# The Haunted House is Home to Horror

An Exploratory Study of the Haunted House Manifest in North American Film from 1940–2020

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# Abstract

Hockey (1999) introduces the House of Doom; Bailey (1999) builds the Haunted House formula from American popular fiction; Meehan (2020) tracks the Haunted House on film and through history; and now, I explore how the Haunted House narrative belies societal concerns about the existential nature of humanity. When COVID-19 forced our global society into at-home isolation, inhabitants were forced to reckon with the effects of prolonged domestic survival, much like the inhabitants of haunted houses. This exploratory ethnographic content analysis of 40 films contributes a trio of phenomenological findings to existing Haunted House scholarship: 1) threats to the safety of one's home can turn the house into a dangerous trap, 2) as a reification of biophobia, the North American Haunted House is more closely aligned with nature than with civilization, 3) the Haunted Heroines of the horror genre showcase the strength and adaptability of the feminine trope. Oppressors mobilize structural restraints—literally and systemically—to objectify the Female Gothic as a Gothic Corpse, all while personifying inanimate structures. The Haunted House manifests in the North American cultural imagination as a monstrous embodiment of biophobia, a fear of nature and the Self. What happens when you open the door to supernatural metaphors for fears about domestic life and the nature of humanity?

*Keywords*: house, home, nature, insecurity, infection, contamination, assimilation, domestic trauma, film analysis, fear, isolation, the body, the Self

# Summary

Chapter 1 situates my analysis, outlining my theoretical framework and methodological approach. Chapter 2 focuses on Hockey's (1999) House of Doom and the reason people decide to enter haunted houses. I discuss the need for shelter and refer to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) as an example, detailing the stigma symbols present on the property and how they can be ignored in favour of shelter. Referring to *Halloween* (1978) I describe the double-edged nature of privacy and how windows contribute to danger entering the home. This chapter concludes with a discussion of *Monster House* (2006) and its illustration of the sentience afforded to the North American Haunted House.

Chapter 3 centres on concepts surrounding nature and bodies. Nature is enrolled into the built environment by human intervention, but the Gothic Body showcases how human bodies are natural and become enrolled in nature through suffering. The nature of the Haunted House is sickly and contagious, affecting inhabitants with its miasma. Not only does the Haunted House infect inhabitants, but it consumes them, bringing to life the fear of losing oneself inside a larger entity.

Chapter 4 builds on the insecurity of the home by looking at the experience of domestic horror, wherein violence and manipulation happen in the home. I look to the Female Gothic for a foundation of analysis and discover a character persistent through Haunted House films: the Haunted Heroine. With examples from *Rebecca* (1940), *Gaslight* (1940), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and *Hush* (2016) I illustrate the Haunted Heroine's experience of danger within her home. She proves to be an adaptable survivor who problematizes expectations of marriage, motherhood, and homelife.

Chapter 5 discusses how to kill a Haunted House and addresses how to respectfully interact with a Haunted House. I outline the limitations of this study and make recommendations for future research on the Haunted House. I conclude by reflecting on how my Haunted House became my Haunted Home through the process of doing this research.

# Table of Contents

"I would like to, if I may, take you on a strange journey."
Charles Gray as the Criminologist (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, 1975)

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Every place you go has a history of its own; every building, every park, every house has a story of what has taken place there. In the case of houses, the lives lived by occupants sometimes have a lingering effect on the way people perceive the space. Some houses are stigmatized by their past; haunted by events which took place on the property and left a dark stain. These are commonly called haunted houses—places with haunted histories.

There is a wonderful lack of disciplinary boundary-work among horror scholars, opening this literature review to numerous vantage points. My analysis builds from the foundation laid by my predecessors and mentors in horror studies. I start by using short stories to help define and set the scene of the archetypal Haunted House extant in mainstream cultural awareness. I examine the existing horror scholarship as it relates to haunted houses, fear, and films. I then outline my theoretical approach and useful concepts for this analysis, along with the research methods of horror scholars, and my methodological approach for this research. From there, I discuss Hockey's (1999) House of Doom and the insecurity of the Haunted House and that it does not keep inhabitants safe. Along with not acting as a good shelter, the Haunted House is alive and more like a creature than it is a house. I move into discussing how the Haunted House intersects with nature, describing the Gothic Body, and themes of infection and assimilation. Building on the feeling of being trapped inside a larger entity, I examine women's narratives where their house becomes a cage, and they go through horrible events in their domestic space. With that, I introduce the Haunted Heroine as a distinct character archetype found in Haunted House stories. She is a surviving character that demonstrates how to live

through trauma in the home. Finally, I conclude this thesis with advice on how to end the Haunted House narrative and a reflection on my own involvement with the Haunted House.

For the foundation of my research, I draw inspiration from fellow horror scholar Robin Means Coleman, author of *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1980s to Present* (2011). Means Coleman (2011) brings a unique perspective on horror films due to her long love of horror and her intersecting, othered identities. Through her analysis of "Blacks in horror"[1] she illuminates the information in horror films which may not be manifest on the surface; latent themes in horror speak volumes about contemporary society:

> Horror has something to say about religion, science, foreigners, sexualities, power and control, class, gender roles, sources of evil, an ideal society, democracy, etc. These topics take a compelling turn when examined through the lens of Black culture. My point is: the story of Blackness, as told through horror, is a complex and interesting one. While horror has at times been marred by its "B-movie," low budget and/or exploitative reputation, one cannot discount its unique skill at exposing the issues and concerns of our social world, to include our racial sensibilities. (p. xix)

I bring to the foreground the relevant topics which my analysis of horror—in addition to Means Coleman's (2011) list of topics—makes salient: ideas of house and home, safety and security, privacy, fear, and one's relationship with their Self[2], stigma and performance, societal anxieties, and isolation. These topics make themselves manifest in film by means of the Haunted House.

Means Coleman (2011) addresses why horror films merit our attention as scholars and how some are too quick to dismiss the symbolism rife in B-rated horror:

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[1] See Means Coleman (2011, p. 6) for discussion of "Blacks in horror" films and how it differs from Black horror films.

[2] I capitalize Self to emphasize its importance as a sociological concept in this thesis. Golovátina-Mora & Golovátina (2014) use the capitalized Self in their discussion to signify the conceptualization and objectification of selfhood.

> Horror films are rarely *Festival de Cannes* top-prize material, but their audiences may be far more astute than critics and some scholars give them credit for. They understand that the whole of the genre is not inane, and that horror filmmakers reveal something much, much more horrifying: that our world and relationships are really being held together with little more than spirit gum. (p. xix)

Spirit gum is an adhesive substance made from solvent and adhesive used to affix costuming pieces to the person, such as wigs, prosthetic noses, facial hair, and crystals. In the costuming department of every professional *haunt*, there is no doubt more than one bottle of spirit gum. Means Coleman (2011) well describes horror's revelation as spirit gum—its temporary adhesion represents how contemporary adhesion to social norms is temporary and continually reproduced and renegotiated through social interaction.

This mention of haunts bridges Means Coleman (2011) with the work of another scholar of the realm of horror, Margee Kerr. Her book, *Scream: Chilling Adventures in the Science of Fear* (2015), combines the psychological and sociological study of fear, teaching readers that "fear is something we can play with, and achieve positive outcomes, but only when handled responsibly. This is," Kerr says, "a lesson I desperately want to teach to the rest of the makers and creators of thrills and chills" (2015, p. 202). Key to this practice of ethical fear play is "the principles of informed consent" (Kerr, 2015, p. 202). This concept relates to the work of Staci Newmahr (2011) on sadomasochism, risk, and intimacy based on her ethnography in BDSM spaces and with rope bondage communities. Newmahr also highlights consent in playing at the edges of risk and how such play has positive intimacy-building effects.

Kerr's method of studying fear is unique and innovative, an ideal literature to incorporate into the foundation of my analysis. While completing her dissertation she began working at ScareHouse, an acclaimed haunted attraction in Pittsburg, the scariest haunt (short for 'haunted attraction') she had "ever been through (and [she's] been through a lot)" (Kerr,

2015, p. 5). Her new employment behind the scenes of a haunt gave Kerr a glimpse behind the proverbial curtain and the opportunity to observe individuals' experiences of fear up-close.

"As I continued to study fear in my work both at the University of Pittsburgh and at ScareHouse, I found I had questions that weren't being answered with theory and stacks of lab research" (Kerr, 2015, p. 6). It seemed to Kerr (2015) that all the research on fear focused on its negative effects on the individual. "Scholars show how panic, anxiety, worry, and fear have taken hold of the American psyche and become driving emotions behind a majority of our actions and decisions, to our great detriment" (Kerr, 2015, p. 6). Kerr found the literature lacking: it could hardly explain why people enjoy fear – why they love screaming and wetting their pants in fright.

In search of answers regarding the positive effects of fear, Kerr (2015) travelled the globe to understand fear from multiple dimensions. A rich ethnographic account of her research and expeditions into horrifying haunts, Kerr's book demonstrates the life-changing impacts of fear and an innovative, ethnographic, experiential-based methodology for the study of emotion. Studies in the field of emotions yield several interesting findings which help contextualize the investigation of haunted houses. Ekman (1992) finds that in every psychological study of universal basic emotions shared by humanity, researchers find six stable emotional categories: happiness, surprise, fear, sadness, anger, and disgust combined with contempt. All bodies experience emotional reactions as emotions are inherent to the body. A psychological perspective on emotions, however, leaves non-positivistic social scientists wanting; thus, I turn to Hochschild's understanding of emotions. Hochschild (2002) reinforces that "emotion is a biologically given sense, and our most important one" (p. 249). Emotion as a sense combines with a taxonomy of universally experienced emotions to layer the nuance of experiencing emotions with feeling emotions.

Polina Golovátina-Mora (2016) describes fear as a natural emotion; something connected to the individual and collective Self. She posits that fear is the inner recognition of the Self (2016) and that one's knowledge of the Self and Other is limited by looking at fear as a weakness or constraint. Rather, Golovátina-Mora (2016) advocates for facing one's fears honestly, thankfully, and responsibly in order to obtain self-recognition and an everyday functioning in society. Like Kerr (2015) and Newmahr (2011), Golovátina-Mora (2016) sees the positive aspects of fear and how it can be embraced to improve overall life enjoyment. Fear is contextual. It is sociocultural. It is influenced by lived experience and the media you consume. Fear is personal, and at the same time it is communal, bridging temporal and spatial dimensions. Fear and latent manifestations of fear require decoding with motifs from the personal narrative and fears which serve to inform the shape that manifestation takes. For this research, that manifestation normally reifies as a haunted house or other haunted structure.

What is a haunting and what does it mean for a place to be haunted? A haunting describes a spirit which is not solidly present at a site, but it frequently visits and often remains at the site emotionally if not tangibly. Hauntings are not always seen as ghosts but are sensed as lingering energy or personality. Hauntings are always situationally related to their surroundings; they are attached to something existing in the present. They could be attached to a person, a family, a location, a building, or an object. A place is haunted when strong, disembodied energy is present there beyond human intervention. That is to say, a haunting takes place where supernatural forces are present. These forces are emotional energy and so can be recognized by one's emotional sense (Hochschild, 2002) explaining why one can inexplicably feel that a place is haunted without knowing its history.

## 1.1 Theoretical Foundation

The literature and theory my data calls for range from academic to classical, gothic literature to cult classics; the Haunted House featured in North American film demands a Frankenstein of literature to be properly contextualized and understood. I approach the study of North American Haunted House films from a phenomenological standpoint and a symbolic interactionist perspective, meaning I study what I encounter and my analysis stems from the everyday lived experiences of individuals. My inquiry gains depth from the ethnographic aspect of this content analysis: through experiential, qualitative primary data collection, I encountered prevalent themes surrounding nature, bodies, stigma, feelings of being watched, imagination, liminality, isolation, and emotions, namely fear and disgust.

Symbolic interactionism (SI) provides the primary backbone for my research. A social psychologist by training and qualitative researcher, I integrate the worldview of symbolic interactionists into all my work. Symbolic interactionism was born from the teachings of George Herbert Mead and brought to life by his student, Herbert Blumer (Blumer, 1969). SI is not just a sociological theory, but a life perspective and worldview: it is the theory that people's experiences, interactions, and social understandings define reality. Consequently, symbolic interactionists focus on people's social definitions of reality – how they are formed and transformed – rather than attempting to find objective truths (Blumer, 1969).

There are three main premises in SI outlined by Blumer (1969) and they are as follows:

1. "Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them…
2. "The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows…
3. "These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things [they] encounter" (p. 2).

These premises inform my research and articulate why it is important to seek out people's unique experiences.

Coupled with symbolic interactionism is social psychology, a relatively young subsect of the social sciences. Social psychology is rooted in studying group behaviour and social interaction with teachings from Blumer, Mead, Asch, Goffman, Milgram, and Zimbardo, among others. Vital to the discipline is the symbolic interactionist concept of the definition of the situation (Berger, Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Altheide (2000) advocates for a reintegration of the definition of the situation into identity analysis and scholarship, particularly in the field of ethnography in social sciences. In this thesis, I use both the concepts of identity and the Self in combination with a fundamental grounding in the definition of the situation.

To narrow the scope of my study, I use films made in the United States of America (US). I later expanded this scope to include audiovisual media popular among North American audiences. Although most of the films I study are products of the US, I do not call this the USHH as the archetypal Haunted House belongs not only to the US, but also to, in the scope of this research, Canada. The haunted houses featured in film inform and are informed by sociocultural information shared across Canada and the US, thus; I refer to them both as North America. The films I study, and the featured characteristic and archetypal Haunted House I study, are born of the North American collective imagination.

For this research "North America" refers to the geographical region inclusive of the United States of America and Canada. North American culture refers to the common cultural norms shared between the US and Canada due to cooperative economies, a large permeable borderline, and copious amounts of shared media. Based on the number of my selected films which were produced in the US, I suggest that my analysis may be applicable to haunted houses as they exist in cultures which are heavily saturated in or are influenced by US media.

