontation with the past in other ways. In these stories history *is* horror. The Allardyce mansion in *Burnt Offerings* displays framed photographs of its past victims, like a serial killer exhibiting its trophies, but the hint goes unheeded. In *The Amityville Horror*, when Kathy and George contemplate buying the house, Kathy says, “I just wish that... all those people hadn't died here. I mean... ugh! A guy kills his whole family. Doesn't that bother you?” George replies,

³³ Luckhurst, *The Shining*, 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁵ Downey, “Locating the Specter,” 148.

³⁶ John Lutz, “From Domestic Nightmares to the Nightmare of History: Uncanny Eruptions of Violence in King’s and Kubrick’s Versions of *The Shining*,” in *The Philosophy of Horror*, ed. Thomas Fahy (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 175.

³⁷ Luckhurst, *The Shining*, 87.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

“Well, sure, but... houses don't have memories.” As horror teaches them, the past persists — insists — into the present. Later Kathy awakes at night, screaming into the darkness, “She was shot in the head!” In *The Shining*, when Danny Torrance sits with Dick Hallorann, sensing The Overlook’s bloody past, he asks him, “Is there something bad here?” Hallorann replies to the young boy, “Well... you know Doc, when something happens it can leave a trace of itself behind. Say like... it's when someone burns toast. When some things happen, it can leave other traces behind... I think a lot of things happened in this particular hotel over the years... and not all of them was good.” He indicates that the things in the hotel might be frightening, but they aren’t harmful. In the novel, Hallorann goes further in his explanation of the ghosts, telling him that “they're just like pictures in a book.”³⁹ However, as John Lutz explains: “Hallorann’s mistake is based on the assumption that the past has no power over the present. Nonetheless, both Kubrick’s film and King's novel each investigate the complex ways in which the past acts upon — indeed, lives on in — the present.” In the film, “Kubrick’s use of the uncanny is concerned with rendering the past corporeal and registering the ways in which the nightmare of history continually impinges upon and defines the present. Taken together, both King's novel and Kubrick’s film adaptation explore psychological, historical, and economic traces of the uncanny.”⁴⁰

History shows itself in ways both frightening and subtle in *The Shining*, the most obvious being the ghosts themselves, the gory trauma of their bloody wounds and bloated, rotting flesh clearly visible. Unlike *Burnt Offerings* and *The Amityville Horror*, Kubrick shows his spectral attackers in the corporeal manner of *The Innocents*, only more graphic. Kubrick was heavily influenced by fairy tales and folklore, which taps into culture memory while also suggesting the

³⁹ Stephen King, *The Shining* (New York: Signet, 1977), 87.

⁴⁰ Lutz, “Domestic Nightmares,” 161-162.

repetition implied by such tales. Luckhurst suggests that these “layers of legendary and folkloric tales, stubs of story scattered through *The Shining*, make the plot resonate beyond the local level, reinforcing the sense of dread, because this hapless trio are merely repeating trajectories that have been told and retold for millennia.”⁴¹ As the Torrances drive through the Rockies to the Overlook they discuss the unfortunate Donner Party, which famously resorted to cannibalism after being snowbound in the Sierra Nevada mountain range in the winter of 1846-1847. They too will be snowbound and seek to expose bloody innards and grey matter (“Darling... light of my life... I'm not going to hurt you. You didn't let me finish my sentence. I said I'm not gonna hurt ya. I'm just going to bash your brains in! I'm going to bash 'em right the fuck in!”). In his job interview, after Jack is told of Delbert Grady’s 1970 murder-suicide, he tells his employer, “Well you can rest assured, Mr. Ullman, that's not gonna happen with me. And as far as my wife is concerned, I'm sure she'll be absolutely fascinated when I tell her about it. She's a confirmed ghost story and horror film addict.” He ignores the warning; with a dismissive air he seals his family’s doom.

Other aspects of American history — especially those dealing with the white abuse of power — are explored less overtly, but are no less crucial to understanding the haunting nature of *The Overlook*. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw an increased cultural awareness of Native American plight. In 1969 hundreds of Native activists occupied Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay as an attempt at reclamation of surplus federal land which they believed was rightfully theirs. In 1973 around two hundred Native activists seized the town of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, site of the infamous Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, condemning the federal government’s violation of Indian treaties. A standoff, covered widely in the media, resulted in shots being fired. Renée Bergland shows that American literature, from its beginning, invoked

⁴¹ Luckhurst, *The Shining*, 50.

Native American spectrality as an acknowledgment of stolen land: “In American letters, and in the American imagination, Native American ghosts function both as representations of national guilt and as triumphant agents of Americanization.”⁴² The land itself becomes haunted, saturated with the blood spilt to obtain it: “The history of European relations with Native Americans is a history of murders, looted graves, illegal land transfers, and disruptions of sovereignty. Among these, land ownership may be the source of the nation’s deepest guilt... American nationalism must be predicated on haunted grounds: the land is haunted because it is stolen.”⁴³ Through ghostly power, then, does the Native enforce its retribution against its white interlopers, for though “Europeans take possession of Native American lands,... at the same time, Native Americans take supernatural possession of their dispossessors.”⁴⁴ As Chief Seattle intoned in the 1850s, “The White Men will never be alone. Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless.”⁴⁵ As has already been seen, Native ghosts were found amidst the earliest ghost films.

Though the trope of the sacred “Indian Burial Ground” within horror films is well-known, it is not as persistent as the public generally thinks. (In fact, one oft-cited example, *Poltergeist*, is erroneous. The film even acknowledges the trope, which was still very new but already well-worn, and goes out of its way to explain of the land on which the Freeling home was not built that “it’s not ancient tribal burial ground.” Even some film/horror scholars still make this mistake, unfortunately.) Within the modern ghostly horror film, the trope began with *The Amityville Horror*. Anson writes (without evidence) that the Lutz house was built not only on the site of a warlock’s home but also where local Natives used to abandon their mentally ill

⁴² Bergland, *The National Uncanny*, 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Jerry L. Clark, “Thus Spoke Chief Seattle: The Story of An Undocumented Speech,” *Prologue Magazine*, Spring 1985, Vol. 18, No. 1.

and infirm to die. In the film, George's psychic friend Carolyn (Helen Shaver) tells him, as she searches a basement wall for malevolent energy, "There was a tribe of Indians called the Shinnecocks, and they used this land as a sort of exposure pen. They put all the crazy people here and left them here to die. My God! That's where it is... There are people buried here." As George leaves the local library after investigating the property's past, a glass display case is visible in the foreground containing stone arrowheads, yet another nod to Amityville's past as a land taken from Natives.

Stephen King appears to have also been at least somewhat conscious of the Native American protests while he was writing *The Shining*, though the film takes it further. He places the Torrances' address on "Arapahoe Street" and when Danny is thinking about confusion and things being misplaced, he's reminded of "one of those pictures that said CAN YOU SEE THE INDIANS?"⁴⁶ (King's 1983 book, *Pet Semetary*, deals more explicitly with the connection of Native lands and the supernatural subversion into modern life. Bergland believes that the work "responds to the Maine Land claims of the late 1970s and early 1980s," and that the ghosts therein "represent the guilty terrors of possession."⁴⁷) Kubrick leans harder upon the legacy of land removal in his version of *The Shining*. Stuart Ullman (Barry Nelson), Jack's employer, explains to the Torrances as he walks them across The Overlook's grounds, "Construction started in 1907. It was finished in 1909. The site is supposed to be located on an Indian burial ground, and I believe they actually had to repel a few Indian attacks as they were building it." As they tour the interior, Wendy asks of the designs, "Are all these Indian designs authentic?" To which Ullman replies, "Yeah, I believe so. Mainly based on Navajo and Apache motifs." Even as they stole and slaughtered the Natives, then, they also appropriated their culture for the pleasure of

⁴⁶ King, *The Shining*, 13, 193.

⁴⁷ Bergland, *The National Uncanny*, 162.

their conquerors. John Lutz writes that “The images of Native Americans in the film serve as an elaborate visual puzzle for the viewer, an uncanny trace of violence that represents not native Americans as agents of evil, but the inability of America to acknowledge or come to terms with the genocide of Native Americans.”⁴⁸

Kubrick’s *The Shining* looks back to another historical period as well, one which becomes key to understanding Jack’s descent. In addition to Native American motifs, the other era repeatedly visualized, especially in terms of the ghosts that are seen, is the 1920s. Jack is depicted as a man dissatisfied with the hand that has been dealt to him. Despite being the cause of many of his troubles (alcoholism, unemployment), he displaces his own shortcomings on the perceived burden of family. It is Wendy and Danny that hold him back from recognition, from success, from entering the class to which, as a writer, he feels entitled to belong. However, Kubrick’s Jack “is already a reflexive commentary on this now conventional stereotype” for his Jack “is not a writer, not someone who has some thing to say or likes doing things with words, but rather someone who would like to be a writer, who lives a fantasy about what the American writer is... Yet even that fantasy is anachronistic and nostalgic; all those unexplored interstices of the system... have long since been absorbed into the sealed and achieved space of consumer society.”⁴⁹ When Wendy suggests that they leave the hotel after Danny has been attacked by a spectral woman in room 237, Jack spits vitriol at her: “It is so fucking typical of you to create a problem like this when I finally have a chance to accomplish something, when I'm really into my work! I could really write my own ticket if I went back to Boulder now, couldn't I? Shoveling out driveways? Work in a carwash? Any of that appeal to you?!” The Overlook, on the other hand, seduces Jack with appeals to his ego. Lloyd the bartender treats him like a valued guest as

⁴⁸ Lutz, “Domestic Nightmares,” 168.

⁴⁹ Frederic Jameson, “*The Shining*.” *Social Text*, no. 4 (1981): 121-22.

the ghosts of wealthy patrons swaré around him. Ullman had told the family, “Oh, this old place has had an illustrious past. In its heyday, it was one of the stopping places for the jetset, even before anybody knew what a jetset was. We had four presidents who stayed here. Lots of movie stars.” “Royalty?” Wendy asks. “All the best people.” Jack feels that he belongs to these “best” people, longing for an era in which white men of learning and class ruled unquestionably.