Of course, there are other types of Haunted Houses. I suspect an Indigenous Haunted House is different from a North American Haunted House, and that a Japanese Haunted House is unique, as is a Taiwanese Haunted House, or a South Asian, or Colombian, or German, or South American, or Kiwi Haunted House, and so on. I also suspect that a late Edo-era Haunted House differs greatly from a modern day Japanese Haunted House as both time and space factor into relevant scripts of fear and horror. Fear is dependent on one's cultural context and life experience, and so the objects of fear will differ by culture, by group, and by individual. I encourage others to continue engaging in haunted house studies and to explore how the Haunted House is impacted by and how it impacts differing cultural contexts. One can only fear what they can fathom, thus their nightmares are limited by the boundaries of their imagination.

To illustrate the relationship between fear and collective imagination, I take as an example the rise in popularity of UFO sightings during the 1960s United States[3]. Sightings gained traction in September 1961 as Betty and Barney Hill, an interracial American couple, drove home after a holiday. On the way back to New Hampshire, the couple lost two hours of time and came to attribute that period to an invasive, albeit brief, alien abduction (Barbeito, 2005; Kelley-Romano, 2006; Mack & Mack, 1994). Kelley-Romano (2006) approaches the study of America's surprisingly expansive alien abduction subculture as a living myth, drawing analytical inspiration from the works of Jung (1978). The myth surrounds human beings interacting with extraterrestrials, paralleling the association between white people and Black people taking place in the mid-20th Century North America. Discomfort with racial integration came to manifest through metaphor in the alien abduction narratives. Articulating the racial tension symbolically underpinning the shared North American alien abduction narrative,

[3] Inspired by lecture content and discussion in my undergraduate sociology class on extreme deviance: Shaw, R. (2017). *Belief in extraterrestrials and alien abductions.* Personal Collection of (Rhona Shaw), McMaster University, ON.

Kelley-Romano (2006) demonstrates the importance of examining emergent popular culture narratives:

> In a culture that has allegedly fixed the racial wrongs of the past, the Myth of Communion articulates fears through a thinly veiled white supremacist extraterrestrial hierarchy. The Myth of Communion shows us who we are, what we fear, and who we hope to become. Aliens have infiltrated American culture and are here to stay. Regardless of the reality of what is happening to individuals who believe they have been abducted, mythic analysis of these stories is important and useful. Exploring the ways these extraterrestrial others are described reveals as much about us as it does about any potential visitors from space. The fact that thousands of people, perhaps millions, are telling stories in which humans need extraterrestrial rescuing is important because for whatever reasons, these humans are unable to rescue themselves and incapable of finding any culturally sanctioned savior. (p. 402-3)

Barbeito (2005) concurs, finding that "these [alien abduction] narratives are absolutely seething with anxieties about the body, reproduction, and even more specifically, miscegenation" (p. 202). Alien abduction stories became a popular manifestation ofanxieties around racial mixing and interracial body connection in the 1960s. Once published, the Hills' abduction narrative served as a blueprint for the ensuing boom in alien abduction media (Barbeito, 2005). North America learned about the alien abduction story, engaging the populace's attention and their collective imagination. Coupled in contrast with the concept of collective memory (Schwartz, 2000), collective imagination refers to a group's shared perceptions of the future and the collective meanings attached to this imagined, future place rather than a physical building (Borer, 2010). After the Hills' story assimilated into the North

American collective imagination, the population began to process, integrate, and mythologize humanity's interaction with extraterrestrial aliens (Kelley-Romano, 2006).

Had Barney and Betty Hill been a homogenous white couple, I wonder if their two lost hours might be remembered differently. As Barbeito (2005) finds in American alien abduction narratives, I find that North American—particularly white—collective cultural anxieties and fears reify in the genre-defining Haunted House. The Haunted House becomes a metaphorical vehicle for expressing contemporary fears by engaging collective cultural memories. A haunting is part of the collective memory, a happening kept alive by social remembering which persists atemporally. Akin to alien abduction mythology, the Haunted House exists within the collective imagination of North America. Borer (2010) uses the collective imagination to conceptualize individuals' relationship with places that do not exist in his study of community redevelopment projects. The archetypal North American Haunted House does not exist and yet individuals come to form relationships with it through their interactions with real places they perceive as haunted. I suspect the collective imagination of North America to possess endless definitions for house and home, both realized and imagined.

I stress that a house is not necessarily a home nor is the home necessarily a house. A home is a place where one feels they belong, where they are comfortable, safe, secure, and welcome. Becoming at-home in a space is an individual process of both passive and active interaction with the space, the structure, its walls and more (van den Scott, 2016). The archetypal Haunted House is seen as a house because its status as home is undermined by its master status[4] as haunted. Haunted houses are considered stigmatized properties, disinclining people from attaching meanings related to their concept of home to that house.

Imagination is central to this research. All nightmares and dreams begin in one's imagination along with every idea for improvement, advance, upgrade, and revolution. From

[4] Master status refers to a label or identity that affects every aspect of one's life. For example, one's status as a refugee, or the colour of their hair. For further discussion, see Hughes, E. C. (1984).

the realm of dreamers, social science seeks to organize imaginations into relatable theories for discussion and sharing. A sort of conceptualization of creative thinking suited to academia, the sociological imagination (Mills, 1969) represents a way of thinking about the world, oneself, and one's position within the world. Embracing the sociological imaginary is an exercise in self-reflexive positionality, enabling me to see myself within my research and contributing to the ethnographic dimension of this study.

Beyond the scope of this project, Latimer and Skeggs (2017) propel a discourse on keeping an open mind to multiple perspectives, something which is easier said than accomplished. The continual cultivation of openness and numerous perspectives is an exhausting feat of research; keeping open is an active process which requires one to embrace and appreciate differences (Latimer & Skeggs, 2017). Dey and Mason (2017) endeavour to take into consideration the

> "constraints surrounding shared narratives and images which guide and restrict people's thinking and acting (we call this the 'orthodox social imaginary'). This omission [of consideration] is problematic [to contemporary social action discourse] because many of today's grand challenges are rooted precisely in people's inability to envision reality outside of the realm of dominant imagination." (p. 1-2)

The North American Haunted House exists in the orthodox social imaginary; it is a creature imagined, created, recreated, maintained, and replicated by orthodox North American cultural thought and imagination[5]. The average Haunted House belongs to the imagination of the masses, not the few of us who select to study it. We researchers, however, are unorthodox enough to study that which is seen as common and taken for granted in the orthodox social imaginary. As Berger puts it, we make the familiar strange (Berger, Berger & Luckmann, 1966;

[5] In 2021, North American thought and imagination may be more unorthodox than ever before. However, the films in this analysis span 80 years; I refer to the orthodox ideas consistently salient throughout my analysis.

Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009) and I seek to make the strange familiar. In the case of haunted houses, the stereotypical traits belonging to a haunted house are taken for granted. For example, researchers may benefit from unorthodox perspectives on Western structures when studying walls as they exist in people's everyday lives (van den Scott, 2016). I position this analysis outside the constraints surrounding orthodox social imagination, step back, and abstract the shared narrative images of the North American Haunted House in film to identify their underlying symbolic meaning. The *Twilight Zone* provides an excellent example of how one can leverage the orthodox social imaginary and the sociological imagination to understand the uncertainty and fear as a manifestation of the collective imagination. By making the link between fear and the Twilight Zone, one can make the strange familiar. We all know fear.

A high-quality broadcast of good storytelling, the creators of the *Twilight Zone* (1959) did not shy from advertising their special product. The concept of the Twilight Zone brings a gripping idea into an easily consumable media format; it has the great potential for entertaining audiences via television. The *Twilight Zone* is an excellent product and an obvious market success, the perfect space to introduce scientific fictions to the coming generations of humanity. The *Twilight Zone* offers North Americans a new realm of imagination in which to set their dreams and nightmares. And so, American horror culture expands, joining hands with science fiction to make the familiar strange. In the coming years, the love affair between horror and science fiction came to fruition in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), a cult classic.

I appreciate the concept of the Twilight Zone and know it to be a common part of North American culture from the 1960s and beyond. Born into the realm of science fiction rather than the supernatural, I set the North American Haunted House in a space like the Twilight Zone because the Haunted House is a mix of technology and supernatural phenomena. The building is technology while the haunting is supernatural: the Haunted House is the meeting place of the natural world, technological advances, and the supernatural world. What is the Twilight Zone?

At the beginning of "Where is Everybody?" (1959), the pilot episode for what would become the successful *Twilight Zone* franchise, a narrator explains:

> There is a sixth [later revised to 'fifth'] dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space, and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow—between man's grasp and his reach; between science and superstition; between the pit of his fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area that might be called the Twilight Zone.

The unique spatial and temporal place wherein rests the North American Haunted House might be called the Twilight Zone. There are certainly other applicable names; the Upside Down, the Shadow Realm, a dark timeline or dark dimension, and so on. The *Twilight Zone* franchise is North American and, I suggest, it makes a suitable conceptual location for the average North American Haunted House. Like the Haunted House, the Twilight Zone emphasizes dimensions of space and time along with fear, knowledge, science, and superstition. The introductory dialogue for the *Twilight Zone* (1959) leans into uncertainty, in-betweens, unknowns, and liminality. These themes resonate with my discussion of spatial and temporal dimensions as they relate to the Haunted House. Occupying an in-between or liminal zone which defies the normal rules of reality, haunted houses simultaneously create, are, and exist within their individual dimensional space. The Haunted House claims domain of its territory; a whole world controlled by the house existing within its allotted plot of land while concurrently existing elsewhere in a different dimension and story, a part of the collective imagination.

## 1.2 Methodology

My method of study is somewhat unorthodox, but it suits horror scholarship and the diverse qualitative methods used by my predecessors. Using ethnographic content analysis, I

made the familiar strange and the strange familiar. What separates this research from previous Haunted House analyses is my perspective and lived experience. My perspective is unique in that I possess a nonbinary understanding of gender and I have experience living in a feminine-coded body as well as a masculine-coded body. Beyond my familiarity with the white feminine–masculine body, I experienced living in a discreditable haunted house for the duration of COVID-19 stay-home quarantine orders and continue to live in different haunted houses while writing this thesis.

The primary concept around which I build this thesis is Goffman's idea of stigma and stigmatization. Hauntification is the process by which someone, something, somewhen, or somewhere becomes haunted. To be haunted is to be followed by stigma. Hauntings are espoused as internal processes which manifest outwardly. I suggest different: hauntings are externally imposed through a social process of presentation interpretation. Hauntings are born of the social imagination and collective memory, attaching past events to present-day places and reacting according to residual feelings about those events. The core of a haunting is the emotional reaction of people interacting with the haunted space and how their feelings conceivably manifest at the site.

To the existing Haunted House literature, I contribute this ethnographic content analysis of the Haunted House as it is featured in North American film (1940–2020), particularly in the horror genre. In this research I seek to make myself at home in the haunted houses of North America, a task easier said than done. To accomplish this purpose, I use ethnography and content analysis, a method termed 'ethnographic content analysis' (Altheide, 1987). Since its introduction to the research community, ethnographic content analysis has been used to study a myriad of topics; America's drug problem and the portrayal of illegal drugs in nightly news (Jernigan, Gorfman, 1996), symbolic gender inequality in wedding books (Besel, Zimmerman, Fruhauf, Pepin & Banning, 2009), the portrayal of female sex offenders in media (Christensen,

2018), exiting rituals on reality television (van den Scott, Forstie & Balasubramanian, 2015), and beyond. My study differs from those mentioned as I am analyzing fictional content. The Haunted House is fictional and exists in the collective imagination, defined by the films which reify it. The content of my analysis showcases how the Haunted House is imagined while offering a blueprint from which individuals can recreate, alter, and reimagine a personalized idea of the Haunted House. Including thematic analysis of 40 films[6], along with ethnographic memos and saturation in popular haunted media content, I find that haunted houses are more closely aligned with nature than with civilization in their North American manifest form.

In my analysis of themes, I take a phenomenological approach and interact with the sensitizing motifs I encounter throughout domestic horror. Themes emerge as salient through ethnographic data collection combined with experiential content analysis. I take an iterative approach to analysis, re-working my current ideas to adapt as, in this case, the haunted house genre grows and matures. In a sense, while isolated in my house I crossed the barrier between fantasy and reality by immersing myself in haunted content for nine months (April to November 2020). I journeyed with many heroes through all kinds of haunted houses. If isolation is a manifest theme in these tales, then I draw attention to the latent content, that which alludes to the deep and dark fears one may scarcely understand.

This thesis grows from a grounded theoretical study of 40 films featuring haunted houses. The select films are predominantly white, meaning the findings from this research will be primarily applicable to haunted houses in white culture. I explore this selected filmography as I am and as the films are, building my understanding emergently by attending to the characters, setting, and overall atmosphere. As all films require work and production efforts, I strive to keep in mind the film as a whole—story, director, cast, context, intention, budget, audience, source inspiration, and even the unexpected events involved with production—and

[6] For a full list of films studied, see Appendix A.

highlight the aspects which inductively emerged as relevant to the Haunted House and my unique analysis of its meaning. I include both North American films and international films popular among western audiences regardless of acclaim, box office success or failure, quality, or other factor of taste.

Films today are normally made for the masses in order to sell tickets, make money, pay production costs, and provide entertainment. And, in the eyes of Hollywood, the more money a movie makes the better; thus, they aim to make products which appeal to popular consumers. Films also reflect, amplify, and problematize contemporary sociopolitical landscapes, encouraging the audience to ruminate on the social and political forces in their life. Popular consumers make up a large portion of the cinema audience, and so it is their collective imagination which houses the orthodox social imaginary. With this research, I hope to offer an alternative perspective and methodology for 'doing social science' (Latimer & Skeggs, 2011), or, as Canadian sociologists like to call it, committing sociology (Doucet & Siltanen, 2017). Although the films I analyze in this study are created from the orthodox social imaginary, my analysis stretches the sociological imagination with a multitude of perspectives.