Literary critic Fredric Jameson writes that

it is by the twenties that the hero is haunted and possessed. The twenties were the last moment in which a genuine American leisure class led an aggressive and ostentatious public existence, in which an American ruling class projected a class-conscious and unapologetic image of itself and enjoyed its privileges without guilt, openly and armed with its emblems of top-hat and champagne glass, on the social stage in full view of the other classes. The nostalgia of *The Shining*, the longing for collectivity, takes the peculiar form of an obsession with the last period in which class consciousness is out in the open: even the motif of the manservant or valet expresses the desire for a vanished social hierarchy, which can no longer be gratified in the spurious multinational atmosphere in which Jack [Torrance] is hired for a mere odd job by faceless organization men.⁵⁰

Kubrick’s *Overlook*, therefore, is an “evocation of a hotel stuck hauntingly in the 1920s” and “is about a nostalgia for the wealth and confidence in rigid racial and class hierarchies of the pre-war era.”⁵¹ The liberal 1960s saw great social changes in race relations, and an overwhelming atmosphere of racial equality and harmony piloted the hearts of many protestors and demonstrators. Historian Bruce J. Schulman writes that “From World War II until the early 1970s, liberal universalism — a belief in the fundamental unity and sameness of all humanity — had undergirded social activism and political reform in the United States.” However, by 1970 a great many had become disenchanted with the seemingly slow-paced Civil Rights movement, thinking the entire liberal movement a little naïve, and began to move instead towards a more separatist “power” movement. This skeptical resentment led many to “rejecting the integrationist

⁵⁰ Jameson, “*The Shining*,” 123.

⁵¹ Luckhurst, *The Shining*, 45.

ideal, abandoning the hope of joining a single American community,” and they instead “increasingly saw themselves as a separate nation within a nation, with distinct needs and values.” Some even began to view this change not as a social struggle, but a war. These attitudes signified that “the shared commitment of minority activists, liberal intellectuals, and northern white voters to removing explicit racial barriers... gave way in the Seventies.”⁵²

When Jack holds a glass of alcohol, he intones, “White man's burden, Lloyd, my man. White man's burden,” invoking the title of Rudyard Kipling’s 1899 poem of the same name, a celebration of Western imperialism. When Delbert Grady tells Jack that Danny “is attempting to bring an outside party into this situation,” he tells him that the interloper is “a nigger,” implying that Dick Hallorann’s race is in itself an affront to the hotel’s dignity. Jack appears as a child who has just heard something he knows is naughty and repeats the word with a hesitant, unpracticed excitement. Jack desires to be a part of The Overlook because it represents old money, white superiority, and a confident patriarchy — a time when an educated white man such as himself would theoretically have had it easier. Lutz sees that “The continuing legacy of this viewpoint finds expression in the way Jack is manipulated to enforce a racist and sexist ideology that serves a set of class interests that are inimical to him and his family... In effect, Jack is offered admission to the ranks of the ruling class if he adopts a managerial/paternalistic standpoint intended to keep women, nonwhites, and unruly children in their place.” However, “In Jack’s descent into madness, the film presents the viewer with a mirror image of the lower/middle-class conservative white male filled with misdirected rage at minorities and women and faithfully serving the interests of the very group working against his well-being and happiness. Even though he will not benefit personally, the supernatural management of the hotel

⁵² Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2001), 58, 62, 54.

gradually moves Jack to embrace the misogynistic and racist attitudes of the wealthy white elite.”⁵³ The film’s last shot is a slow push to a photograph on the wall. It shows a lively gathering and written upon it is “Overlook Hotel, July 4th Ball, 1921.” There before the smiling crowd, arms outstretched, is Jack, triumphantly smug. This parting image may be read “as the return to the last confident moment of class and race hierarchy in America in the 1920s, a response to the economic and social instabilities of the 70s that arguably helped foster the horror boom in the first place. The Overlook is America’s past glory, frontier-triumphant, however bathed in blood.”⁵⁴ Like Eleanor in Hill House and Marian in the Allardyce mansion, Jack ultimately becomes a part of the structure to which longs to be a part.

⁵³ Lutz, “Domestic Nightmares,” 172.

⁵⁴ Luckhurst, *The Shining*, 91.

CHAPTER SIX:

“You son of a bitch, you left the bodies and you only moved the headstones!” (1981-1998)

As the 1980s dawned the 1960s concepts of racial optimism and idealism gave way to a far more conservative and materialistic agenda, and the expectations of unity were quenched in a culture that increasingly became, as we have seen, more cynical in the 1970s. As Schulman explains, what began with Nixon’s “Silent Majority” party that he hoped would “foster a wholesale realignment of American politics” would be embraced by later politicians and transformed into a living entity. “This new party would unite white Southerners,” blue-collar workers, “and traditionally Republican rural and suburban conservatives around social issues. It would ostracize the socially liberal... and attack liberal Democrats for playing so heavily to the fashionable, but unrepresentative constituencies of the young, the poor, the racial minorities, and the students.”¹ The liberal demonstrations had won terrific battles in the 1960s, but by the 1970s plenty of malcontent had been nourished toward it from “hard hats outraged by hippies and anti-war protesters; parents, mainly northern white ethnics, hostile to forced busing” and even causing a race riot in America’s cradle of freedom, Boston, in 1976, America’s bi-centennial year; “born-again Christians disturbed about sex on television and sex education in the schools; anti-feminists frightened by the ERA; blue-collar workers fed up with seemingly profligate welfare spending; right-to-lifers fighting against legal abortions; business interests resisting excessive regulation”; and ex-liberal Neoconservatives who believed that “the left had forsaken moral values.”² This hotbed of dissatisfaction became a tool to be exploited by conservative Republicans after Nixon, who also took advantage of the failing image of Democratic President Jimmy Carter, who was unable to alleviate the nation from a horrible economy or properly

¹ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 38.

² *Ibid.*, 193, 204.

contend on the world scene. With the coming of Ronald Reagan “by 1980, a vague antiliberalism had transformed into avowed conservatism.”³ This New Right conservatism would be well organized, but more importantly, well financed, and also included the Religious Right championed by Patrick Buchanan or Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority. Their strategies often met with incredible success, such as Phyllis Schlafly’s annihilation of the Equal Rights Amendment, a crushing defeat for liberal feminists.

Ronald Reagan was no stranger to these groups or their sentiments, and his powerful victory in both of his Presidential races reveals just how greatly the nation had changed, as it also owed much to Falwell’s organization. His convictions were reaffirmed in his speeches where he repeatedly refers to the moral order of the America given by God, and calling his political fights “crusades.”⁴ Also in Reagan’s speeches he revered business, and many Americans would latch onto that ideal to redeem America from the economic hardships of the 1970s.

Young people, especially, would take the business ideal to the extreme. *Newsweek* declared 1984 to be “The Year of the Yuppie”. Yuppies “rejected the values of the counterculture” and in some ways “represented the ascendance of a new cultural style. In many ways, the boisterous, consumerist spirit of the mid-1980s signaled the triumph of Reaganism. After all, the president had long wished to restore... his image of America as a place anyone could get rich.” Yuppies felt that “raw accumulation of wealth for its own sake was not tawdry or immoral but worthy” and “dismissed the antimaterialism of the counterculture as naïve; they replaced the hippie quest for freedom... with an equally passionate search for the best that consumer culture could offer.”⁵

³ Ibid., 194.

⁴ Paul Boyer, *Reagan as President* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990), 33, 25.

⁵ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 243-244.

These shifts can be found within the quintessential haunted house film of the decade, 1982's *Poltergeist* (though *The Shining* was released in 1980, its characteristics place it more firmly within the ghost films of 1970s). Directed by Tobe Hooper, the film was produced by Steven Spielberg, whose fingerprints can be found within the film's tone and sentiments (so much so that some speculate whether he is the actual director). The *Poltergeist* story is consistent with certain conservative turns of the 1980s, such as a celebration of the nuclear family unit, without fully "buying into" other aspects of the Reagan-era, especially in the film's criticism of big business and materialism. In this way, it shares in the 1970s' anxieties regarding economic horror while departing from the decade's cynicism about parenthood and children. The story follows Steve (Craig T. Nelson) and Diane Freeling (JoBeth Williams) as their suburban home is beset by various manifestations of poltergeist activity. While they at first find this an exciting departure from their normal routine, their idyllic lives are turned upside down when their son, Robbie (Oliver Robins), is pulled from his bed and nearly eaten by the backyard tree and their youngest daughter, Carol Anne (Heather O'Rourke), is kidnapped by the household spirits.

Once again, suburbia becomes the locus of ghostly horror. Critical theorist Douglas Kellner, writing in the year following the film's release, recognized the significance of the story's locale:

It presents the shadow-side of suburban life in the form of an allegorical nightmare. It also has an utopian vision of the family's pulling together and pulling through in the face of adversity and eventually triumphing over demonic forces. By articulating U.S. fears and showing them conquered, the film defuses the nightmare quality of life in the U.S. horror show. By depicting with affection its residents, houses, goods, toys, and electronics, it presents advertisements for a U.S. way of life which defines happiness in terms of middle-class lifestyle and consumption...

The Freeling family idyll soon becomes interrupted by the poltergeists' presence. At first, they appear only to little Carole Anne through the medium of the television set. The poltergeists soon begin, however, more actively intervening. They shake the house, turn on appliances, bend and play with kitchen

utensils, and make chairs slide across the floor. These scenes, I believe, celebrate middle-class commodity icons, showing the consumer society's bounty.

While Kellner views the presence of these “commodity icons” as a celebration, they may also be read as a warning. It is these very comforts of the middle-class, status symbols that let Americans know they were living the American dream, that turn on the family. Kellner continues:

As the film proceeds, it shows the house and its objects being progressively demolished. At first, objects fly around and are broken and shattered. Eventually the whole house is totally destroyed. These scenes play on fears of losing one's home in this era of rising unemployment, inflation, and economic hard times. The film evokes the horror of watching loved objects smashed, of seeing the tokens of the middle class systematically disintegrate. Finally the film offers a fable about the family's walking away from the ruins of suburban affluence with the comforting assurance that the evil spirits have been vanquished, that the family is still intact, and that all will be well.

In the end, the film seems to suggest, those commodities, those *things*, don't matter. Only family matters. As the Freelings enter their motel room at the end of the film, Steve pushes the television out, a statement on the irrelevance, if not outright danger, of consumer commodities on the family if ever there was one. “*Poltergeist* thus offers solace that the family stands as a viable institution, even in the context of contemporary troubles.” For Kellner, at the time it was “one of the few ‘blockbuster’ films that explicitly and unabashedly offer apologetics for the family.”⁶ Kimberly Jackson, however, implies evidence of class comparison over family bonds in the different outcomes for George Lutz, Jack Torrance and Steve Freeling: “The comparative ‘success’ of the Freelings suggests that the middle-class family is better equipped to handle the pressures of modern existence precisely because of their economic comfort in bourgeois normalcy, while the working-class Lutzes and particularly the Torrances can never escape the pressures of the economic class.”⁷

⁶ Douglas Kellner, “*Poltergeist*: Suburban Ideology,” *Jump Cut*, no. 28, April 1983, 5-6.

⁷ Jackson, *Gender and the Nuclear Family*, 67.

The cause of the supernatural activity is once again embedded in a past that wills itself into the present. History will not be silenced, and it will shake your home and take your children in order to be heard. Avery F. Gordon writes of the relationship to history and ghost stories in a sociological context: “History... is that ghostly... totality that articulates and disarticulates itself and the subjects who inhabit it. It is, in contrast to sociology and other modern retrieval enterprises, never available as a final solution for the difficulties haunting creates for the living. It is always a sight of struggle and contradiction between the living and the ghostly, a struggle whose resolution has to remain partial to the living, even when the living can only partially grasp the source of the ghost’s power.”⁸ In the case of *Poltergeist*, Steve is one of the top real estate agents for a suburban developer. Seen reading *Reagan: the Man, the President* by Hendrick Smith in bed, we can imply his alignment with Reagan’s laissez-faire economic policies (they are also smoking pot, suggesting their earlier political convictions may have been more liberal). After he misses time from work (because Carol Anne has gone missing) he is invited out by his boss, Mr. Teague (James Karen), who shows him a new large plot of land they plan to build upon, located down the hill from a large cemetery. Teague tells him, “We own all the land. We have already made arrangements for relocating the cemetery.” Steve’s reply is laden with distaste, “Oh, you’re kidding. Oh, come on. I mean, that’s sacrilegious, isn’t it?” “Oh, don’t worry about it. After all, it’s not ancient tribal burial ground. It’s just... people,” Teague says. “Besides, we have done it before.” In fact, the Freeling house sits atop an old cemetery. After the skeletons come floating up from the muddy pool and the coffins burst forth from their home’s foundation, spilling corpses onto the floor, Steve grabs Teague by the shoulders and shouts at his face, “You son of a bitch! You moved the cemetery, but you left the bodies, didn’t you? You son of a bitch, you left the bodies and you only moved the headstones! You only moved the headstones! Why!

⁸ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 184.

Why!” Bernice M. Murphy reminds us that “suburban developers during the 1950s and 1960s were often accused of allowing their construction sites to spread relentlessly over the countryside, ruthlessly bulldozing the past in order to build a rash of affordable, identikit homes... In *Poltergeist*, however... this contempt for both for the past and for the undead will not simply be forgotten. Teague has placed money above respect for the dead and he will pay the price, as will Steve, who has done so much to unwittingly perpetuate this injustice.”⁹ Kellner agrees: “Clearly the villain is the greedy real estate developer” who “puts economic interests over people's safety and well-being. Spielberg... champions the middle-class ideologue but not the economic or political establishment. His strategies reveal a crisis of ideology in the United States, where its most powerful and effective ideologues working in the cinematic cultural industries cannot or will not concoct ideological fables to legitimate the economic and political order.”¹⁰

Poltergeist also looks at gender in ways both contemporary and traditional. As we have seen, the supernatural was traditionally gendered female, with women being seen as more susceptible to the paranormal (and more likely to believe in it). With 1950s and 1960s suburbia came the niggling feeling among some male writers that “the suburban setting itself and its associated trappings (comfortable home, desk job, sedentary lifestyle)... has in a way ‘softened up’... white-collar protagonists, leaving them all too susceptible to powerful, irrational forces beyond rational comprehension.”¹¹ Thus in the 1970s and early 1980s we find Ben Rolf, George Lutz, and Jack Torrance manipulated and eroded psychically and emotionally by supernatural forces. Other ghostly horror films of the period, such as *The Changeling*, *The Fog* (1980), and *Ghost Story* (1982), deal with male protagonists who must contend with ghosts. In each case a

⁹ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 131.

¹⁰ Kellner, “Suburban Ideology,” 5-6.

¹¹ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 36.

past wrong must be righted, history must be appeased with the help of living men. Indeed, in each of these films women take on largely secondary roles or, in the case of *Ghost Story*, are the very thing threatening the hero. Steve Freeling, however, while an amiable man, has more in common with the skeptical Roderick Fitzgerald of *The Uninvited* than with the men mentioned above. While he accepts what he sees, he is set apart from the ghostly happenings, taking on a largely supportive role while the women of the film attend to the paranormal. This shift is perhaps symptomatic of the increasing obsession with hypermasculinity in 1980s cinema which celebrated strong (white) male heroes, to the point of near fetishism.

Diane Freeling is unlike Marian Rolf. *Poltergeist* does not exhibit the same fears of domesticity that are found in *Burnt Offerings*. Kellner writes that Diane “presents a positive image of the New Mother, who is able to smoke dope, be sexy and modern, and yet also be a loved wife and nurturing mother. In response to the women's movement's critique of ‘women's place,’ Spielberg and company answer with the image of a mother who assumes her traditional role while she enjoys suburban affluence. The film thus cleverly supports traditional roles and institutions while it presents symbolic threats to the existing order.”¹² When she first discovers her house is haunted, Diane is ecstatic, jumping and clapping like a cheerleader. Before she shows Steve, she prepares him by instructing, “Now reach back into our past when you used to have an open mind, remember that? Just try to use that for the next couple of minutes.” Once again, we see the suggestion that Steve was not always a Reaganesque convert. The women of the film need no such prompting to believe. In fact, Diane, the lead paranormal investigator, Dr. Lesh (Beatrice Straight), and the medium who comes to the family's rescue, Tangina Barrons (Zelda Rubinstein), are women who lead the way in navigating the movie's men through this supernatural terrain. Carol J. Clover, in her landmark study, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws:*

¹² Kellner, “Suburban Ideology,” 5-6.

Gender in the Modern Horror Film, writes extensively of the feminization of the supernatural in *Poltergeist* (and in another ghostly horror film of the decade, 1986's *Witchboard*), even recognizing the “vaginal nature” of the dimensional vortices that the “spiritual midwives” must navigate.¹³

In the 1980s, females were again the primary victims of supernatural assault, from young girls like Carol Ann to urban professionals like Dana Barrett (Sigourney Weaver, in 1984's *Ghostbusters*) to working-class single mothers like Carla Moran (Barbara Hershey). Moran's story, told in 1982's *The Entity* (adapted from the 1978 novel of the same name), was based upon the real-life case of Doris Bither. UCLA's parapsychology lab, which opened in 1967 (a “landmark event in ghost history”), investigated Bither's home after she reported poltergeist activity. She soon revealed, however, that she had also been raped by an unseen entity.¹⁴

The ghost film changed in other ways as well, expanding well beyond ancestral mansions, suburban homes and historic hotels. A feature in the early 1980s about a haunted Toys R Us implied “*anywhere* could be haunted.”¹⁵ Haunted attractions began to proliferate, giving the promise to patrons that “now anyone could experience a powerful spirit presence.”¹⁶ 1977's *Star Wars* also had a hand in changing the cinematic game by raising audiences' expectations with regard to improved special effects. Lisa Morton writes that with this “emphasis on fast pace and high concept, films like *Poltergeist* (1982) and *Ghostbusters* (1984) took cinematic hauntings out of the realm of misty, frightening but powerless spirits, into one where deathless entities could kidnap children, destroy houses, open portals to other dimensions and finally transform into giant

¹³ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 188.

¹⁴ Morton, *Ghosts*, 91.

¹⁵ Dickey, *Ghostland*, 99.

¹⁶ Morton, *Ghosts*, 94.

marshmallow men tramping through New York.”¹⁷ *Ghostbusters* also popularized the idea that ghosts (or at least ghostly phenomena) could be captured with modern technology, resulting in an increased interest in amateur ghost hunting.¹⁸ Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP), perhaps the most prevalent “evidence” offered by paranormal investigators, was first popularized by the Latvian writer Konstantin Raudive, who in the 1971 English language release of his book *Breakthrough: An Amazing Experiment in Electronic Communication with the Dead* claimed that he had captured ghostly voices on a tape recording.