## 1.3 Origins of the Haunted House

Haunted Houses ordinarily feature in films as the setting, a character, or a combination of the two. The Haunted House in film first appears as the setting for the first horror movie, made in 1896: *The House of the Devil* (*Le Manoir du Diable)* (Cholodenko, 2004; Jones, 2018). As Dale Bailey, author of *American Nightmares* (1999), puts it, "It's worth pondering why the [Haunted House] archetype has such continuing appeal" (p. 6). Dale Bailey (1999) sources the origins of the modern American Haunted House in 1764 with Horace Walpole's publication of *The Castle of Otranto*. Inspired by European gothic tradition, the setting is central to the story "—that atmosphere of gloom and decay which adheres to the crumbling abbey and the ruined

castle in the gothic novel. In few other genres does setting play such a significant and defining role" (Bailey, 1999, p. 4). Bailey highlights the unique quality of the Haunted House's presence and its power to define the situation. How one understands the situation affects how they interpret that situation. I agree with Bailey's assertion that the Haunted House plays a significant role in defining the gothic genre.

Likewise, Paul Meehan (2020), author of the most up-to-date exploration of the Haunted House on film, historically contextualizes the significance of the haunted house. Meehan (2020) backtracks further into history citing "the Roman writer Pliny the Younger (61-112 CE) in a letter to his patron Lucias Sura describing a haunted house in the city of Athens" (p. 5). Meehan's historical analysis of the haunted house on film (2020) is rooted in antiquity with renting the Haunted House at a reduced rate, a practice which remains a popular motif today in film and reality. It appears that since the concept of renting houses came into being, so too has there been the existence of stigmatized, difficult-to-rent properties.

Akin to Meehan, I look back in recorded history to the Greco-Roman roots of Western society to build my understanding of the modern Haunted House. The Haunted House narrative showcases domestic horrors. My understanding of domestic horror is rooted in the curse of the House of Atreus, a gruesome part of ancient Greek mythology[7]. Haunted both as a structure, and as a family lineage, the House of Atreus is a Haunted House in more than one aspect. The mythology centres primarily on the cursed lineage of Atreus, emphasizing the role of fate and hereditary familicide[8]. There is a miasma[9] within and surrounding the House of Atreus, obscuring the boundaries of morality for those in the family. Here, "house" refers to both the physical structure within which one resides and one's familial hierarchy. Stained and

[7] To read about the House of Atreus and the trio of plays through which the story is told, see Lewin, J. (1966). The House of Atreus. University of Minnesota Press.
[8] This concept relates to Western Biblical texts and ideas of hereditary familial curses.
[9] Miasma refers to wicked air, a concept taken seriously in Ancient Athens; they conducted murder trials in open-air courts so that the miasma would not be trapped indoors.

stigmatized are those haunted by a curse like the House of Atreus. A space imbued with trauma becomes a miasmic place, be it one's family lineage or physical space which is cursed.

The Haunted House develops full sentience later in its film career, becoming an antagonist character in the haunted house tale (Bailey, 1999). This change emerges with the literary works of Shirley Jackson, namely *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962). The task of describing Haunted Houses is terribly difficult without art. Art allows us to express feelings that escape understanding and articulation. As Haunted House descriptions are similarly elusive, I use art to build context for my research. Creative spaces act as a safe place for vulnerable expression to become manifest and tangible through the artistic process. As such, I engage with art and literature below to aid my description and depiction of the phenomenal Haunted House manifest in North American horror.

The North American Haunted House is a creature collectively imagined, developed, and grown by North American society through its various media representations of the Haunted House, with an ever-growing mythology. I establish this archetypal Americanized form of the Haunted House with help from North American literature, film, popular culture, scholarship, material evidence, and more. Coming from a nonbinary perspective, I use a contemporary lens and symbolic interactionist approach to examine the significance underpinning the nature of the North American Haunted House as it reifies in film.

Since the release of Bailey's foundational work in 1999, haunted house storylines have only grown more popular, coming into the "golden age of the haunted house movie" in the 21st century (Meehan, 2020, p. 197). Based on the future trends I see for Haunted House narratives in mainstream North American media, this golden age will be strong and transformative as a new generation of the Haunted House emerges. Meehan (2020) concludes his discussion stating that haunted houses will remain relevant for the foreseeable future, attesting to the archetypal Haunted House's continuing appeal.

I first attend to the development of the Haunted House as an agentic character through a discussion of Poe; Bailey (1999) posits that Poe contributes to the traditional gothic setting "at least one revolutionary quality which will become central to the haunted house formula: the house is alive. It possesses its own malign will" (p. 22). The genre-defining gothic tale to which Bailey refers, written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1839, is "The Fall of the House of Usher."

It is paramount to establish the foundation before moving to build the structure. As such, Poe's "Usher" serves as an introduction to the modern haunted house's ancestors: great aristocratic manors perched outside town on a cliff or in the mountains. The House of Usher is a melancholic monument tucked away amidst mountain clusters and an ink-black pond. As described below, being in the House's presence affects onlookers with gloom; perhaps desolated by the gaze from the vacant, eye-like windows. The opening passage reads:

> *During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly*

*than to the afterdream of the reveler upon opium—the bitter lapse into everyday life—the hideous dropping off of the veil.*

Poe graphically identifies key haunted house elements: the season is autumn, it is cloudy with no one around, the front face of the house features symmetrical windows like eyes on a human face, the unkempt exterior and grounds, the evocative darkness radiating from the premises, and the desolation after an otherworldly experience. I appreciate the smattering of tree corpses across the lawn—the lawn decorations and outer performance of the house project the definition of the situation within its territory. The house's power over its property is undoubtably absolute.

In the opening passage alone, Poe makes salient a half-dozen haunted motifs; although he holds no degree in sociology, his insight into living life within a haunted house is invaluable to my discussion. Poe articulates beautifully the confusing, unnerving, and much-feared task of encountering your nightmares while wide-awake.

Poe's narrator gazes upon a house that appears haunted by some tragedy; perhaps the structure is, as many haunted houses are, built atop occupied land that is soiled or stolen, perhaps its construction funded with blood-spattered gold, or perhaps it is the site of one-too-many peculiar deaths? What haunts the house, we know not in the first passage—somehow, though, we still recognize the manor as a haunted house. The House of Usher, akin to its mythological counterpart the House of Atreus, is the Haunted House of gothic tradition. I use Poe's House of Usher to illustrate enduring haunted motifs which continue to be associated with the modern haunted house.

*There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all*

> *insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodeled and inverted images of the grey sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.*

This passage exemplifies Poe's depth of understanding in the everyday interactions with haunted houses; how it feels to see one looming in the distance, to feel the miasma. Deceptively simple patterns and combinations found in nature have the power to heavily affect one's emotional state, but the narrator finds this unsatisfactory for explaining his complex feelings.

It strikes me how the narrator has difficulty grappling with the parsimonious beauty of nature because he finds it simultaneously unnerving and exciting, things which he associates with ivory-tower complexity. I emphasize nature's deception in its simplicity to stress the importance of not underestimating the strength found in simplistic design; this is especially true of symbols and symbolic meanings associated with nature. Ergo, attending to the power in parsimony is by extension important to anything involving nature; recurring themes often surprise me by how simplistic they appear. Take for example the autumnal setting in "Usher." It is a common theme for haunted house stories to be set in the fall season—the spooky season. Autumn appears to be a simplistic theme clearly linked with the popular celebration of

Halloween; as October plays host to Halloween, it is deemed the spookiest of seasons and the appropriate seasonal atmosphere for scary stories told about that haunted mansion on the outskirts of town.

Additionally, featured in the above passage is a difficult-to-express understanding about the nature of identity performance. The narrator, while confused by his feelings, understands that the House of Usher is performing an anthropomorphized outward projection of sorrow and melancholy. From the bystander's view, the manor house appears to embody negative feelings. With further consideration, the narrator suggests that perhaps the house would seem different were the particulars of the scene changed or rearranged. When he gazes upon the house's reflection, the narrator finds his suspicion confirmed; the inverted image of the House of Usher serves to highlight permanent features which would be unaffected by aesthetic modifications. The reflection makes overgrown greenery, the trunks of immovable trees, and especially the vacant eye-like windows of Usher House salient as prominent house features.

Poe focuses on the unchanging overgrowth and trees, emphasizing nature's inevitable presence on the grounds of a haunted house; one cannot conceptualize the archetypal Haunted House without including nature. In addition, one must also attend to the House's face for no Haunted House exists without windows-for-eyes. After all, a predator ought to be able to see its prey approaching.

## 1.4 Stigma and Property

This research employs Erving Goffman's concept of stigma to understand the negative meanings socially attached to houses and properties with spoiled identities. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as "a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity" (p. 3). One's virtual social identity is a set of characterizations and assumptions that we make about and assign to a person upon meeting them (Goffman, 1963). One's actual social identity is the

attributes and social categorization that a person possesses and proves to possess (Goffman, 1963). In essence, stigma refers to an attribute that a person possesses which excludes them from their expected social category: a stigmatizing trait, or stigmatized master status, makes someone different from what you might expect.

A stigma is often thought of as a negative trait possessed by a person and which causes them to be seen as undesirable. It is important, however, to notice that Goffman does not state that all stigma is negative; a stigma could potentially be negative, positive, or neutral in nature. This recognition of the non-valued nature of stigma as a concept couples with my symbolic interactionist approach because the negative or positive value of a stigma is socially constructed and modified by the persons interacting with the stigmatized person.

To fit with my research, I apply the concept of stigma to people as well as animate and inanimate objects (gardens and houses). I will focus primarily on the house which holds the stigma of death as it transgresses its virtual social identity (being a home) with its actual one (the site of death). As I suggest above, this stigma could prove negative, positive, or non-consequential. Just as there are different ways of evaluating the desirability of stigma, there are different kinds of stigma. Goffman (1963) labels two kinds of stigma as discredited and discreditable. Discredited stigma is a stigmatizing attribute which is obvious and apparent upon interacting with someone (Goffman, 1963). For example, a broken leg or a facial tattoo qualify as discredited stigmas as they are visibly stigmatizing traits. Non-visual stigmatizing traits belong in this category of stigma if they are apparent upon first interaction, such as a stutter or inability to make eye contact.

Discreditable stigmas are different in that they are not obvious upon meeting: discreditable stigmas are invisible during interaction, and it is up to the stigmatized person to decide how, when, and whether to disclose information about their stigma (Goffman, 1963). For example, being an addict or abuser could be a stigmatizing attribute that is not obvious upon

meeting. These attributes could only be learned through means other than the initial encounter, such as being told by the person possessing the trait or learning about the attribute through another source. I extend stigma theory to objects; I apply discredited and discreditable stigma to houses with stigmatizing pasts. For example, entering into a house you know to be haunted is a vastly different experience from learning the house in which you stand is haunted.

The presence of stigma symbols helps to differentiate between houses which have discredited stigmas and houses with discreditable stigmas. Stigma symbols are "signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to the debasing identity discrepancy, breaking up what would otherwise be a coherent overall picture" (Goffman, 1963, p. 43-44). In the case of haunted houses, stigma symbols may be the stereotypical characteristics associated with haunted houses in North American media. By consuming haunted house media, we learn the stigma symbols that are present in houses with spoiled identities, enabling us to qualify a house as haunted if it presents enough stigma symbols at once. Poe's *Usher* demonstrates this principle, qualifying as a haunted house by presenting a plethora of stigma symbols. As the category of houses is large and widely varied, I expect that people are only willing to qualify a house as haunted if enough stigma symbols are present; a few, scattered stigma symbols may be disregarded as normal and non-indicative of a spoiled-house identity.

Scholarly literature regarding houses with spoiled identities falls into the domain of stigmatized properties.

Morgan (1994) defines stigmatized property as a "property psychologically impacted by an event which occurred or was suspected to have occurred on the property, such even being one that has no physical impact of any kind" (p. 28). This definition is flexible and inclusive of houses in which death has occurred, but also houses which are believed to be haunted or affected by past events, regardless of whether this belief is true. Morgan's idea of stigmatized property

fits with my SI approach as it gives weight to people's individual interpretations and the meaning that they have attached to a property.

Supernatural literature puts special emphasis on the characteristics of haunted houses and how those characteristics are used in different media. Authors have dedicated research, theses, and books to the study of understanding North American concepts of haunted houses. As a result, there are several agreements across supernatural literature: haunted houses are unique places which manipulate space in unexpected ways (Solomon, 2012), they are places which used to be homes but are now unwelcoming (Hockey, 1999; Solomon, 2012), they are haunted places regardless of whether there are ghosts (Hockey, 1999; Smuts, 2002), and they reflect people's relationship with the contemporary ideal home (Griffin, 2015; Hockey, 1999). I highlight a concept which served to inspire my exploratory investigation into haunted houses. This house functions as antithesis to the ideal home: The House of Doom.

# Chapter 2: The House of Doom and Safety

Rather than an idealistic white picket fence, a creaking wrought iron gate guards the perimeter of the House of Doom. Instead of a manicured front lawn and garden, the lawn is overgrown and wrought with unruly vines. The doorbell singsongs not in welcoming, its bells tolling to foreshadow the danger waiting beyond the threshold of the house. The House of Doom is, in every way, opposite to the ideal home; it is uncomfortable, unliveable, haunted, and falling apart. Hockey (1999) uses her concept of the House of Doom to describe the antithesis to the North American ideal home. Her exploration of the archetypal House of Doom becomes the concrete foundation of this research.

After establishing and illustrating the House of Doom, Hockey (1999) describes how "moving into a new home means" moving into a place where we have "dangerous spatial intimacy or proximity with others from whom we are separated merely by time" (p. 152). She refers both to ghosts which linger in the house when new occupants move in and to the impression of previous tenants, even if they remain not as ghosts but as sentiments. Hockey (1999) elaborates on how people mitigate their spatial proximity to previous owners by redecorating and reinterpreting the space that is now their house. Hockey's ideas align with a symbolic interactionist perspective as she focuses on people's lived experiences in haunted homes, the symbolism of haunted spaces, and the meanings attached to their surroundings. While Hockey (1999) focuses on the experiences of new tenants in haunted spaces, I focus on the collectively imagined and fictionalized experiences of Haunted House inhabitants and their relationship with the house itself. With this research I flesh out Hockey's idea of spatial intimacy with temporally distant persons in the home, linking her supernatural phenomenological findings to film, media, and contemporary North American fears, concerns, and anxieties surrounding house and home.