Without doubt, however, 1980s horror belonged to the slasher rather than the ghost. Beginning with John Carpenter’s *Halloween*, the subgenre in which teens are picked off in gruesome ways, usually with edged weapons by masked assailants, took off with *Friday the 13th*. The market was immediately flooded with films which were only slight variations on the formula — the more blood and female nudity, the better. The generally sedate ghost story gained little traction amidst these bombastic gorefests, save for a few of the aforementioned examples. However, while Michael Myers, Jason Vorhees, Freddy Krueger, even the eponymous villain of *Candyman* (1992) are not ghosts in the traditional sense, they do often operate as revenants — corporeal undead who wreak havoc upon the living (Myers less so, depending on the film). Even Chucky in *Child’s Play* (1988) is essentially a doll possessed by the spirit of a serial killer, Charles Lee Ray, the “Lakeshore Strangler” (Brad Dourif). Morton offers that “it is not completely implausible to suggest that slashers functioned in much the way ghost stories had in the past: they presented an anti-hero who acted on pure rage, was often acting out a vengeance against perceived wrongs, and was nearly impossible to thwart. In the case of one highly successful slasher series — *A Nightmare on Elm Street* — the killer was a ghost returned from

¹⁷ Ibid., 93.

¹⁸ Ibid., 129.

the grave to haunt the dreams (another classic ghost trope) of the children whose parents (note the ancestral link) had murdered him.”¹⁹ Once again, history would not be forgotten, and this time the reminder was a knived glove.

By the late 1980s, however, the ghost had largely lost its ability to scare. Some movies, such as *Lady in White* (1988), leant upon classic ghost story structure and even utilized the conventions of early cinema via double-exposure spectrality. The film was well-received by critics but was a box-office failure. More successful was that year’s *Beetlejuice* (1988), Tim Burton’s film about a bawdy ghost whose supposed specialty is exorcising the living. The horror comedy features trappings of Spiritualism, such as a séance, played for laughs. It grossed several times its budget and even won an Academy Award (for Best Makeup). Perhaps a side-effect of economic security, the message was nevertheless clear: Americans were “afraid of no ghost.”

By the early 1990s ghosts had largely become ineffective within their own narratives (save for *Candyman*, mentioned above). Once otherworldly forces to be reckoned with, able to spill rivers of blood from elevators, crush houses into interdimensional vortexes, and flatten churches with giant marshmallow feet, ghosts now found themselves reliant upon or subservient to the living. A prime example is Sam Wheat (Patrick Swayze) from 1990’s *Ghost*, who must rely upon the ability of a reluctant psychic, Oda Mae Brown (Whoopi Goldberg), in order to save his girlfriend’s life. Leave the smashed doors of *Amityville* far behind; for most of the movie Sam cannot turn a door knob. Ghosts were no longer the grim insistence of the Gothic past. Lee Kovacs sees the fading power of the ghost as a result of the complexity of modern society. Ghosts became more and more like us, experiencing the approximate problems, frustrations, and limitations. Sam just wants to help his girlfriend. And the ghosts in *Beetlejuice*, after all, just want to “live” peacefully in their own home. They find the afterlife a bureaucratic reflection of

¹⁹ Ibid., 162.

modern life with waiting rooms and case managers. They are ineffective in their attempts to frighten their home's new inhabitants and in the end carry on as they used to, cleaning the house and continuing with their hobbies, joining the living as a new extended family. Their motivations are understandable, their wants banal. Kovacs writes, "Modern man and modern ghost are one and the same. The Gothic concept of doubling, of creating antithetical situations or people who clearly delineate the ancient opposing forces of good and evil, nature and man, order and disorder, disappear in the miasma of modern society. The old, splendid example of the haunter fades and merges into the angst and collective futility of the end-of-century world."²⁰

²⁰ Kovacs, *The Haunted Screen*, 159.

CHAPTER SEVEN
“It’s not the house that’s haunted...” (1999-2013)

Ghosts would find their teeth again at the close of the millennium. The 1990s was a decade of dramatic global shifts, especially as contentious conflicts seemed to resolve themselves. 1991, for instance, saw the Cold War fizzle to its finish and legislation repeal South African apartheid. Later, peace arrived in Ireland after decades of bloodshed. In 1999, ghosts came back to horror cinema in profound ways. Kendall R. Phillips observes that “1999 was more than just the end of a decade or century; it was the end of the millennium. For many Americans 1999 represented more than just a change in the calendar. It represented a final moment, an end of what had been known, and the beginning of an unknown era. The twenty-first century had long stood as a mysterious age of the ‘future,’ and as America prepared to enter it, anxieties were high.”¹ The coming of the New Millennium saw apocalyptic themes (which had also been prevalent in the 1970s) but this time there was an emphasis, Phillips argues, on reconciliation with the past as a means to move forward. In this way the “past, which has been either denied or utilized as a means of imprisoning us can begin to function as a haunted place, a place through which we begin to imagine a future.”² The result was a return to the Gothic theme of the recompensive past returning making itself known, though whereas before the dead sought to corrupt or corrode the world of the living they now sought to restore balance by seeking retribution. Only then are the living and the dead able continue their respective existence without interference.

Two ghostly horror films which represent the theme of reconciliation most clearly, both released in 1999, are M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* and David Koepp’s *Stir of Echoes*

¹ Phillips, *Projected Fears*, 181.

² Redding, *Haints*, 50.

(based upon Richard Matheson's 1958 novel of the same name), and share a remarkable amount of elements in common (though they remain their own distinct stories). Both films feature protagonists (children included) who have the ability to see ghosts, and both films posit that the ghosts appear to seek justice with regards to the wrongs done to them. In both films, too, we find that the ghosts, though frightening in their visage and methods, are not inherently dangerous. If ignored, however, their tactics become terrorizing. Nevertheless, in these films it is the living that must be watched, and whose crimes must be uncovered. Lastly, both films look at father-figures in similar ways, in ways that are different from either the destructive patriarchs of *The Amityville Horror* or *The Shining* or from Steve Freeling, who was supportive but played very much a secondary role in confronting the supernatural than did his wife.

The Sixth Sense received numerous accolades upon its release, including nominations for six Academy Awards (including Best Picture), and was the second highest-grossing film of that year. It tells of a child psychologist, Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), who tries to help a troubled young boy, Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment), who confides in him in a now iconic line, "I see dead people." When Malcolm asks him how often he sees them, Cole answers, "All the time. They're everywhere." The ghosts appear to Cole in frightening ways: vomiting in front of him, yelling, or hanging from rafters by nooses. Eventually, the pair figure out the ghosts are seeking assistance from Cole. They want to be heard and they want him to use his gift to bring reconciliation with the living. Malcolm suggests to him, "They just want help, even the scary ones." Avery F. Gordon writes, in her sociological examination of haunting, "A haunted society is full of ghosts, and the ghost always carries the message... that the gap between personal and social, public and private, objective and subjective is misleading in the first place. That is to say, it is leading you elsewhere, it is making you see things you did not see before, it is making an impact on you;

your relation to things that seem separate or invisible is changing.”³ The act of experiencing ghostly matter is what Gordon refers to as “profane illumination” and explains:

to experience a profane illumination is to experience a something to be done... For profane illumination is a way of encountering the ghostly presence, the lingering past, the luminous presence of the seemingly invisible... When you have a profane illumination of these matters, when you know in a way you did not know before, then you have been notified of your involvement. You are *already* involved, implicated, in one way or another, and this is why, if you don't banish it, or kill it, or reduce it to something you can already manage, when it appears to you, the ghost will inaugurate the necessity of doing something about it.⁴

Cole embraces “the something to be done,” deciding to help the ghosts who terrorize him. He first helps to uncover the murder of a young girl whose stepmother poisoned her, and soon finds, step by step, a level of comfort and confidence with his ability. In the movie's famous twist Cole even helps Malcolm to recognize that he is a ghost, having died early in the film when a former student, one who had been like Cole, enacted vengeance against him for not assisting him in the way he needed. In short, Malcolm had not believed him, and the “film suggests that redemption for Malcolm will come only if he can help this young boy [Cole] to appease the ghosts, who all seem to be seeking justice for wrongs committed against them.”⁵ Malcolm tells Cole a story about himself:

Once upon a time there was this person named Malcolm. He worked with children. He loved it. He loved it more than anything else. And then one night, he found out that he made a mistake with one of them. He couldn't help that one. And he can't stop thinking about it, he can't forget. Ever since then, things have been different. He's not the same person that he used to be. And his wife doesn't like the person that he's become. They barely speak anymore, they're like strangers. And then one day Malcolm meets this wonderful little boy, a really cool little boy. Reminds him a lot of the other one. And Malcolm decides to try and help this new boy. 'Cause he feels that if he can help this new boy, it would be like helping that other one too.

By helping Cole to reconcile with his ability, Malcolm is also helping to reconcile his own guilt.

³ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 98.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 205-206.

⁵ Jackson, *Gender and the Nuclear Family*, 72.

The Sixth Sense is saturated with the theme of reconciliation, between past and present, between known and unknown, and also as a means for allowing relationships to heal. Cole is reconciled to his extraordinary ability and he gains, at least for a short time, a father figure in Malcolm which he had not had before. Malcolm is reconciled with his own death and can move on when he can finally say goodbye to his wife. Cole takes on Malcolm's role as therapist as he listens to the ghosts (who suffered familial abuse and were killed at the hands of the state), helping to reconcile their injustices. Cole even finds reconciliation with his mother, with whom he had felt estranged, unwilling to confide in her as he had with Malcolm for fear of losing her affection ("She doesn't look at me like everybody else, and I don't want her to. I don't want her to know... That I'm a freak"). As the two sit in a traffic jam on a rainy day, Cole tells her that the traffic is due to an accident where someone had died. When the mother (Toni Collette) asks if he can see her, and where she is, Cole answers chillingly, "Standing next to my window." At first unnerved ("Cole, you're scaring me"), the mother listens as Cole tells her about how he talks to her dead grandmother, revealing things the young boy could never know. In a tearful exchange the mother accepts Cole's ability, and even helps to find closure with the memory of her grandmother.