Fear belongs not in the ideal home: the home is supposed to be a place of safety and trust. One trusts in the building and in everything attached to that building. *Homes* are filled with memories, nostalgia, meaning, and milestone moments while *houses* are empty and vacant of that personal attachment, of personal histories and sentiment. It is interesting, though, that haunted houses do have attachments, but it is not *your* personal attachment or formed attachments. Rather, it is the attachment of the past to the space. Someone else has formed an attachment with the house and that attachment remains; the house is haunted by meanings previously made. The established meaning takes precedence over newly forming attachments; in many cases, the house prioritizes the meaning attached to the space over incoming owners' attempt at cultivating new meanings for the space, preventing the house from becoming home to a new family. Therefore, it is a haunted house; haunted not necessarily by ghosts, but by its previous owner's attachments, sentiments, memories, and meanings. A haunted house remains home to the past, serving as house to the present tenants but not as home.

In so-called ordinary, non-haunted houses, old attachments are laid to rest with the sale of the house or the change in ownership; the new owner's relationship with the house takes precedence, replacing, overtaking, or becoming more important than the past owner's relationship with the house. The new owner cleanses the house of its outdated meanings and any trace of previous owners. When we move into a new house, we make painstaking efforts to erase all evidence of previous residents, especially as we are rarely acquainted with the old tenants and know not how they lived in the space (Hockey, 1999). Ordinarily, we prefer to leave the space's history as an unknown.

Haunted House films, in contrast, focus on the space's history and its previous attachments. In the case of *The Amityville Horror* (1979) the audience is shown temporally distant events juxtaposed with the now-empty spaces in which they occurred. As a newly wedded couple tours the house, each room is shown to have its own history. Opening the door

to a room reveals to the audience what happened there a year prior: family members shot and killed while asleep in their bedrooms. The site of four gruesome murders and a death by suicide, violence leaves a stain of evil on the house; a miasmic presence remains in the *Amityville Horror* house. The large house is host to multiple domestic traumas with each room possessing unique attachments derived from the events which occurred in the space, particularly the bedrooms and the basement.

In a haunted house, one has not the luxury of erasing the past from the present. Instead, the past is inextricable from the space. Despite repainting, redecorating, and renovating, the past somehow remains. The house is haunted by its past, an amorphous, permanent stain on the space, a miasma that lingers beyond expectation. Is it ghosts? Is it a psychological imprint? Is it the bad soil the house is built upon? Is it from the horrific deeds done there? Is it an infection? A stain? A tarnish? Something which is part of the house? Is it the house itself? Was it born bad? Made evil? There is something that we cannot quite put our finger on which makes a house into a haunted house.

In this chapter I demonstrate the dangers of the Haunted House and how it does not provide a safe shelter to inhabitants. First, I look at the stigma symbols on the grounds of the Haunted House which signal the precarious nature of the property and how one might miss or dismiss those warnings of danger. Next, I use thick description to examine how acts of voyeurism undermine the safety offered by the home. *Halloween* (1978) showcases how the violation of privacy can turn a home into a House of Doom. Finally, I discuss a theme emblematic of the North American Haunted House, its status as alive and powerful.

## 2.1 Shelter and, "Janet, they may have a phone."

The Haunted House plays with removing a need that is commonly considered a latent concern in contemporary North American culture: shelter. So used to having their physiological

needs met, imagining what it is like to live in a place of insecurity is inconceivable. And those who cannot imagine such will be unable to guess at how it feels to be in that situation, negatively impacting their capability to empathize with a pervasive sense of insecurity. The hyperbolic danger of living in a House of Doom or Haunted House showcase how North Americans living in secure housing imagine the experience of living insecurely; compared with unstable and insecure housing, the Haunted House is a nightmarish parody of unsafe domestic living.

I frame my analysis with Maslow's theory of human motivation (1943) to situate how haunted houses undermine a fundamental human need. An essential part of every first-year psychology course, Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests a framework for future research into human motivation and serves as the foundation for modern scholarship on human nature. Uriel Abulof (2017) speaks to the ubiquity of motivation theory (p. 508):

> The fate of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs is different [from other theories which fall out of popularity]. It has resonated powerfully in scholarship across disciplines. More interestingly, it remains, some 75 years after its articulation, well known beyond the ivory tower. Whenever I try to introduce Maslow's pyramid to first-year students, I quickly realize it needs no introduction. They have heard of it, have seen some popularized versions of it, before, and it struck a chord. Instinctively, it feels familiar. The continued resonance of Maslow's theory in popular imagination, however unscientific it may seem, is possibly the single most telling evidence of its significance: it explains human nature as something that most humans immediately recognize in themselves and others.

Abulof (2017), along with decades of scholarship using the theory, argues in support of Maslow's pyramid-shaped hierarchy of needs based on its popularity in mainstream society. Not only does Maslow's theory seek to describe human motivation, but it helps to explain and orient our perception of motivation. As everyone possesses their own worldview and

motivations, it can seem impossible to ascertain what that individual person wants. However, one can guess the basic roots from which an individual's motivations extend: needs for physiological well-being, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

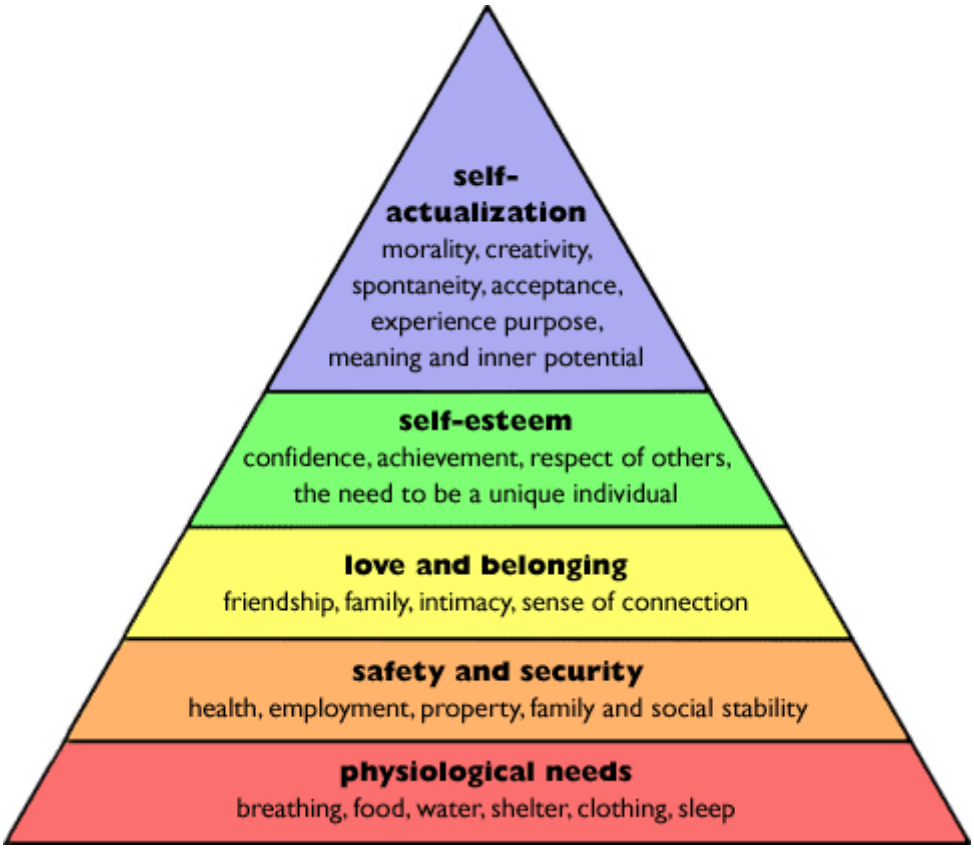


*Figure 1* - Maslow's pyramid-shaped hierarchy of needs. At the bottom level are the most basic (physiological) needs, and at the top the most difficult needs to fulfill (self-actualization). To ascend a level, the lower needs must first be met.

Haunted houses do not offer the safety and security of the home, but they do offer shelter from the elements. Their function as a structure is frequently the reason people deign to enter seemingly haunted houses which are outwardly unwelcoming. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), for example, introduces Janet (the Heroine) and Brad (the Hero) who are driving at night in bad weather. The narrator recites:

> It seemed a fairly ordinary night when Brad Majors and his fiancé, Janet Weiss, two ordinary healthy kids, left Denton that late November evening to visit a Doctor Everett Scott, ex-tutor and now friend to both of them. It's true there were

> dark storm clouds, heavy, black and pendulous, toward which they were driving. It's true also that the spare tire they were carrying was badly in need of some air. But, eh, they being normal kids and on a night out, well they were not going to let a storm spoil the events of their evening. On a night out. It was a night out they were going to remember for a very long time.

Brad and Janet drive past a castle on their evening trip to see Dr. Scott but get a flat tire on the road. To their misfortune, Brad never got around to fixing the spare tire. Caught in the rain, the couple is forced to seek shelter at that nearby castle, a monumental manifestation of the North American Haunted House.

*Figure 2* - Janet (left) uses a newspaper as a makeshift cover from the rain. Brad (right) holds Janet close, his jacket and glasses covered in raindrops.

For the plot of *Rocky Horror* to progress beyond Janet and Brad's graveyard engagement, something needed to happen which would force the couple to enter the Haunted House. On an average night out, they likely would have waited in the car for help. However, the torrential downpour of rain is enough for the couple to disregard their ill sense of ease about the castle and seek its shelter. Despite the copious stigma symbols present acting as warning

indicators of danger, Brad and Janet pass through the wrought iron gate, down the laneway, and approach the heavy front door.


*Figure 3* - Brad and Janet approach a set of wrought iron gates wearing a sign that says to "ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK!!" The gates sit ajar and unlocked.

Streaks of lightning crack through the clouds. Rain beats against the pavement, steady and relentless. Brad takes the lead as they start the walk down the road. The couple pause at the towering gothic gates to the Frankenstein Place. Brad reads the sign and looks to his fiancé before taking a breath, looking up to the castle beyond the gates, and steps through. To their luck—or perhaps misfortune—the gates are unlocked and the pair pass through unimpeded. The storm continues to rage, more thunder rumbling and lightning streaking the sky.

The camera focuses on Janet as she trespasses. Low-hanging branches from a fir tree reach for and brush against her. She ducks and protects herself with the newspaper, then begins to sing, “In the velvet darkness of the blackest night burning bright there’s a guiding star, no matter what or who you are.” Brad joins in, the couple harmonizing as they take one another’s arm, “There’s a light (chorus: over at the Frankenstein place). There’s a light (chorus: burning in the fireplace). There’s a light, light in the darkness of everybody’s life.” As they approach, they are forced to separate, pushed to either side of the road by a band of motorcyclists who roar up the drive. All Brad and Janet see is a light in the darkness of the night. However, the

chorus chimes in with added information; that Janet and Brad approach the Frankenstein Castle, and that the place is alive with life and activity symbolized by hearth imagery.

*Figure 4* - The Frankenstein Castle stands tall in the night, a domed observatory and central window glow bright with light.

Looking up at the castle, there is a single lit window. As the camera zooms in on the window, someone is revealed standing there, leaning toward the glass as he gazes out. His face is pale, illuminated by a ghastly glow from below. His facial structure is sharp, appearing harsh with the shadows cast from his features: his face is gaunt and skeletal. This scene in *Rocky Horror* is a striking reference to Poe's House of Usher. Rather than using windows on Castle Frankenstein as eyes, they place a servant in the illuminated window, one with a gaunt, skeleton-like visage. He is a looming, waiting, watching presence high in the castle. He is also the character who answers the door for the couple. Before that, however, the Frankenstein theme of *Rocky Horror* magnifies as the camera pans to a tall lightning rod attached to the castle and flashes of lightning in the background sky.

Based on the discreditable exterior of the castle, it is apparent that this is a precarious place for one to be, particularly for those who arrive uninvited. Although, in *Rocky Horror*, there is no reference to the estate being a haunted house, it fits the parameters of my

understanding for haunted houses, and displays plentiful haunted motifs in its design, both the exterior and interior. The stigma symbols act as indicators, not barriers, thereby allowing characters to continue forward should they miss or ignore the warnings of danger. The danger, of course, is in entering the Haunted House. The motifs on the grounds cluster as one draws closer to the structure, a lawn of warning to stay away and leave while escape is still possible.

However, on a dark and stormy night, otherwise obvious stigma signals are obfuscated in the velvet blackness and rain. Janet heeds the warning signs, perceiving the place to be unsafe when they finally reach the front door. “Brad, let’s go back. I’m cold and I’m frightened.”

Brad, cleaning his glasses of raindrops, oblivious to the warning signs shouted by his surroundings, brushes her worries aside, “Just a moment, Janet, they may have a phone.” He rings the doorbell, an ominous cacophony of bells. From that moment, Brad and Janet are swept into the world of Dr. Frank N. Furter, a mad scientist. Whether it is by fate or script design, Brad and Janet have valid reasons for seeking shelter in what appears to be an obvious Haunted House. Brad offers rationalizations for the unique design of the castle, having missed the gothic exterior while cleaning his glasses, ringing the bell without hesitation. Janet, however, is terrified before they reach the front door because she paid attention to the scenery, was accosted by tree branches, and battered with rain. Before she steps foot into the dear doctor’s home, Janet is primed as a Virginal Heroine on her journey to becoming a Haunted Heroine, her katabasis through the Haunted House about to ensue.

## 2.2 Privacy Undermined by Voyeurism

Haunted Houses violate those fundamental requirements for feeling at home: privacy and safety. The Haunted House undermines sought-after seclusion because one is never alone while in a haunted house; the Haunted House is alive and watching. As the saying goes, the walls have ears. And if the walls have ears, then so too must the windows have eyes. The

Haunted House is dangerous; it is a place where one is not only unsafe but is actively under threat of harm by their surroundings.

Domestic horror happens when the safety of the home is undermined, rendering it naught but a house. A haunted house, perhaps. This genre encompasses horror films set at home, and situates the viewer as voyeur, even as they watch from within their own home. Seeing inside another's home—even the set of a film and home only to the characters whose story you watch unfold—is an act of voyeurism and it creates a sense of invasion. The voyeur invades the privacy of those they watch, viewing people as objects on display, unreal, encased in glass.


*Figure 5* - The title scene of *The Amityville Horror* (1979) featuring a side profile of the house, showcasing two eye-like windows.

*The Amityville Horror* (1979) house wears vacant, eye-like windows on a symmetrical face. Bailey (1999) suggests that Poe's tale is the inspiration for the Haunted House's archetypal "vacant eye-like windows;" the windows which speak volumes of a house and the residents within. For example, the opening scene of *Halloween* (1978) exemplifies what the windows of a house can tell you and how windows contribute to the haunted aspects of a haunted house. I begin this discussion of windows with a descriptive analysis of *Halloween*'s iconic first scene:

Halloween night, 1963. Straight ahead there is a boxy, white, two-story house with four windows on its face, two on the top floor and two on the ground floor flanking the front door.

A single pair of muted footsteps approach the house, accompanied by the gentle buzz of crickets. An owl hoots into the stillness and signals its presence.

The dark of night highlights the toothy grin of a carved pumpkin sitting on the porch's railing. Its jack-o-lantern face gazes toward the right side of the property, hollow eyes keeping guard. The front hallway light is on, as are those in rooms on the first floor and in the right side second story window. The rest of the scenery is too dark to see – the moon is waxing and not bright enough to light up the night.

The film's camera pauses at the front steps, two figures visible in the front hall. Translucent gauze curtains cover the glass portion of the front door, but it does little to conceal the happenings beyond. The people inside the house exit to the right. The camera follows.

"My parents won't be home until ten," says a feminine voice. The camera moves across the lawn, concealed from the front window by shrubbery hugging the porch railing. Heading toward the right side of the house, the camera crosses the jack-o-lantern's field of view. Its triangular eyes glow with fire, a sharp-toothed grin for a mouth and an empty cavity serving as its nose.

"Are you sure?" replies a young masculine voice. The camera's perspective comes face-to-face with the pumpkin. It gazes down at the camera lens, at the audience.

*Figure 6* - A spooky, toothy, smiling face is carved into a pumpkin. It sits on the porch railing of the house.

“Uh huh,” she confirms. More shrubbery cushions the corner of the house. There is a faint noise, a muffled moan.

Around the corner, a second window looks into the front room. The curtain is open, only stray shrubbery and a diamond-patterned screen obscuring the view. Inside is a living room with a pastel, floral couch, a painting of sunflowers, a silver standing lamp, and two white teenagers making out on the couch. We linger to watch the lovers’ passionate display. He is draped atop her, his hand on her collar and mouth pressed over hers. He casts a shadow on the wall behind them, no doubt from the glow of an ignored television in the background.

*Figure 7* - Two conventionally attractive teenagers canoodle on a couch inside. We watch from outside through a closed window.

The guy cocks his head, glancing at the doorway to the hall. “We are alone aren’t we?” He looks around, misleading her attention as he discreetly palms a mask on the corner of the couch. She sits up a little.

“Mm, Michael’s around someplace,” she says, checking for him.

As soon as she looks the other way, the guy puts a child-sized clown mask to his face and goes in for a kiss. She giggles while recoiling, half-heartedly pushing him away. “Take off that thing,” she laughs. They kiss and nuzzle.

“Let’s go upstairs,” he says.

“Okay,” she agrees. He pushes off the couch, turning off the television before heading into the hall. She steps ahead, beating him there and the two proceed up the stairs. She giggles in the distance, “... your hands are cold.”

The camera turns and looks to the following side window; it is dark. The camera perspective backtracks, returning to the pumpkin’s line of sight so that the face of the house is again in view. Knowing where the couple is heading, the camera perspective sets sights on the upstairs right window, its curtains yellow in the glow of the light inside.

The lights flick off and the window goes dark. A dissonant, eerie twang penetrates the pregnant silence. The waxing moon is a bright but blurry beacon in the clear sky.

The camera goes around the side of the house again, this time ignoring the first window and heading for the backyard. There is a small back porch and the door to the house is ajar. Footsteps making little sound, the camera walks up the porch and through the door into a kitchen. The character embodied by the camera’s perspective turns on the light automatically and beelines for the cutlery drawer. An arm reach into frame and into the drawer, from it withdrawing a large silver chef’s knife. Their grip is aggressive, the knife pointed downward, a small fist clutching the handle.

Wandering into the dining room, not bothering to turn off the kitchen light, the camera perspective reaches the living room. The television bares a black screen, and a metronomic clock ticks on the wall. Beside the television is the front window, obscured by a gauzy white curtain. The sound of the clock’s ticking is louder in the room. In the corner, by the hall, there sits an empty wooden rocking chair. The still-hidden character whose perspective we follow hesitates, then looks to the place on the couch where sat the lovers mere moments ago.

“Look, Judy, it’s really late. I gotta go.”

“Will you call me tomorrow?”

There is a pause as the teenage guy stands in the stairwell. He eventually answers, "Yeah. Sure." He dons his shirt, looking back toward the room from which he came.

"Promise?"

"Yeah," he says and descends the stairs to the front door. As he opens it, he looks back once more. He exits, closing the door behind himself.

Now alone in the house with Judy, the camera begins forward. The music rings, tense and piercing. Starting up the stairs, the sound of Judy's humming lilts from her open door. As the unknown character reaches the last few steps, the clock strikes ten, resounding through the house and halls. By the time the final bell tolls, they reach the doorway upstairs, the room from which the humming emanates. In the room, clothing is scattered, and the clown costume mask sits discarded by the door.

Coming across the mask, our perspective character retrieves it. Having to lean down, they expose a costumed right arm and shoulder: colourful fabrics of red and yellow run in stripes down the arm and white lace frills cuff at the wrist and adorn the shoulders. The arm's owner dons the clown mask, reuniting the pieces of the clown costume to make it complete once more. The film reflects this, a mask-shaped filter blocking all but two giant eye holes from the audience's perspective. Their field of vision is narrowed by the mask, tunnelled straight ahead.

Tension builds. The clown stalks through the room, a door in the corner its target. The door is open, connecting to Judy's room. Finally able to see into the front room on the second story, the clown finds Judy. She sits at a wooden vanity in the corner across from the doorway. It is turned at such an angle that the doorway does not reflect in the mirror; Judy remains oblivious, brushing her hair while wearing only a pair of underwear. Her humming turns to singing, the sound of bristles combing through her hair a steady beat to her song.

Her bed is to the right of the door, the foot extending toward the front windows. While lying in bed, she could gaze out the front window if she wanted. She could gaze out as the

clown had gazed in, a voyeur of the outside world and its happenings, veiled from society and the public eye by a lacy white curtain. But not from the clown. Even with the curtains drawn, her bedroom light shines through. If she stands in the doorway and the light hits just right, her silhouette fills the front window, dancing on her bedroom curtains. In the evening when it is time to say goodnight, when she turns out the light, it is as if the house winks at the clown, beckoning him to her bed.

The clown looks to the bed, the covers pulled back and crumpled in disarray. His breathing turns heavy behind the mask as he slowly approaches Judy. She puts down her brush and notices the clown over her shoulder. Gasping, she turns and hugs her arms across her naked chest, "Michael!"

The ringing is back, and the clown's arm seems to move of its own volition. Michael, dressed as a clown for Halloween, thrusts the kitchen knife into his sister Judy's torso again and again as she screams, feebly attempting to cover her nakedness. Unable to watch, Michael looks to the right and sees the bloodied blade flash with moon light.

His gaze strays from Judy to a darkened doorway, and then back as her body falls to the floor. She lands on her back, legs closing for a modest death pose. Her chest is painted red with blood, her right hand draped atop her breast in a pose reminiscent of a Renaissance painting. Posed for the male gaze, the Renaissance subject lounges half-nude on a sofa, her breasts erect and her expression bored. In Judy's case, however, her expression is blank in death, her lips lax and parted, her body prone beneath the window.

Michael exits his sister's room through the darkened door, heads to the hallway, descends the stairs, and heads straight out the front door. Stepping onto the porch, a car pulls up in front of the house. As the passengers get out of the car, he moves to meet them down the lawn's walkway.

"Michael?" His father asks, pulling the clown mask from Michael's face. His parents gawk at their 6-year-old son, standing on the lawn in a clown costume while clutching a bloodied knife in one hand. It glints in the moon's light.

A discordant chorus strikes up as the camera changes perspectives, no longer seeing through the eyes of young Michael. Now abstracted from his point of view, the camera pans back, showing a final shot of Michael with his shocked parents on the front lawn of their haunted family home.

This is the opening scene of *Halloween* (1978) which puts the viewer into the slasher's shoes. I admit, I did not expect to start my movie-watching experience by stalking and murdering my sister – I was uncomfortable being in Michael's shoes and watching from behind his mask. Seeing the events unfold from Michael's perspective is fascinating, albeit disconcerting and voyeuristic. It shows me exactly where he looks, what and how long he watches. I know where he waits, the places he lingers, and when he hesitates. For those long four minutes, I am 6-year-old Michael dressed as a clown on Halloween night, and I find myself standing on the lawn watching through the window as my big sister embraces Whatshisname on the living room sofa.

I have used thick description to illustrate the haunted motifs present in *Halloween*'s (1978) opening scene, with emphasis on how voyeurism undermines the safety afforded by the house's privacy. Windows provide Michael with information about the house and those within. I highlight the act of looking to elucidate Michael's thought process and the information signalled to him by the setting. In turn, this is the same information signalled to the audience as the story unfolds and we learn more of the story's context, such as who we are following and what their relationship is. In addition, the scene contains multiple elements of sight and gaze, emphasizing the senses of sight's role in horror; first person perspective, coming face-to-face

with the house, windows for eyes, the jack-o-lantern's hollowed-out eye holes, fields of view and how they are avoided and obstructed, and so on.

What would be the house's left eye is a focal point for the scene, the window to Judy's room. Featured in the opening and closing shots, her bedroom window is easy to underappreciate for the role it plays in *Halloween* (1978) and as a witness to Judy's death. Thus, I now draw attention to her window in my analysis.

The curtains in Judy's window are drawn, preventing onlookers from seeing into the teenage girl's room. However, the curtains do not prevent the window from illuminating when the room light is on, nor do they prevent the window from darkening when that light is turned off. Because of the light, Michael can identify which room the couple enters upstairs and that the atmosphere of that room changes. Going from well-lit to darkness starkly changes the mood of a space or encounter.

In the end the window coverings which served to conceal her from scrutiny and protect her modesty aided in Judy's murder by hiding it. Had the curtains been open, someone on the street may have seen Judy through the window. They could have seen Michael silhouetted in the doorway, a knife in hand. They could have known she needed help, if only Judy could have been safe in her home—in her bedroom. Judy, like many domesticated women before her, falls victim to the violence of a loved one while safe behind closed doors and drawn curtains.

Judy was murdered in the privacy of her bedroom on the second floor of her family home in an average suburb in some small town in Illinois. Judy's death is framed such that it could happen in any state, any town, any suburb, any family, any house, and in any room at any time; *Halloween* (1978) evokes a sense of uncertainty regarding supposedly safe spaces and jeopardizes one's ontological security. Put simply, *Halloween* (1978) is scary because it is relatable, and it turns the average suburban American home into a bona fide haunted house on Halloween night. Perhaps Judy would have lived had her bedroom door been closed and locked.

## 2.3 The House is Alive

In her conceptualization of haunted houses, Hockey (1999) does not ascribe agency to the House of Doom; she looks at real experiences with real houses rather than at the imagined ones serving as subject for this research. Building from Hockey's work, I am interested in interpretive understandings of haunted houses. North American culture sees haunted houses, for the most part, as sentient. We see the Haunted House as alive, autonomous, willful, and as having its own agenda. The Haunted House serves its own purpose and does not do what we expect from a normal domicile. In this way, the Haunted House is a House of Doom because household norms and regular functions do not hold. However, the Haunted House I discuss differs from Hockey's House of Doom in its personification and inherent agentic will.

After being abandoned by humanity, nature overtakes the house. The house becomes part of its natural surroundings, melding into the property. That which is natural creeps into the house. Along with it encroaches the *super*natural, the natural phenomena which falls outside human understanding. The supernatural realm is broad, complex, and insidious. When the natural roots itself and grows strong in a man-made space, it crosses into the realm of the supernatural. This supernatural presence is what differentiates the Haunted House from a house haunted by its tragic past. A run-of-the-mill haunted house is setting to tragic events and a place where dissatisfied spirits remain, sometimes restless and causing domestic chaos. The Haunted House, in contrast, is alive; it is an agentic creature with its own will and power.

The Haunted House frequently wears its own name or title, a vestige of its aristocratic history harkening back to gothic castles (Bailey, 1999). Manderley (*Rebecca*), Hill House (*The Haunting*), The Bramford (*Rosemary's Baby*), Belasco House (*The Legend of Hell House*) are the statuesque buildings immortalized in Haunted House films ranging from 1940–1973—all based on books. This pattern of naming houses in haunted media emerges early in the 20th century with these iconic stories. Considering each tale prominently features an

anthropomorphized haunted house, it makes logical sense for the author to name the house; this helps with narrative writing and emphasizes the *character* of the house.

One's choice to name their house or home affects all subsequent interactions with it; no longer is it an object with which to interact passively, the now-named space is an object with which (or with whom) one actively engages. By granting the house a name, one gives it agency. Although words may not break one's bones like sticks and stones, they still hold power and influence when interpreted as real[10]. To name a house is to acknowledge that the given space matters and that it possesses power. It has the power to define the situation.