Stir of Echoes also deals with themes of father-son relationships, of males who take on the psychic role and withhold that fact from the women in their lives (among other things), and both films eschew the suburbs and bring haunting to the urban neighborhood (Chicago for *Echoes*, Philadelphia for *The Sixth Sense*). In *Stir of Echoes*, working-class father Tom Witzky (Kevin Bacon) begins experiencing haunting visions of a dead girl in his rented home after insisting he be hypnotized by his sister-in-law, Lisa (Illeana Douglas). Tom and Malcolm reflect changing attitudes towards masculinity and fatherhood. Action films of the late 1970s and 1980s

featured unattached males and promoted a hard-body idealist vision of masculinity. As the 1990s proceeded men were shown as more attached to families and were often depicted as the family's savior (though Malcolm is not a father, he does act as a father-figure for Cole). The males are once again the focus. Whereas the *Poltergeist* series showcased femininity as a conduit for the supernatural, *The Sixth Sense* and *Stir of Echoes* suggests that men share a secret understanding of these matters, though far more reluctantly. When Tom's wife, Maggie (Kathryn Erbe), comes across a cop who's also psychic (Eddie Bo Smith Jr.), he recognizes the same ability in her son (much like Dick Hallorann with Danny Torrance). "Boy's got the eyes on him, doesn't he? X-ray," he says. "Not you, though. Possibly daddy." At first horrified by his new ability, Tom ends up embracing it. Feeling unaccomplished and inadequate, Tom apologizes to Maggie for being so "ordinary," but becomes obsessive when he accepts he has been chosen by the ghost to find her corpse, hidden somewhere in the house, and proceeds to tear up the backyard, floors, and walls to find it.

As Tom discovers, two of the local teens, one the son of his landlord, Frank McCarthy (Kevin Dunn), murdered a neighborhood girl, Samantha Kozac (Jennifer Morrison), in the house while it was being renovated. The boys' fathers learned of this and helped hide the body in the basement wall, more concerned with the impropriety of their actions than with the fate of Samantha. Tom realizes that the seemingly idyllic neighborhood into which he has moved has merely been gilding its rot. When Frank confronts Tom about his discovery, he confesses to him, "They were going to kill you in cold blood. I couldn't let that happen. Not here. This is a decent neighborhood!" Tom's crime is that he does not conform to the cabalistic pact into which the other men have been initiated. Tom chooses reconciliation with the past instead of concealment. The house is complicit in hiding the body and must be torn down. The ghost must find justice,

the consequences (or a football scholarship for the teen) be damned. Both Tom and Cole come to realize what Gordon explains: “When a ghost appears, it is making contact with you; all its forceful if perplexing annunciations are for you. Offer it a hospitable reception if we must, but the victorious reckoning with the ghost always requires a partiality to the living. Because ultimately haunting is about how to transform a shadow of a life into an undiminished life whose shadows touch softly in the spirit of a peaceful reconciliation.”⁶ Tom, Cole, and Malcolm come away, not unscathed, but more completely and comfortably at peace with themselves for having helped the ghosts find their reconciliation. Phillips writes, “The resurgence of Gothic horror at the turn of the millennium should not be surprising. American horror has always been about what lies lurking just beyond the boundaries of vision and normalcy... The Gothic reconciliation offered in [*The Sixth Sense* and *Stir of Echoes*]... offered not only a way to resolve the problems of the past but also a way to enter boldly into the future.”⁷

1999 also saw the release of two big-budget ghost films, both remakes, *The Haunting* and *House on Haunted Hill*. These films marked an aesthetic departure, utilizing modern computer effects technology to generate its spirits (whereas *The Sixth Sense* and *Stir of Echoes* relied upon practical effects). Increased “technical sophistication, the broadly creative and specifically visual possibilities, and the increasingly affordable availability of computer-generated effects seem to have been one of the engines driving the return of the ghost as a viable horror film trope.”⁸ Both films, however, though box-office successes, were critical failures. One of the chief complaints was, in fact, the overuse of CGI, the falsity of which was too plain to conjure scares. *House on Haunted Hill* fared slightly better with reviewers, partly due to having been released second. The *San Francisco Chronicle* lamented, “*House on Haunted Hill* is the kind of horror movie that's

⁶ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 208.

⁷ Phillips, *Projected Fears*, 194.

⁸ Hantke, “I See Dead People,” 192.

not a bit scary and quite a bit gross. Yet it's also mildly, even pleasantly, entertaining, at least by the diminished standard set by this summer's *The Haunting*.”⁹ *House on Haunted Hill* was produced by Dark Castle Entertainment, an American film production label which was formed to remake the films of William Castle. The company would follow with two more CGI-reliant ghost films, *13 Ghosts* (2001) and *Ghost Ship* (2002, and not based on a Castle film). Though the former has gained minor cult status, both movies were also panned as lacking genuine scares.

These flashy ghostly horror films used their technology as a gimmick and missed the mark on what actually frightened audiences. However, at the same time ghostly horror films from abroad made their presence known. These foreign specters became conduits of fear and anxiety, especially in moments where the spectral merged with the technical to horrifying effect. Cinema expert Jay McRoy claims that “Japanese horror cinema’s ‘return’ to international prominence in the mid-1990s was one of the most exciting events in world cinema during the waning years of the twentieth century.” In genre fandom “this was especially true for audiences tired of the annual parade of unimpressive sequels to franchises that had seemingly long ago run their course.”¹⁰ These films generally depicted an *onryō*, a type of ghost (*yūrei*) that was capable of causing harm to the living world. These malevolent entities, nearly always female, “return to exact upon those living beings that have harmed them... Almost exclusively the result of distressing/’unnatural’ circumstances, their deaths, either by their own hands or at the hands of patriarchal violence, typically follow a prolonged period of abuse or neglect.”¹¹ They are often depicted (thanks to *kabuki* tradition) in white burial clothes with pale-white skin and long, black, unkempt hair hanging before their face. The two most prominent *onryō* films of this era, both of

⁹ Mick LaSalle, “A Gutsy Remake / 'House on Haunted Hill' goes for the gross-out,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 30, 1999.

¹⁰ Jay McRoy, “Spectral Reminders and Transcultural Hauntings: (Re)iterations of the *Onryō* in Japanese Horror Cinema,” in *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*, ed. Murray Leeder (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 209.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

which spawned long-lasting franchises and both of which were remade for American audiences, are *Ring* (1998) by Hideo Nakata (remade in the U.S. by Gore Verbinski in 2002) and *Ju-On: The Grudge* by Takashi Shimizu (remade in the U.S. as *The Grudge* by the same director in 2004). In *Ju-on*, “Shimizu combines a subtle variation on popular cinematic representations of the *onryō* with visual and narrative tropes culled from late 1970s and early 1980s Hollywood stalker/slasher films” which “resulted in a tantalizing cinematic hybrid that doubtlessly contributed to the film’s continued transcultural appeal.”¹² *Ring*, in which the ghost girl is associated with a cursed videotape and crawls from a television screen, reflected “trepidation over the impact of emerging technologies (particularly media technologies).”¹³ Both remakes achieved wide success in the United States, for reasons that will become apparent. However, Japan was not the only Asian country to find success with ghostly horror films in the U.S., a country that hungered for these haunting imports. These ghost films provided many Americans with their first glimpses into these foreign markets’ offerings. *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003), for example, “was the first South Korean horror film to receive an American release.”¹⁴ Since then, South Korean horror has received consistent praise within the U.S., equaling and sometimes surpassing Japanese horror cinema in popularity.

Another reason for the popularity of these Japanese remakes may lie in the events and aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, without doubt the most traumatic event in recent American history and one which has had long lasting repercussions. The tragedy, as Arthur Redding notes, “created seismic shifts in American thinking. That day of horror and tragedy... prompted a collective interest in the nature of evil, haunted spaces (such as the destroyed World Trade Center towers), enduring trauma and mourning, and the debt the living

¹² Ibid., 213.

¹³ Ibid., 211.

¹⁴ Morton, *Ghosts*, 169.

owe the dead in seeking justice and reparation. Indeed, ‘We will never forget’ is the motto that emerged in the aftermath.”¹⁵ The combining of spectrality and technology, in particular, spoke to national fears of terrorism, of the seemingly anonymous attackers and their destructive abilities (despite being small in number), and of the methods those terrorists might use. Americans awaited another attack and thought continuously about where it might occur, who might commit it, and how. Redding poignantly observes:

For while the personification of menace can be relegated to those who are visibly different, the real danger is that the threat is ubiquitous... The home must be understood to be a safe haven, and any threats to it must be considered foreign, threats from the outside. And yet, the foreign might be found anywhere, *even at home*, even in one’s neighbor, even in one’s own self. Terrorism comes from out of the clear blue sky, attacking the unsuspecting and unvigilant; it (rather brilliantly) *uses the technologies of the first world against itself*. Terrorism is contagious, unpredictable, cancerous, and far more pernicious in its capacity for dissimulation than communism had been, even in the heyday of the Cold War... The enemy is felt, quite palpably, to be nowhere and everywhere, and potentially anywhere. We may want to bomb the bastards back to the Stone Age, but who are they? Where are they?¹⁶

The very technologies that identified the U.S. as an advanced nation, upon which Americans had come to feel dependent, could be used against them and bring them down. Many of the American remakes of Japanese horror films released in the aftermath of 9/11 dealt with this fear. These include not only *The Ring*, but also *Pulse* (2006, a remake of 2001’s *Kairo*), in which mysterious e-mails and internet videos drive people to commit suicide, and *One Missed Call* (2008, a remake of the 2003 film of the same name), where the characters receive cell phone calls in which they hear recordings of their own final moments. In both films malevolent ghosts are the cause, and the “victims are targeted because of their reliance on communications technology,

¹⁵ Jessica O’Hara, “Making Their Presence Known: TV’s Ghost-Hunter Phenomenon in a ‘Post-’ World,” in *The Philosophy of Horror*, ed. Thomas Fahy (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 81.