A Weberian approach to understanding power dynamics defines power as the ability to get what one wants despite resistance. Foucault (1990) builds on the topic of power through the idea of sovereignty. A sovereign's power truly lies in their ability to determine when the law no longer applies (Foucault, 1990). I suggest that haunted houses have absolute sovereignty within the bounds of their reach. The House's power lies in its ability to set the definition of any situation it engages. The goal of the Haunted House is to maintain equilibrium and live on. Incoming owners upset this by attempting to assert control over the household environment and change it to their likeness.

The Haunted House has sovereign power over its acreage, extending its influence over anything which crosses within its boundaries. The property line demarcates the boundary of a Haunted House's influence, insulating the house within its designated plot of land. Property and ownership of land is a human invention; it is a socially constructed idea for a person to own a plot of land. How can one own an allotted section of the Earth? On whose authority? Settler colonialism prioritizes resource-rich land and transforms land into property (Patel & Moore, 2017). Land is not innately property—property is the sanctioned ownership of land by decree of a social contract between occupant and local authority.

[10] This is the defining principle of the Thomas theorem. For further discussion, see Merton, R. K. (1948).

The concept of property reaches back further than written records of history, and so I turn to the legal systems of prehistoric Ancient Mesopotamian society with the mundane Documents of Practice[11] garnered in everyday life. Although these documents are not accounts of history, they reveal how property pertained to people's day-to-day activities and how boundaries worked to affect citizens' lives. I use the term "citizen" mindful that it refers only to a privileged class of society; traditionally owning property establishes one's citizenship. The prerequisite for owning property was, for misogynistic reasons, being male.

Contracts are the earliest form of recorded legal activity. Before the advent of parchment, those contracts were inscribed on rock; promises literally written in stone. Called *kudurrus*, Boundary Stones are large stones which mark the boundary of privately owned land and may even feature mortgage information—yes, mortgages pre-date recorded history. Smaller hand-held *kudurrus* illustrate the practice of property exchanging hands, and that is the beginning of the real estate market. *Kudurrus* establish the now-popular concept of privately owned property and estates, paving the way for citizenship, democracy, and colonization.

A modern form of *kudurrus*, popular to mark the perimeter, is a wrought-iron gate and fencing (often stone or metal), a long winding drive through the woods, a white picket fence, a sudden drop in elevation, an inviting front door hung slightly ajar up three steps to the porch, or any other such domestic architectural boundary made manifest as part of the built environment. Consequently, those boundaries are empowered through their reification as *kudurrus* marking the house's range of influence. Reified *kudurrus* mark the range of a haunted house's influence, infusing the property line with power.

Ultimately, humanity is responsible for giving the Haunted House its omnipotent power within its bounded land. Humans personify everything in their environment, giving life and

[11] Documents of Practice are everyday recordings of business such as contracts, judicial records, official inscriptions/edicts, legal codes, etc. Referenced from my Classics notes; Reeves, J. (2017). *Hammurabi of Babylon*. Personal Collection of (Johnathan Reeves), McMaster University, Hamilton, ON.

personality to inanimate objects, and attributing human qualities to inhuman creatures like dogs and cats. We view the Haunted House as a powerful supernatural creature.

*Monster House* (2006) epitomizes the monstrosity that the agentic Haunted House has become in 21st Century North American culture. The film introduces the featured Haunted House in a classic scene, what I refer to as the "boys on bikes" scene. To prove their bravery, earn bragging rights, and test their courage, boys on bikes venture close to or into a Haunted House. This scene takes place at the beginning of the film to create context and establish that the House is Haunted. Thanks to the boys on bikes trope, the audience learns some lore about the House while encountering what may be their first surprise and fright of the day.

Watching *Monster House* (2006) I am greeted in the opening scene by a little girl on a tricycle, a clever twist on the boys on bikes scene. The obnoxious little girl with blonde pigtails pedals down the sidewalk, greeting inanimate objects as she rides along: "Hello, fence," "Hello, leaves," and "Hello, sky." She acknowledges the objects, actively interacting with them and framing objects as possessing human qualities; she anthropomorphizes objects to set the audience up for the film's plot wherein the Haunted House becomes increasingly human-like.

*Figure 8* - Clutching the handles of a red tricycle, a young, white girl with blonde pigtails gazes at a spooky house.

The tricycle comes grinding to a halt when the little girl's path veers off concrete and onto grass. It is the lawn of Mr. Nebbercracker and his creepy house. Once within the bounds

of the Haunted House's power, the property comes alive: her trike is claimed by the grass, blades of green tangling around the front wheel, tearing it from the frame with ease. The girl runs away, abandoning her trike to the unruly lawn. From the beginning of *Monster House* (2006), the audience is taken on a familiar tricycle ride—no doubt a tribute to Danny in *The Shining* (1980)—down the way to a house that practically screams, "I'm haunted!" Hooked into the narrative and brought into a child's frame of mind, the blonde trike girl primes the audience for the Haunted House narrative to come.

In other films such as *Casper* (1995) and *The Haunted Mansion* (2003), boys on bikes scenes add context for the story and provide basic lore about the House to ensure the audience recognizes and understands it as Haunted. This type of scene also serves to introduce viewers to a mild spook in preparation for scarier spooks later in the film. Entering the Haunted House to test one's courage is a popular motif, but not the sole reason characters deign to open the front door. Indeed, some characters seek out haunted houses for their long-forgotten purpose: to provide shelter and safety. However, the Haunted House does not serve to keep its occupants safe from the outside world as homes are meant to do. Instead, it victimizes the family, or allow their victimization by other sources—sources such as ghosts, poltergeists, supernatural beings, the outside, trees which break through the windows, home invaders, and inhabitants driven crazy over time.

## 2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I look to the opening scenes of three films and how they present the Haunted House's violation of safety. In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) Brad and Janet are faced with plentiful stigma symbols which warn of the property's potential danger. Despite this, they stand on the front porch ready to enter a House of Doom in seek of shelter and a telephone. In *Halloween* (1978) the home becomes a House of Doom when voyeurism turns to

invasion, illustrating how the normally safe suburban home can become the site of violence in private. With *Monster House* (2006) the Haunted House comes alive. Mr. Nebbercracker's house is an obviously haunted house in the eyes of children, its exterior discredited by numerous stigma symbols. Over the course of the film, the house grows more and more human-like; its windows serve as eyes, its front door and porch develop into a gaping mouth filled with sharp teeth, and eventually it rips up the trees lining its yard to use them as limbs, rooting them to the sides of its structure. Indeed, Mr. Nebbercracker's house becomes the agentic manifestation of an unsafe home, the Haunted House.

In reality, the Haunted House is naught but a structure brought to life by the collective imagination as a canvas upon which to project the dangerous parts of one's self. Typically, this is the traumatized self, the self which has been hurt time and time again but has never been afforded the resources to heal properly. Instead, that self is hidden beneath the surface, the so-called dark emotions suppressed, repressed, and finally projected. It is easier, at times, to abstract your own emotions through a conduit in order to discover, unpack, and process them. The Haunted House is a popular reification of unresolved domestic trauma and a place which appears as unsafe as it feels.

Stigma symbols signalling precarity and danger are worked into the structure of the Haunted House and its surrounding property. Most iconic is the gothic mansion which sits on a cliff-face overlooking something—a body of water, rolling hills of manicured lawn, or a graveyard. Its position on the cliff reinforces that the house is isolated, lowers the chance of escape from the house, inhibits inhabitants' ability to call for help, and the house's placement reifies the precarious position of those who enter the house. The stigma symbols built into the environment serve as a warning of one's vulnerability to the house and grounds, particularly when inside the house. It warns not only of the physical dangers one may encounter in the house but implies a deeper meaning of insecurity brought on by the house—one that is spiritual,

emotional, and mental in nature. The Haunted House's precarious placement is a spatial representation of the potential danger one may face when inside.

To paraphrase Kerr (2015), the best time to study people's behaviour is when they are vulnerable. People are vulnerable at home; it is where they decompress and kick off their shoes. People are vulnerable when afraid, and I suggest that people are extremely vulnerable when they are simultaneously scared *and* feel at home. While frightened at home, a person's thinking brain overflows with memories and meanings associated not only with home, but also with danger. This tricks the body's internal security system into a false sense of safety. I suggest that the Haunted House is a site wherein people paradoxically feel at home and scared; haunted houses occupy an intersecting anomic space of security and danger wherein norms are violated and perverted.

# Chapter 3: The Nature of the Haunted House

The Haunted House is a space wherein the label of home becomes invalid, indicated by the presence of the natural world indoors. Be it flies, spiders, dust, mould, birds, or bugs, when nature enters the House, it transforms in the collective imagination from Home to Haunted. The Haunted House becomes a space where civilization and nature meet and interact in ways beyond human control. Interestingly, nature can also transform an ordinary House into Home if it is controlled, tamed, domesticated, and curated for human pleasure. The practice of civilizing nature plays a part in the human practice of making Home; gardening, mowing the lawn, and pruning hedges illustrate this practice of cultivating nature into form. Other examples of nature contributing the status of Home rather than nullifying it include owning a pet, tending indoor plants, mounting the heads and skins of hunted animals, and more.

The concept of assimilation reveals tension in humanity's relationship with nature as it belies mass social experiences of biophobia. Put simply, biophobia is the fear of nature. Unpacking this relationship between horror, biophobia, and assimilation is key to understanding humanity's relationship with the Haunted House. Assimilation describes what happens post-invasion: the loss of the Self in service to a collective consciousness. Nature motifs highlighted in humanity's relationship with Nature reveal a societal fear of the inherent: biophobia.

In this chapter I explore the relationship between the Haunted House and the natural environment. I look at bodies and how nature becomes enrolled in the built environment. By looking at the Gothic Body and *The Shining* (1980) I show that humanity is nature and is pulled into nature. Using the concept of miasma, I explore how the Haunted House's evil is treated as an infectious disease in *The Amityville Horror* (1979) and *The Evil Dead* (1981). Finally, I expand on the theme of assimilation and how the Haunted House aligns itself more with the natural environment than it does with civilization.

## 3.1 The Built Environment and Nature's Enrollment

For my research, it is vital to differentiate "house" from "home." A house is part of the built environment[12], a structure within which one can seek shelter from the weather and outdoors. Fisher (2009), Mouratidis (2019), and Sullivan and Chang (2011) illustrate the ability of the built environment to impact everyday social interactions. The built environment is not so much a concept as it is literal: the built environment is anything built, and related social theory focuses on the spatial and temporal dimensions of human interaction with the environment (Lawrence, 1990). Fisher (2009) develops an interactive approach to analyzing the relationship between the built environment and social reproduction, whereas Mouratidis (2019) employs spatial analysis in the pursuit of improving communal satisfaction with leisure-oriented built environments. To investigate the relationship between human well-being and the built environment, Sullivan and Chang (2011) explore place attachment[13] and mental health. They find that one's surrounding environment can work to either promote or hinder their mental health. Common sense dictates that one's surroundings will have an impact on them. In the case of the Haunted House, it hinders inhabitant's mental health and social relationships.

Goss (1988) asserts that the architect and the geographer ought attend to the society existing in, producing, and reproducing the meaning of a space: "To understand the meaning of the built environment… we must realize the complexity of a multicoded space and study it in its everyday usage" (p. 398). Similar to the perspective of symbolic interactionism, Goss (1988) emphasizes symbolic meanings of the built environment and how they impact and reflect dominant social relations (Goss, 1988). "But buildings are also physical objects that present environments of opportunity and constraints that serve to reproduce these meanings, life-styles, and relations" (Goss, 1988, p. 399). Information garnered from the signs presented by the spatial

[12] For further information on the built environment, see Gieryn, T. F. (2000) and Gieryn, T. F. (2002).
[13] For further information on place attachment, see Scannell, L., & Gifford, R. (2014).

system helps the interpreter of the space to quickly identify an appropriate, shared definition of the situation. The Haunted House presents an environment primarily of constraint, signalled by looming fencing and walls. The constraint turns suffocating as nature encroaches; cobwebs occupying the corners of rooms, vines crawling up the gates and exterior walls, rodents making homes in the walls.

Regarding power relations infused with man-made spaces, Chandra Mukerji (2002) examines material practices of domination in the western Christian tradition of establishing power by erecting tangible monuments. Land can be cultivated, excavated, tilled, farmed, built on and into; it plays a foundational role in western society. Because it is literally the soil upon which society has built itself, the settled land becomes entwined with human culture and meaning. Mukerji (2002) asserts the importance of remembering land in social analysis:

> Looking at where land becomes visibly enrolled into culture… is fundamental to social analysis – not just for doing cultural history but for analyzing regimes of power. To understand western culture and its effects on world patterns of environmental mobilization, we need more research on what western relations to nature have been and why. (p. 1)

Although environmental mobilization is not the primary concern of my research, I seek to engage the discussion of western relations with nature, and humanity's relationship with nature. To avoid overgeneralizing my analysis, I narrow humanity's perspective to the philosophical perspective of humanism which values humans and their agency as a collective, and as individual agents. Adhering to Cartesian duality, "humanist thought has been characterized as depending upon the purification and separation of what is natural from what is man made" (Mukerji, 2002, p. 3).

Lisa-Jo van den Scott (forthcoming) coins the term "contranature" to describe how walled, colonial structures are built in opposition to the natural environment, drawing a stark

line between *inside* and *outside*. Prepositions require an object with which to interact; therefore, without a barrier, there is no separation between what is "in" and what is "out." Western civilization has developed in a contranatural pattern, erecting the built environment against nature with the purpose of keeping nature *outside* because only civilized persons belong *inside*. The Haunted House violates this purity as nature lives inside, encroaching on the parts of the property seen as habitable. Home to mice, mould, spiders, and insects the Haunted House is effectively home to nature.

Inside, however, is not the place for humanity and nature to mix. Rather, the house should be kept separate from nature in order to maintain its appeal as home. Mukerji (2002) illustrates how Italian Renaissance gardens build humanist thinking into the natural environment, a way of controlling and hybridizing nature and human will while maintaining human–nature distinction. Mukerji (2002) explains that "gardens in early modern Italy were showy display places, where the wealthy and powerful could manifest their capacities to control the world with their will" (p. 8).

"By the time landscape gardens turned into the familiar rolling hills, peaceful lakes, and small shrines of eighteenth-century England, human control of land (as property, as territory) could be portrayed as natural because it had been routinized in public administration and the development of private properties" (Mukerji, 2002, p. 5). Over time, humanity's unnatural intervention into the management of nature becomes normalized and accepted as natural because of the long-lasting human creations of previous generations. The more time passes, the more humanity believes in its entitlement to cultivate nature to its will. Quick to become a latent ontological assumption, human dominion over land became a normal piece of everyday life; farming, hunting for sport, territorial expansion and conquest, resource extraction, and gardening are a few examples.

Like Mukerji, I find humanism's goal of natural restoration for human enjoyment to be contradictory and interesting. Mukerji (2002) addresses justification narratives of English garden cultivation: "They spoke to hopes of restoration that served to make control of land – as a political place or private property – more legitimate" (p. 5). By storying their narrative of restoration, wealthy eighteenth-century English landowners framed their control of land as legitimate and for the benefit of the environment. In essence, one is doing a generous service to their land by caring for and raising their allotted piece of property to fit a socially constructed, contemporary image of what society deems the perfect form for nature. Manicured expanses of gardens and grounds are a way by which one can demonstrate their wealth. I offer golf courses as a twentieth-century North American example of landscape restoration and the process of infusing power, wealth, and status into nature.

## 3.2 Gothic Bodies

The Gothic Body makes salient humanity's inextricable relationship with nature. The human body is alive, it is natural, it is neither machine nor cybernetic in its iterative design. Flesh, bone, organs, and blood. At its most basic, the gothic body is a reminder that all humans are mortal and that they all stand equal before death. Imagery of gothic bodies achieves this impact through horror by displaying visceral bodily suffering. Horror subjects the human body to endlessly horrible things—not to mention the bodies of other animals, particularly arachnids, birds, cats, dogs, insects, larvae, rodents, and worms. Coupled with the suffering of the organic body is the decay of the organic body (Shilling, 2012). Haunted House films align the organic (human) body with the structure of the house, which is the constructed body. The Haunted House is a dilapidated body, succumbing to aging and deterioration. We see the constructed body's deterioration paralleled by the suffering inflicted on the inhabitants and their degrading mental state.

Pain, in Steven Bruhm's study of the politics of pain in Romantic fiction, is "the ontologically significant focused experience which, even if it comes sympathetically from the outside, is incontestably present in the self that feels it" (1994). Essentially, Bruhm posits that the experience of pain is felt not only physically by those in pain, but also felt sympathetically by those who witness, contemplate, feel, experience, and attempt to understand other's pain. I adapt this to my research in that pain is an ontologically significant, focused experience which, even if it comes sympathetically from the outside, is incontestably present in the Self that feels another's pain. Empathy and psychosomatic pain exemplify the process of feeling pain which is external to the body yet is experienced on an intellectual level.

"The Beauty of Barbarism," a Gothic fiction phrase, depicts vulnerability, violence, and suffering. It invokes a separation between mind and body; the mind thinks about pain while the body experiences the pain. This is the gothic body. To illustrate this concept, Bruhm (1994) offers the example of Eugene Delacroix's 1827 canvas, The Death of Sardanapalus, which is not about Sardanapalus' death but rather his contemplation of death as women are slaughtered before him:

> The "Gothic body" is that which is put on excessive display, and whose violent, vulnerable immediacy gives both the Delacroix painting and Gothic fiction their beautiful barbarity, their troublesome power. [The bystander] Sardanapalus contemplates pain, and has the luxury of doing so because he is not feeling it (the same could be said, I suppose, for the author of this study). Pain for Sardanapalus is filtered through spectacle: it has that curiously fascinating quality that inflicters of pain have exploited in different ways from the Roman coliseum to the contemporary slasher film. And for writers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that spectacality takes on particular importance, for it underlies the ways writers saw and thought about their world.

To illustrate how the gothic body presents in North American horror, I look to *The Shining*, the Overlook hotel, and Jack Torrence. In the scene below, Jack becomes an emblematic gothic body. Ordinarily, North American horror and thriller films focus on the feminine gothic form, but *The Shining* (1980) shifts attention from the feminine gothic body to the masculine gothic body, symbolizing Jack's vulnerability to the Overlook's malignant will.

*Figure 9* - Wendy knocks Jack unconscious after threatening to kill her. Wendy drags Jack's body into the kitchen where she puts him in the food pantry. Jack is delirious, blood dripping from a cut on his head.

Wendy hits Jack with a baseball bat, throwing him down the main staircase of the hotel. During the scene, Wendy exemplifies the agentic feminine gothic body as she tells her harasser to leave, and exercises force when he ignores, advancing and threatening to bash her skull in. As she navigates the scene, Wendy is shaking, tears streaming down her cheeks, her eyes wide in fear as she swings a wooden bat to keep Jack at distance. Vulnerable, entangled in domestic violence and abuse, Wendy suffers at the whim of her husband. Wendy is the feminine counterpart to Jack's masculinity, both gothic bodies tortured because of the Overlook.

*Figure 10* - Jack shambles through the hedge maze, seeking his son Danny long after the boy has escaped.

Later in the film, we are given one of the most iconic masculine gothic bodies to grace the horror scene: Jack Torrence in the hedge maze through which he chased his son with a bloodied axe. Here, we see the shadowy silhouette of Jack as he hobbles through the maze, abandoned by Wendy and Danny who drive away to safety. He howls in anguish, crying for his family, his life, his sanity. Wounded and weakened, dragging his feet through the snow, Jack hangs his head, axe reflexively clutched in his left hand. He is alone in the maze, abandoned on the grounds of the Overlook to freeze in a snow drift.

*Figure 11* - Jack the following morning, frozen to death in the hedge maze, now an icy feature of the outdoor labyrinth.

Literally frozen in time and place, Jack's corpse becomes an emotive feature of the hedge maze. The gothic body possesses significant meaning whether it is living or dead, particularly when preserved by ice. The freezing preserves the individual's final experience of pain and suffering, an expression which holds intense emotion although no longer holds life. Succumbing to one of our greatest human fears, Jack dies alone by exposure, a lonely fate brought on by his self-imposed isolation narrative. In the end, Jack is overcome by the elements, losing to nature.

Jack is an interesting body to attend to since he begins *The Shining* (1980) as a civilized body (Shilling, 2012), and finishes the film as a distinctly uncivilized body. Jack's assimilation into the Overlook Hotel nullifies the civility and individuality afforded Jack as a masculine-bodied person. Jack, as an organic human being, representing an organic, or natural body (Shilling, 2012). Naturalistic views of the body describe it as the "pre-social, biological basis on which superstructures of the Self and society are founded" (Shilling, 2012, p. 41). In contrast, the Overlook Hotel is a constructed body, meaning "the body is somehow shaped, constrained and even invented by society" (Shilling, 2012, p. 70). The Overlook's Haunted House narrative flips this juxtaposition on its head: nature reclaims the constructed body and consumes organics.

The Overlook, a constructed body, mutilates Jack's mind and body, then proceeds to consume, digest, and incorporate Jack's organic body. In this scenario, the Haunted House assimilates its victim and caretaker, effectively trapping Jack in the history of the space, represented by his appearance in historical photos hung on the walls of the hotel.

## 3.3 Contamination & Infection

Overall, I find that North American haunted houses fall into one or more type of haunting. I offer the following typification of hauntings common to haunted houses: sacred soil, desecrated space, infected with evil, site of death and sacrifice, lingering spirits, possession, haunted inhabitant, and the house is alive. I use this typification for haunted houses knowing that the categories are permeable; haunted houses often qualify for multiple haunting types at once or at different points in their life. For example, the Belasco House (*The Legend of Hell House*, 1973) is put into no less than four different haunting categories by characters. A spiritualist hired to investigate the house asserts that the house is *not* the haunted part, but that there are multiple surviving personalities attached to the house, referring to ghosts. She goes on to describe that "this is an evil house, a place of sickness." Her counterpart, a physical medium, disagrees, saying that the house *is* the source of the haunting. According to the mediums, the Belasco House, popularly called Hell House, is infested with evil, the site of death, haunted by lingering spirits, and the house has a will of its own; Hell House can be simultaneously categorized into four types of haunting.

In this section I emphasize the conceptualization of the Haunted House being infected with evil. This idea of contamination alludes to a form of miasma which contaminates inhabitants. Disgust is a basic human emotion and horror employs its provocation wisely to enrich the depth of one's emotional reaction. Many things which trigger feelings of disgust are related to death: the rotting corpse of skunk roadkill, contracting a potentially fatal virus from

a public washroom, flesh-eating infectious wounds, putrid smells, and beyond. Oftentimes these disgusting qualities are applied to living and undead beings in horror. For example, the character of Beetlejuice (*Beetlejuice*, 1988) climbs out of a grave, eats beetles, and is visibly moulding. *The Amityville Horror* (1979) highlights the contamination of evil and how it manifests as disgusting qualities in the home. This film centres around infection, disease, evil, and domestic disarray. Religious figures become sick from interacting with the house, the family is affected by negative moods, and multiple grotesque phenomena manifest in the bedrooms, bathroom, and basement of the *Amityville Horror* house, High Hopes.

Early in the film, a priest visits High Hopes intending to bless it for the new family moving in. He is, like priests in other Haunted House films, rejected by the house and driven away. High Hopes knowingly and actively works against the priest and his attempts to subvert the house's domain over another family. When disciples of God encounter the Haunted House, they feel the evil and become a trope to demonstrate how the Haunted House reacts in opposition to divinity. Priests, nuns, and other religious figureheads feature primarily in Haunted House films involving themes of evil, satanism, corruption, disease, possession, and contamination. In this case, the priest highlights the strength of the miasma present in the *Amityville Horror* house.

Inside the house, the priest feels unwelcome and hesitates. He encounters a notable sign of the house's miasmic contamination: the overwhelming presence of buzzing flies. As George describes it, there are "rooms full of flies at the wrong time of year." He highlights the unusual aspect of the flies' presence: timing. Were it deep into the summer months, the Lutzes might expect swarms of buzzing flies in their new home, but see it as strange since the season is autumn. The flies' presence equates the house with imagery of a decaying corpse, strengthened by the black bile bubbling forth from the plumbing as fluids would from a rotting body.

*Figure 12* - The priest, covered in flies, witnesses the miasmic evil of the house.

Flies are a popular horror motif in North American haunted house films, an easy stigma signal to work into the house[14]. The flies act as a manifest invasion of nature into the home, displaying the insidious persistence of nature against the barriers built contra to it. Later in the film, we learn that the priest becomes sick after his interaction with High Hopes. Not only does he encounter indicators of disease on the property, but he becomes infected by his interaction with the house. Beyond disgusting qualities and symbols of nature encroaching on the home, there are plentiful stigma signs which indicate the property as unsafe, dangerous, or hazardous to one's health. For example, I direct attention upward to a key feature of any haunted house's foyer: chandeliers.

Chandeliers add beautiful decor to any room with a high ceiling. In haunted houses, they are a near-mandatory feature of the foyer. In some cases, the chandelier becomes an early trap built into the environment, such as in *The House on Haunted Hill* (1959 and 1999) wherein a chandelier nearly falls onto the virginal heroine of the story. *The Amityville Horror* (1979) associates High Hopes with sickness and disease, along with signalling its precarious function

[14] Flies as an ill omen could be an allusion to one of the 10 plagues of locus referenced in Biblical tradition.

as a shelter. This is made obvious when the Lutzes' maternal aunt visits. The aunt happens to be a nun, and the chandelier starts to shake when she enters the front door and moves through the foyer, signalling the house's rejection of her religious affiliation like it did with the priest.

Before seeing the chandelier, the twinkling of its crystal droplets builds as the nun draws closer. The shaking chandelier returns to stillness only as the mother descends to greet her aunt. The chandelier shakes to signal the house's protest to a religious person entering its domain; the clatter of crystals is a type of warning to the nun to get out. Much like the priest is warned with flies and then dismissed from the building, the aunt does not last long in the house after the chandelier's sign. She makes a hasty exit before having the chance to socialize. "I can't stay, I feel sick. I can't stay." And with that, she is in and out of the house within a minute.


*Figure 13* - A relative of the family, the Nun, enters High Hopes. Overhead, the crystal chandelier shakes, and she clutches a housewarming gift of flowers in both hands.

The aunt safely returns to her car but stops to pull over as she drives away. Vomiting out her car door, the nun appears to be stricken with a similar sickness to that of the priest. By this point in the film, the house has infected two religious characters with its sickness, causing them to become physically ill. The priest encounters naturalistic stigma signs while the nun encounters stigma signals built into the house, both prompting hasty exits and ensuing sickness.

Beyond the religious characters, the family living inside High Hopes are affected by the evil forces inside the house. George works most closely with the house and feels the brunt of the contamination. It is as though he becomes poisoned over time, his sickness manifesting unlike that of the priest and nun; George's illness is of the mind rather than the body. He wakes at odd hours of the night, grows obsessive of the house, neglects his work, and eventually attempts to kill his family with an axe. George's decline in wellbeing suggests that his interaction with High Hopes has negatively impacted his mental health and caused him to struggle with mental illness.

Another diseased Haunted House features in *The Evil Dead* (1982), a gory slasher flick from the 1980s is an excellent illustration of infection as a primary theme. Its villain, the Evil, is an infection and the film uses visceral imagery to create this association: oozing pus and blood, decay, vermin, cockroaches, and pestilence. The association between the Evil and infection leads into themes of possession and assimilation, as though Evil is a disease which can be caught and spread.