¹⁶ Redding, *Haints*, 101 (my emphasis).

which takes them away from the real world and from having real physical contact with others.”¹⁷

These films along with American originals, such as 2002’s *FearDotCom*, can be read as “marking cultural anxieties about the ubiquity of media technology and its influence on us.”¹⁸

Asian-influenced horror films aside, most American horror cinema in the years following 9/11 focused on bodily trauma and mass death. Graphic depictions of torture and violence generally defined the American reaction to the tragedy, at least on the big screen. However, as literary scholar Jessica O’Hara suggests (writing in 2010), ghosts took their place on the small screen as result of Americans retreating from public space:

September 11 casts its shadow in other ways as well. It has perhaps intensified a trend toward ‘nesting’ and perfecting the home space, a trend that, oddly enough, can help to account for the popularity of ghost-hunting shows. On September 11 public space showed itself to be dangerous indeed. Thus the idea of retreating from the public into the private sphere became all the more appealing. The rhetoric of the home as ‘sanctuary’ has certainly dominated the television and airwaves over the last decade or so, perhaps because of this post-9/11 turn ‘inward.’ Another possibility for the HGTV orgy of late could be the secularization of our culture and our postmodern skepticism toward meta-narratives. If more and more of us do not regard churches as ‘sanctuaries’ and have trouble believing in the meta-narratives of official religion, why not find spiritual solace and sanctuary — quite literally — in the comfort of our own homes?¹⁹

While the trend of reality-TV ghost-hunting was first popularized by *MTV’s Fear* (2000-2002), in which contestants were chosen to spend the night in a supposedly haunted location and complete tasks for money, television ghost-hunting found a wide audience with shows like *Ghost Hunters* (2006-2014), *Paranormal State* (2007-2011), and *Ghost Adventures* (2008-). These shows, which even mimicked the qualities of home improvement programs, followed a similar pattern: paranormal investigators spend an evening in a haunted location and use various

¹⁷ Jackson, *Gender and the Nuclear Family*, 108.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁹ O’Hara, “Making Their Presence Known,” 83.

technologies in an attempt to communicate with and capture evidence of ghosts. Once again, spectrality is seen as directly associated with technology.

These shows popularized a new aesthetic within the ghostly horror film with their abundant use of first-person digital recordings and green night-vision cameras. The so-called “found-footage” subgenre came to international prominence with 1999’s *The Blair Witch Project*, directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, in which a trio of university documentarians venture into the Maryland woods in search of the eponymous witch of legend and succumb to supernatural inflictions on their bodies and minds. The story in its essence is about a haunted woods, and though it was not the first film to utilize the first-person “found-footage” or mockumentary aesthetic, it was the first to garner international success, becoming one of the most successful independent films ever, based in part on its advertising campaign that effectively blurred the line for audiences between fact and fiction. Nevertheless, it was the success of 2007’s *Paranormal Activity* that really set the found-footage trend in ghostly horror films in motion, and was in many ways responsible for reigniting ghosts as a popular (and lucrative) subject in horror films. Like *The Blair Witch Project*, *Paranormal Activity* was made for a paltry sum but raked in enormous proceeds at the box office, beating out the former film as the most profitable ever.²⁰ The film’s success put American production company Blumhouse on the map, making it a defining genre force through the following decade. Directed by Oren Peli, the film takes place within the home of Katie (Katie Featherston) and Micah (Micah Sloat), which has been experiencing supernatural disturbances. Micah sets up cameras throughout the house to document the activity which escalates steadily and dangerously.

²⁰ Eoin O’Carroll, “How ‘Paranormal Activity’ became the most profitable movie ever,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 30, 2009. <https://www.csmonitor.com/Technology/Horizons/2009/1030/how-paranormal-activity-became-the-most-profitable-movie-ever>

The aesthetic of combining the spectral with the technical, which proved so influential for the ghostly horror films that followed, has been explored by technological theorist Marc Olivier. Termed “Glitch Gothic,” Olivier paints this scenario: “A small crew of attractive twenty-somethings with an assortment of video cameras record themselves wandering around an abandoned building as one by one they fall victim to supernatural forces. That synopsis describes the found-footage horror film *Grave Encounters* (2011)” as well as dozens of other “films released between 2010 and 2013. Apart from sharing a generic plot, these otherwise unremarkable found-footage horror films have in common a glitch aesthetic that exploits the shock of a digital noise event for the sake of gothic horror.” The glitches in digital found-footage films of the early 2010s utilized the glitch as a symptom of ghostly phenomenon. “In its current use, Glitch Gothic figures into the history of ghosts and technology as both a perpetuation of the enduring tradition” of blurring the spiritual and technological realms that dates back to the earliest uses of Spiritualists using the latest technologies to communicate with the deceased, “and as a material counterweight to the ghostly aspects of media.”²¹ Once again Americans distrusted the technology upon which they had grown so dependent: was it working for them, or against them?

The Blair Witch Project and *Paranormal Activity* established another trend in ghostly horror films. The protagonists’ fates in both films are bleak; there are no real survivors. Whereas ghostly horror films at the turn of the millennium adopted a theme of reconciliation, the traumatic events of September 11, in which the remains of more than 1,100 victims went unidentified, appear to have created a shift toward uncertain and incomplete narratives. In addition, the financial crisis of 2007-08 rocked the housing market. The recession began with the

²¹ Marc Olivier, “Glitch Gothic,” in *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*, ed. Murray Leeder (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 253, 256.

depreciation of value in the subprime mortgage market in the United States, but soon turned into an international banking crisis. By 2009 unemployment exceeded ten-percent and a 2010 study found that approximately 1.2 million households had been lost to the recession.²²

The ghostly horror films of the first half of the 2010s featured hauntings more akin to the abodes of the Allerdyce mansion, 112 Ocean Ave., and *The Overlook*. The most prominent of these films are *Insidious* (2010) and *Sinister* (2012), both produced by Blumhouse, and *The Conjuring* and *Mama*, both released in 2013. These films (except for *Mama*) blur the line between the ghostly and demonic, and in their own ways reflect the financial and familial anxieties of the era. Bernice M. Murphy writes that “for all of their obvious replication of themes and plot devices... what is most striking about the films considered here is the manner in which they implicitly and explicitly reference the financial crisis [that] has adversely affected the lives of millions of ordinary American families. The significance of middle-class economic anxiety in the films... is first of all emphasized by the fact that they have helped re-establish the idea of the suburban-set haunting for a new generation of cinemagoers.” As we have seen, until the deepening financial crisis most American cinematic horror did not deal with hauntings, but that rapidly changed, and “this can partially be attributed to the fact that economic crash has deepened the preexisting suspicion that the suburban way of life is one that cannot (and indeed, *should not*) be maintained.”²³ In 1980 Stephen King recognized *The Amityville Horror* as a parable of economic nightmare. As such, “Given the rather obvious (and oft noted) potential for drawing parallels between the specter of supernatural incursion and the specter of looming

²² John W. Schoen, “Study: 1.2 million households lost to recession,” *NBC News*, April 8, 2010. http://www.nbcnews.com/id/36231884/ns/business-eye_on_the_economy/t/study-million-households-lost-recession/#.Xn9oxTJKiM8

²³ Bernice M. Murphy, “‘It’s Not the House That’s Haunted’: Demons, Debt, and Family in Peril Formula in Recent Horror Cinema,” in *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*, ed. Murray Leeder (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 243. Murphy’s analysis of these films is apt but she mistakenly refers to *The Conjuring* as a Blumhouse production.

bankruptcy, it is hardly surprising then that at a time when the American middle classes have been through severe economic uncertainty last seen in the early 1970s, the haunted house movie has made such a major comeback.”²⁴ Andy Muschietti’s *Mama* deals directly with the financial crisis. The film opens with stockbroker Jeffrey Desange (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) who, after losing his fortune in the economic meltdown, murders his colleagues and his estranged wife and then takes his two young daughters to an abandoned house in the woods with plans to murder them as well. Kimberly Jackson observes that “Desange’s murderous rampage is reflective of changing social and economic conditions that challenge... his ability to succeed financially,” and at “his breaking point, the impotent father takes out his rage on those upon whom he projects his own failures: his work partners, his wife, and his children.”²⁵

Likewise, the families central to *Insidious*, *Sinister*, and *The Conjuring* are all recent homeowners (the Lamberts in the first film buy two homes, in fact), and the “purchase of a new home... represents one of the biggest and most anxiety-spawning financial transactions any of us will ever make. It is perhaps hardly surprising, therefore, that” these families “seem to have at the back of their minds the niggling worry that they have severely overextended themselves this time.”²⁶ In *Insidious*, for instance, the Lambert family is “portrayed as suburban upper-middle-class. In their case, class may be less dependent on how much money the family has and more on how they define themselves. It seems the Lambert family is living above their means, a circumstance that aligns them with the current cultural and economic climate, in which many bought above their means and are now reeling from the recent bursting of the real estate

²⁴ Murphy, “Demons, Debt, and Family,” 244.

²⁵ Jackson, *Gender and the Nuclear Family*, 146.

²⁶ Murphy, “Demons, Debt, and Family,” 246.

bubble.”²⁷ These fears are seen most prominently in James Wan’s *The Conjuring*, the lucrative reception of which spawned a successful franchise. The film draws many parallels with *The Amityville Horror* (which had been remade in 2005) as it contends with similar economic angst. Both films are set in the 1970s; both are based on supposedly true stories and feature characters based upon real people (this pretense of veracity assisted in the successful marketing of both films); both films feature a house with hidden rooms and a young daughter with an invisible ghostly playmate; members of both families feel perpetually and inexplicably cold within the house; both films present a clear contest of demonic evil against traditional Christianity (the icons of which the demonic spirits are openly hostile); and finally, both films feature a father weighed down with financial worries. *The Conjuring*’s family is headed by Roger (Ron Livingston) and Carolyn Perron (Lili Taylor) who buy an old house (on auction from the bank) in Rhode Island. Predictably, paranormal activity begins and becomes more physically violent until the Perrons, in their desperation, seek the help of paranormal investigators Ed (Patrick Wilson) and Lorraine Warren (Vera Farmiga) (perhaps unsurprisingly, the real-life Warrens first made a name for themselves by investigating the original Amityville home). This latter narrative element “conjures” up memories of the Freelings inviting investigators into their home to help them. Though the Perron house doesn’t seem bent on destroying itself like that of the Lutzes, Roger is a man in perpetual worry about his family’s financial security. In the beginning, when he orders pizza as they unpack, he urges his daughters not to let the food go to waste. “It’s expensive feeding you girls,” he tells them. When they find furniture in a hidden cellar he immediately wonders if some are antiques that could be sold. On a phone conversation we hear him stressing over the cost to insure his rig, commenting that the expense will cut into half his

²⁷ Jackson, *Gender and the Nuclear Family*, 81. Jackson notes that this element is found more forcefully within the film’s original screenplay.

rate. Most tellingly, when Ed asks him why he has not moved yet, Roger answers, “I don’t know where we’d move to. We’ve got all the money tied up in this place. We’ve had a lot of repairs on top of that. And I don’t know anybody who’s going to take in a family of seven indefinitely.”

Scott Derrickson’s *Sinister* also has economic motivations as the root of its peril. Ellison Oswalt (Ethan Hawke), a once-famous true crime writer who has not had a hit in years, moves his family (without their knowledge) into the house of a family who was hanged from the tree in the backyard. Ellison hopes to use the murder as the basis for his next book and finally regain the limelight he once enjoyed. For Kimberly Jackson,

The particular sin being punished in *Sinister* has to do with contemporary American culture's obsession with representations of true crime. What began with popular though overtly fictionalized shows appearing on primetime networks in the early 1990s — like *Law and Order*, their cases ‘ripped from the headlines’ — led to more docudrama-style manifestations in the late 1990s like *48 Hours*, *New Detectives*, and *Cold Case*. The newest craze is an entire cable television channel, Investigation Discovery, devoted only to shows with sensationalized depictions of true crime, bearing names like *Southern Fried Homicide*, *Swamp Murders*, *Deadly Women*, and *Dates from Hell*. As the irreverent titles indicate, the purpose of such shows is simply to shock and titillate. Any motion toward social justice or awareness in the earlier shows has here disappeared... Ellison Oswalt is forced to realize over the course of the film that he is part of this trend, exploiting the victims he writes about with no higher motive than his own fame and fortune.²⁸

Ellison solves the case, but at the cost of his family. He unwittingly falls into the plans of a ghostly demon called Bughuul, an entity who mixes the spiritual with photographic film, and becomes a victim of his own true crime story.

These films keep within the more nihilistic tone set forth by *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity*. The entities (often demonic) do not seek out the living to obtain their help. They mean them harm, plain and simple. Murphy explains that:

the demonic entities which feature here all differ significantly from the displaced spirits who wreak havoc on suburbia in *Poltergeist*, the ghost of the murdered child seeking justice in *The Changeling*..., or the psychotically vengeful yet

²⁸ Ibid., 108.

horribly mistreated in life ghosts of Sadako in *Ring* and the titular “Candyman” in Bernard Rose’s film. They don’t want to right past wrongs, terrorize those who have harmed them in life, or bring to light the crimes of the past. Although the protagonists in all four cases have done something to capture the attention of their demonic antagonists (just moving in to the wrong house is enough, it seems), their suffering takes place mainly in order to satisfy the entities’ desire for pain and suffering — they represent evil of the very broadest, most unambiguous variety.²⁹

In addition, the middle-class became the locus for supernatural threats. In the 1980s *Poltergeist* depicted the middle-class status as an advantage when battling against the paranormal kidnappers which sought to break up the family unit. However, “the more recent films situate the origin of the horror firmly within the middle class itself,”³⁰ reflecting the anxieties and skepticism about family and home that were found in the working-class ghostly horror films of *Burnt Offerings*, *The Amityville Horror*, and *The Shining*. With so many Americans having lost their homes and their economic security so recently pulled out from under them, the ghostly horror films of the early 2010s reveal the uncertainty of the future of the American dream, and the worry that the middle-class lifestyle to which Americans had long aspired was truly untenable. Americans saw a past they could not sustain and a future they could not envision.

Jackson observes that “it is telling that so many of these recent popular horror films are narratives of haunting that suggest that we are stuck in a middle zone that has been identified as uninhabitable and inhospitable, yet there is seemingly no way out or forward. The nuclear family continues to be prayed upon by the ghosts of patriarchy and struggles to find a sustainable figure for the new form of power that has come to disrupt the old order.”³¹ As evidence, Jackson points to *Mama*. Jeffrey Desange’s attempt to murder his daughters is thwarted by the eponymous ghost, who kills Jeffrey and raises the two young girls as her own for the next five years in the abandoned house until Jeffrey’s twin brother, Lucas (also played by Coster-Waldau), who has

²⁹ Murphy, “Demons, Debt, and Family,” 250.

³⁰ Jackson, *Gender and the Nuclear Family*, 68.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

hired a private investigator to find his nieces, succeeds in tracking and obtaining girls. Mama follows the girls to their new home — a house provided by an institution in exchange for psychiatric monitoring — where they are cared for by Lucas and his girlfriend, Annabel (Jessica Chastain), who is reluctant to take on the role of mother to the girls, believing herself largely unfit for the occupation. As the film goes on, Annabel discovers that Mama was an asylum patient named Edith Brennan whose child was taken from her and given to nuns. Edith escaped the asylum and stole her baby back, but leapt off a cliff in order to avoid her pursuers. On the way down her baby was caught on a branch and Edith drowned in the river, her ghost not understanding her baby's absence. Edith, therefore, in spectral form, took the Desange sisters as substitutes. Eventually a rivalry forms between Annabel and Mama (in an inversion of the Wicked Stepmother fairy tale trope), who grows more hostile and possessive of the girls. The film ends with the younger niece choosing Mama on a cliff's edge, falling to her death in Mama's arms, smiling warmly, and the older sister choosing the traditional comforts of a nuclear family with Lucas and Annabel. Jackson notes that "Annabel is only marginally allied with the societal forces that, on the one hand, deemed Edith Brennan mad and unfit, locking her away and taking her baby from her, and, on the other hand, led to the madness of Jeffrey Desange. She does not accept the standards of the social sphere into which she has moved, and she does not force them on the children. The upper-middle-class home is transformed when it must contain Annabel, two wild children, and a vengeful ghost." Annabel is especially contrasted (favorably) with the girls' Aunt Jean (Jane Moffat), who "cannot tolerate these variations from the norm, calling social services on Annabel after one of her scheduled visits with the girls."³² Mama kills both Aunt Jean and girls' psychiatrist when she literally "opens up an abyssal hole in the wall of

³² Ibid., 156.

the domestic sphere that threatens to swallow authority figures.”³³ When the body count has come to completion, “Though Mama’s acts were violent, she essentially freed all three survivors from representatives of oppressive forces: from their obligation to the psychiatrist/state, who turn” the girls into specimens “and forced them all into a lifestyle unnatural to them; from the prying eyes of Aunt Jean, who insisted that they conform to that proper middle-class suburban lifestyle; and now from Mama’s own fury, demanding redress for the wrongs of the past.”³⁴ In the end, then, in “terms of the future of the nuclear family in the face of social oppression and decay, the film seems to suggest that only those who can recognize the decay of the once-ideal upper-middle-class family and the American dream they represent, while not abandoning the social or the familial altogether, will be able to survive.”³⁵

While *Mama*, as the title suggests, is mainly concerned with mothers and daughters (the character of Lucas is put in a coma for good measure to keep him out of a large section of the film), most of the ghostly horror films of early 2010s were concerned with the place and position of fathers. Masculinity was seen by some as experiencing a crisis (a concern which has roots many decades earlier). Long seen as the head of the household, responsible for primary income, men found fewer and fewer occasions in which the characteristics of traditional masculinity were needed in the modern era. One article from the time wrote, “Drastic demographic shifts over the last half century suggest that the archetypal American male is on the decline: manufacturing employment, long the realm of men, has slumped over the last 60 years.” In addition, women outperformed men in obtaining college degrees and also in general academic performance; another contemporary article suggested “that women might be better-suited than men for postindustrial society. The result: men, even insecure in their roles as basic breadwinners,

³³ Ibid., 150.

³⁴ Ibid., 163.

³⁵ Ibid., 159.

increasingly feel out of place.”³⁶ Jackson sees crumbling patriarchy reflected in the ghostly horror films of 2008-14:

It is not surprising that we see a resurgence in representations of patriarchal decline in this time period. In addition to ongoing social trends — the rise of (often highly publicized) cases in which women opt to have children out of wedlock, the highly contentious issue of gay marriage and adoption, and the increasing intervention of technology into family life, including alternate methods of conception and birth — there is the unique state of what we might call post-post-9/11 culture. While immediately after 9/11 male heroism was celebrated — particularly in the figures of courageous New York City firefighters and the Texas-born president, who steadfastly resolved to punish those responsible — since then, criticism of the Bush administration’s war efforts and of the uses of questionable methods of detainment and torture,³⁷ in addition to a failing economy, have tarnished that image of masculine power.³⁷

For these reasons and more, horror films of the time “suggest that the bourgeois nuclear family, once seen as the exemplary embodiment of patriarchal culture,” should now suffer “grave consequences in the face of... cultural standstill, trapped between a future it cannot envision in the past it cannot forget.” These threats generally came in the form of the father, who far “from protecting his family from an external threat” is himself “often the internal source of it.”³⁸ In the late 1970s and early 1980s films like *The Amityville Horror* and *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* offered narratives of paternal redemption where the father saves the family (and sometimes even the family dog) in the end. In contrast, many “post-9/11 horror films are particularly brutal in their portrayal of the fragmentation of the nuclear family and the larger patriarchal structure that it supports. In such films, patriarchs are often absent or violently dispatched, and a host of feminine figures and children are left to pick up the pieces.”³⁹ As we have seen, the fathers of the

³⁶ Victoria Bekiempis, “The cowboy in crisis, or male anxiety in American politics,” *The Guardian*, Oct. 25, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/oct/25/cowboy-crisis-male-anxiety>

³⁷ Jackson, *Gender and the Nuclear Family*, 8. Jackson makes an error: George W. Bush was born in Connecticut.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

Sinister and *Mama* do not survive. The surrogate father of the latter film (the girls' uncle) is comatose for much of the film's runtime.

In *Insidious*, the father survives physically, but is *spiritually* lost. Josh (Patrick Wilson) and Renai Lambert (Rose Byrne) have not long moved into a new spacious suburban home when their oldest son, Dalton (Ty Simpkins) inexplicably goes comatose. As the stresses and bills mount up Josh becomes distant, staying late at work in order to avoid the difficulties at home. Meanwhile, Renai becomes convinced the house is haunted, hearing voices in the baby monitor and seeing apparitions in the rooms. Finally, she convinces Josh to buy a new house (one noticeably smaller), but the paranormal disturbances quickly return with amplified intensity. The family brings in the help of a trio of paranormal specialists led by an elderly psychic named Elise (Lin Shaye). She explains that the reason the ghostly activity has followed them to their new home is because "it's not the house that's haunted; it's your son." Dalton has the ability to astral project while he sleeps, but his soul is lost in a place beyond the physical world called The Further. Ghosts are attracted to the boy's empty body, wishing to inhabit it for their own ends. Elise eventually reveals that she had also helped Josh when he was young; though he does not remember it, a parasitic ghost used to stalk him when he was child, appearing in photographs of the boy, and who came close to claiming Josh's body for its own. Like in *Stir of Echoes*, paranormal sensitivity has passed from father to son. Furthermore, the root of the horror is found not within the home. It is contained within the family members themselves. In a plotline reminiscent of *Poltergeist*, a child is lost in a ghostly realm and investigators led by a female psychic have come to assist. However, this time it is not the mother who ventures beyond to retrieve the child, but the father, who astrally projects himself. Josh succeeds in bringing back Dalton, but finds himself trapped in The Further — his body now inhabited by the same parasitic

entity which stalked him as a child. The possessed Josh strangles Elise, leaving the family unit without either of its saviors. Unlike *The Amityville Horror*, *Poltergeist*, or *Stir of Echoes*, then, *Insidious* (and its sequel) contains “no reassuring message that the family bond will prevail.”⁴⁰ In this film, as well as in those like *Paranormal Activity* and *Sinister*, the “final moments... leave us with the disquieting sense that the fractured family cannot be put back together again, in part, because they have brought their terrible fate upon themselves.”⁴¹

One more film is worth considering within this cycle of familial ghostly horror, Mike Flanagan’s *Oculus* (2013). The plot centers on two adult siblings, Kaylie (Karen Gillan) and Tim (Brenton Thwaites), who come together to fulfill a vow they made as children — to kill the haunted mirror they believe is responsible for the deaths of their mother (Katee Sackhoff) and father (Rory Cochrane). The film continually shifts back to when Kaylie and Tim were kids, revealing as the story progresses their prior experiences with the mirror. The narrative alternates between the two timelines until they converge in ways that make the characters question their senses and sanity. S.S. Praver, in his *Caligari’s Children: The Film as Tale of Terror*, writes of the effectiveness of mirrors in horror films: “Here claustrophobic and agoraphobic motifs come together. The mirror experience is claustrophobic when it hems us in and throws our own face back at us... It is agoraphobic when... the mirror opens out into an unfamiliar space, reflecting a room quite different from that in which it hangs.” The mirror may also “assert dark energies, allow glimpses of a repressed part of the personality, a world of violence and sexuality with which the characters cannot come to terms.”⁴² *Oculus* effectively embraces and utilizes all of these aspects. The mirror manipulates and alters its victims’ perceptions; the fallibility of the mind is a central theme in the story. Our understanding of the world is unreliable — our senses

⁴⁰ Ibid., 82.

⁴¹ Murphy, “Demons, Debt, and Family,” 248.

⁴² S.S. Praver, *Caligari’s Children: The Film as Tale of Terror* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1980), 78.

deceive us, our memories can be insufficient or even false, and our self-analysis can be our own worst enemy. The mother embodies this through suggestions of body dysmorphia. The character's self-esteem teeters on the edge as she becomes overly conscious of her weight and a scar which she fears is becoming more visible. The mirror exploits fears and weaknesses to steadily grind down its targets, ultimately showing its beholders that which they fear. The father is seduced by the mirror and becomes convinced of his own maliciousness. "It is me," he says as he looks at his own twisted reflection, "I've met my demons and they are many. I've seen the devil, and he is me." His madness results in him chaining his wife in the bedroom (where she feeds on broken glass) and the attempted murder of his children. Indeed, "it is striking how often the theme of infanticide manifests in popular horror of the" time period. "*Oculus* and *Mama* are exemplary in this regard,... [and] their uniqueness stems from their overuse of mythic and fairy-tale elements. In the realm of fairy tales, little children often suffer violence at the hands of parental figures, whether or not attempts on their lives are successful."⁴³ In the ghostly horror of most early 2010s films, family is not merely the tie that binds, it is the noose that chokes.

⁴³ Jackson, *Gender and the Nuclear Family*, 15.

CONCLUSION

Horror cinema seldom receives respect from mainstream critics — a genre which counts negative emotions as its chief currency, and which willfully throws the niceties of a culture back in its face and works to tear down an audience's sense of comfort is, after all, not asking to be accepted. Nevertheless, the ghost has garnered more positive recognition from critics and analysts outside the genre than other cinematic monsters (the same could be said of the ghost in horror and gothic literature, as well). Films such as *The Uninvited* and *The Sixth Sense* received praise upon their release and have endured as cinematic exemplars, and other films, like *The Innocents*, *The Haunting*, and *The Shining*, while not appreciated upon their release, have grown in cultural stature by commentators both within and outside of the genre. Much of this has to do with the ghostly horror film's general reliance on subtle storytelling, forgoing gore for atmospheric dread. A film about haunting often contains a psychological component that demands an appreciable mental interaction with the viewer, and makes for a more accommodating experience for those not acclimated to the more visceral offerings of the genre. Ghosts remain effective in sending chills down the spine. Regardless, the list above is short and ghostly horror films, like horror films in general, are rarely considered for their cultural value.

We may consider for a moment that folkloric ghost stories are an important aspect of social memory — they are a way for a people to (admittedly mis)remember the past in a way that proves functionally significant to the present. Often ignored as kitschy pop-history used to sucker tourists, these ghost stories nevertheless exhume past traumas and provide a folk-memory for a locality that refuses to forget the darker moments of its past. Colin Dickey writes, “Ghost stories, for good or ill, are how cities make sense of themselves: how they narrate the tragedies of their

past, weave cautionary tales for the future.”¹ Similarly, the ghostly horror film, often dismissed by mainstream entertainment critics, is a cultural artifact that, in its own way, makes sense of the people that made them and the historical moment in which they were made.

An exploration of relevant scholarship, historical consideration, and textual analysis shows that ghosts and hauntings in horror films reveal valuable insights into contemporary American cultural and social preoccupations. These movies serve a vital role in recording the fears, values, prejudices, and attitudes (among many other aspects) of their era. For the first half of the twentieth century, American filmic ghosts were largely relegated to comedy, their depictions representative of the prevailing incredulous attitudes towards Spiritualism. As the behemoth that was the Second World War began to rise, ghosts were the subjects (and sometimes objects) of romance. Though the ghost was traditionally an entity to incite fear, Americans were slow to accept the real ghost as a viable cinematic monster, with few exceptions. The 1960s finally saw horrific ghosts taken more seriously, serving as symbolic manifestations of (particularly female) mental fragility. By the following decade, ghosts and hauntings had found their home, so to speak, within the lives of an American working-class that was struggling to make ends meet. The physical structures which housed these families became psychological cages of ruin, invading their inhabitants’ psyches to manipulate and gnaw upon their bonds of kinship. By the 1980s ghosts had gotten bigger and more destructive, though it was not long before their size outgrew their ability to frighten. As the millennium turned, ghosts once again effectively haunted American screens, first as totems of reconciliation, then in a post-9/11 world becoming ever more connected to anxieties surrounding our dependence upon technology. By the 2010s, ghosts were largely spectral demons bent on the destruction of

¹ Dickey, *Ghostland*, 248.

American notions of economic security and a wilting of the traditional ideas of middle-class idealism.

The remainder of the decade saw ghosts grow in prominence within horror cinema. *The Conjuring* franchise proved financially successful, spawning by the decade's end seven entries in the form of either sequels or tie-in films, the *Annabelle* series arguably being just as successful as the core *Conjuring* films. *Insidious* also offered its own franchise with four installments. Mike Flanagan has emerged as the most prolific and thoughtful storyteller of modern ghost tales, particularly with his loose adaptation of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, as well as his adaptation of Stephen King's *Doctor Sleep* (a sequel to *The Shining*), the filmmaker has knowingly embraced ghosts as powerful metaphors for memories, desires, fears, and appeasement. His ghosts, like those of the turn of the millennium, have the capacity for reconciliation, lest they consume the living in the meantime. Whatever the coming ghostly horror films hold, they will no doubt reflect our inner-most anxieties back at us from the flickering screen. Ghosts are here to stay. After all, as Avery F. Gordon has noted, "It is essential to write about societies and people enthralled by magic, enchanted, possessed and entranced, disappeared, and haunted because, well, it is more common than you might have considered... That all these ghostly aspects of social life are not aberrations, but are central to modernity itself."² Ghosts have been with us so long as we have had a past with which to contend. They help us to confront death, to recognize injustice, and to give voice to the silenced. They can serve as symbols of reconciliation, however, more often they are our own dark reflections. We have always been haunted.

² Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 197.

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