To a cabin in the woods, far from the city and steeped in thick fog, travel a car of teens ready to relax. They head along a dirt road through the woods; the cabin is "right up in the mountains." They drive across a rickety bridge, its structure screaming in warning. On the other side, the road blends into the undergrowth, no laneway marking their path. These stigma symbols indicate not only the isolation of this location, but act as a warning of its precarity.

Nestled in the woods is a log cabin, symmetrical and facing the group's arrival. A bench swing sways on the porch, clunking against the cabin's exterior. Up in the mountains, this cabin stands alone with no neighbours in range. To get back, one would need to traverse the woods, cross a bridge, and travel back to the gas station at the base of the mountain. Indeed, the cabin is secluded and difficult to access, offering privacy and quiet to vacationers. Spatially isolated

from normal society, the teens need not adhere to regular, everyday norms. Their hopes are to deviate sexually, but events escalate far beyond teenage make-out sessions.

Once isolated, the group is primed for Evil's invasion of the area and cabin. The group summon Evil when they read from an ancient text, manifesting it as an active force. To symbolize the new miasmic presence and change in story dynamic, a tree branch breaks in through a cabin window, violating the barriers meant to keep inhabitants safe from outside. Next to be violated is the privacy of the characters: they are watched by the Evil peering in through the windows, waiting for an opportunity to strike. The Evil is an amorphous villain that seems to come from the land and take control of the natural surroundings. It brings malicious qualities to the forest. The forest now possesses malicious qualities: an empty voice calls to one of the girls, Cheryl, and beckons her outside.

Shadows cover the full moon's light and thick fog rolls through the forest, obscuring the scenery. Hearing an empty voice calling from the woods one of the girls, Cheryl, goes to investigate. She leaves behind the partial safety of the cabin and starts into the forest, the air abuzz with flies, the forest groaning and branches crackling as she advances. Unbeknownst to Cheryl, the trees and vines of the woods come to life and Cheryl soon falls prey to the Evil. Vines restrain her ankles, her wrists and wrap around her neck. As she struggles, her clothes are ripped off and she is pulled to the ground. Vulnerable to the greenery, Cheryl is raped by vines and branches. She is the first character to come in contact with the Evil and it infects her by violating her body.

Surviving the assault, Cheryl returns to the cabin in torn clothes covered in scratches. The group doubts and dismisses her experience. "The woods are alive," she asserts, but her pleas go unheeded. "It's not going to let us leave," she says about the possessed woods and the force lingering in the fog. Cheryl's body is the first to be violated in *The Evil Dead* (1982) and it is done in an explicitly sexual way. Through being raped, Cheryl is infected with the Evil and

soon begins to manifest symptoms. The Evil is transmissible and parallels a sexually transmitted disease or infection. As the virginal character of the story, Cheryl is the pure feminine body which becomes contaminated by the Haunted House and its miasma, catching the Evil.

At this point in the story, the group is isolated atop a mountain in a creepy forest on the night of a full moon. They are primed for the horrible events to follow, their environment signalling the imminent danger: a shattered window, low visibility, and a collapsed bridge indicate the surroundings are unsafe. Without the bridge the group faces a topographic barrier to escape the woods. The fog narrows their potential field of vision making it easier for the teens to lose one another in the woods or lose their way entirely. The cabin, their last hope for shelter and safety, is undermined by the broken window; what seemed an inconvenience earlier becomes a hole in the cabin's defense, weakening the protection offered by the overall structure. Isolated and violated, the Evil is ready to assimilate its victims.

## 3.4 Assimilation

What happens to abandoned land gone wild, no longer in the beautifully manicured state it once was? The land cannot fully return to its former wildness, its original state of being, because of material human intervention. Instead, the land comes to claim all which remains in its domain. No longer constrained and overpowered by human cultivation, nature reasserts control and encroaches on long-untouched, domesticated spaces. The artifacts left behind from human occupation become assimilated with the environment; tendrils of ivy snake up and over walls, storms break through windows and assault shingling, moss covers walkways as roots grow beneath, and everything that once belonged to a person is left in nature's encompassing care. This is the consequence of a consumerist society: junk left in the wake of our consumption, a hunger for items designed to never fully satisfy. The inherent cost of capitalism is non-sustainable consumption of natural resources and the invention of manmade objects destined to

break, be thrown out, and become useless junk in a landfill. Ultimately capitalism costs nothing in terms of dollars, but it costs everything in life; it desolates the natural environment.

This idea of nature encroaching upon left-behind human property speaks to an insidious theme in Western haunted house media: assimilation. Cholodenko touches on assimilation when discussing ghosts, phantoms, and spectres in his article "The crypt, the haunted house, of cinema" (2004). He builds on the works of Derrida, explaining the paradoxical process of the spectre *incorporation*. Termed cryptic incorporation, Cholodenko (2004) grounds his explanation by quoting an interview which highlights the French idea of ghosts as *revenants*, the returned, rather than entities which *come* into the world (such as a newborn child).

> Cryptic incorporation is for Derrida what mimes or simulates the process of introjection while not effectuating the completion of mourning that introjection accomplishes. While introjection is of the order of presence, representation, the subject, the spirit, the ontological, incorporation is of the order of the simulacrum, the object, the spectre, the hauntological. … With incorporation what is constituted as inner enclave within us remains unassimilated. (Cholodenko, 2004, p. 101)

Haunted houses often sit in the middle of these abandoned plots of cultivated and domesticated land. They are the estates left behind, forgotten by old inhabitants. When abandoned by humans, the house grows into the land as the land embraces it; Nature opens her arms with no judgement and endless compassion for the forgotten house. When left to rot by soulless owners and reclaimed by nature, North American society labels a house "haunted." A house becomes haunted by the forgotten consequences of its owner's ill-gotten gains: the house pays for the sins of its traumatic past by playing host to ghosts and monsters. Sometimes, the house is rightfully haunted by its own horrific aftermath. Other times, the house is naught but a structure and setting for hauntings and terror.

The Haunted House, as a term and conceptual archetype, is a whole comprising everything within reach of the house. I stipulate that the Haunted House does not *own* the land on which it is situated and built. I imagine the Haunted House as a creature that comes into being as it is accepted by Nature, and its manifest form is determined by the structural bones left to dust. Juxtaposed with Nature, civilization is wild. Assimilation with the natural surroundings does not stop with the house, however, but continues with anyone who comes onto the property.

I look to an iconic North American Haunted House to illustrate the House's power of assimilation: Shirley Jackson's Hill House. *The Haunting* (1963) and *the Haunting* (1999) are film adaptations of Jackson's 1959 novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*, and popularized Jackson's motifs as stigma symbols forewarning of the supernatural. *The Haunting of Hill House* is a foundational Haunted House narrative and phenomenal ghost story. Jackson understood intimately how one feels while trapped within a monster, a common theme among the women of Haunted House narratives and films.

*The Haunting* (1963) is a black and white gothic masterpiece. It is an elegant and timeless piece of art, a stunning depiction of Jackson's Hill House and the relationship it forms with our virgin heroine, Eleanor Lance. From the moment she meets the house, Eleanor's gaze is drawn to a duo of windows at the top of Hill House's ivory tower in the library, behind which stands a circular staircase and balcony. Eleanor and Hill House have staring contests, recurrently drawing the audience's attention to those vacant, eye-like windows high up the House's face. The eeriness of Hill House creates a gothic atmosphere in *The Haunting* (1963), its echoing halls and imposing architecture swallow the inhabitants, grandeur inspiring awe.

Eleanor has the sense that Hill House is alive. She articulates feeling like a small being trapped inside a monster, as if she were swallowed by Hill House. One morning, the group living inside Hill House discover the words "help Eleanor come home" written on the walls

with chalk. It is a message from Hill House to Eleanor and she interprets it to mean that the house wants her to stay there. At first, Eleanor is frightened by the attention that Hill House is giving her but warms to it throughout the film. She feels wanted and needed, that she belongs in Hill House and has a place there. Eleanor mistakes Hill House's pulling her in as an opportunity to make the house her home.

Late in the film, however, it becomes apparent that Eleanor is not making Hill House her home but is being assimilated into Hill House: "I'm disappearing inch by inch into this house." As Eleanor becomes absorbed with Hill House her actions turn uncharacteristic and dangerous. She follows in the footsteps of a woman that died by suicide in the house by climbing the library's spiral staircase and hanging herself from the upper balcony. Eleanor ascends the staircase in a daze but is prevented from throwing herself over the railing by one of her companions in the house. The next day, Eleanor is being sent home but does not want to leave Hill House. While driving down the laneway, she loses control of the steering wheel and the car crashes into a tree. Eleanor dies in the crash, mirroring a crash 90 years previous where another woman died in a crash with that same tree.

In *The Haunting* (1963) Eleanor loses her individual self to the power of Hill House. The house is alive and actively influences Eleanor's behaviour, pulling her in with the promise of belonging and home. In the end, Eleanor dies on the property, becoming part of Hill House in her afterlife. The theme of assimilation is subtle in *The Haunting* (1963) as Eleanor gradually becomes incorporated into the house. In *The Haunting* (1999), a remake of the classic, the theme of assimilation is more pronounced and made obvious with new plot threads and special effects.

As far as Haunted House narratives go, *The Haunting* (1999) is representative of the data. The themes are obvious and ubiquitous to haunted horror: legacy of immoral earnings, light-hearted spooks by masculine characters, gently wafting lacy curtains, paintings of

previous owners holding a part of them[15], exploration of traumatic past, elements of carnivals tied to youthfulness, mirrors, reflection work, and so on. This retelling of Hill House's story may be rich in gothic architecture, but it is lacking in the uneasy ambiance required for affective haunted horror. *The Haunting* (1999) took a gothic horror story of suspense, tension, and the unknown, and changed it. Adding special effects gave form to that which is meant to be unknown; ghosts lose their suspense-provoking uneasiness when they are made visible with special effects and computer-generated imagery. The miasmic force haunting Hill House is brought to screen as a mass of shadows which morph the house's architecture into faces and bring it to life.

The 1999 adaptation of *The Haunting* changes the story to frame "evil" with contemporary ideas of terror and horror. Existing post-industrial revolution, *The Haunting* (1999) films in an era coping with residual traumas from Industrialization and the rise of capitalism. Hugh Crain, the man who built Hill House, is explicitly named as a textile factory owner, a typical industrial capitalist who made his fortune off the broken backs of others. Eleanor is shocked when she discovers that men, women, and children worked for Crain. The names of 10- and 11-year-old are crossed out in ledgers, indicating their death under Crain's watch. Not only did the children die, but their spirits became trapped in Hill House. The lives of the children infused with Hill House, their laughter haunting the halls and their images carved into the walls and furniture. The child labourers were not freed in death, they were incorporated into Hill House. *The Haunting* (1999) illustrates how the Haunted House links with the capitalization and cheapening of life in North America's recent history (Patel & Moore, 2017).

The Haunted House can no longer have a merely *tragic* backstory; there needs to be a sinister element, a perversion of the home, something sour kept too long secreted away in the closet. To accomplish this, *The Haunting* (1999) expands on the original tale to include Crain's

[15] For reference, see Wilde, O. (1890). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

perverse collection of children's laughter, his first wife's suicide in the greenhouse, and his second wife's disappearance with their newly born child. Although these elements are absent in other versions of the story, they fit neatly into the infamy of Hill House and give the film an action-oriented vibe rather than the original gothic atmosphere of Jackson's novel and the noir film of early cinema. In a notable departure from the 1963 film, *The Haunting* (1999) makes Eleanor a descendant of Hugh Crain, assimilating her character further into Hill House. Now, Eleanor is linked with Hill House by inhabiting it and by right of her bloodline.

*The Haunting* (1999) expands on the theme of assimilation by referring to Hill House as a kind of purgatory. The spirits are neither alive nor dead, unable to transition from the mortal plane into the afterlife. The souls of children are trapped in Hill House alongside the malicious spirit of Crain. The trapped children's souls emphasize the theme of immortalizing youth and innocence by way of preservation against time. Eleanor, however, is able to free the children from Hill House by sacrificing her own life. By martyring herself, Eleanor damns Crain's soul to hell while unleashing the children from the crypt of Hill House. In the process, Eleanor dies and follows the souls of the children to a different assimilation, becoming part of the heavenly afterlife. *The Haunting* (1999) builds on the theme of assimilation laid out in *The Haunting* (1963) by showing hundreds of souls trapped in Hill House, their freeing, and a positive assimilation into heaven. The theme of assimilation speaks to feelings of being consumed or trapped, but also to the desire to preserve life, particularly innocent life.

North American culture encapsulates eternal youth in the feminine body. By preserving that beauty, one can enjoy it forever, much like a trophy. By undergoing a forced process of *trophication* (to become a trophy), the youth imbued in the feminine body can be preserved; the body is objectified, making possible the quantification, collection, and display of these beautiful bodies for the enjoyment of the male gaze. In the Haunted House narrative, the person becomes an object by being incorporated into the house, adding to the personality of the

haunting. In *The Haunting* (1963 and 1999) Eleanor is a source of life for Hill House, being drained of her mental and emotional stability while living inside it. When she dies on the property she is assimilated into the legend of Hill House. Her spirit becomes a part of the property, furthering its legacy and adding to Hill House's infamy.

The theme of assimilation depicted in Haunted House stories belies fears of losing oneself to a greater force, and it depicts the experience of eligible women entering the constrains of heteronormative marriage. The woman, once wed, becomes a symbol of her husband's prowess. The wife is akin to the stuffed heads mounted upon the wall of the Game Room. The animals' heads were but a treasure from the gamified thrill of the hunt. The wife would fit well were she decapitated, stuffed, and presented on a plaque after saying her marriage vows. Instead, she is designated a homemaker. Her presence in the house is both decorative, as are the taxidermy animals, and functional. A wife brings to her husband's house a sense of home; *she makes a house into a home.* The wife is a homemaker, literally meaning she makes home for her living. In white Anglo-Saxon protestant North American culture, a domestic housewife is required for an adult man to be "at home" in his house.

His house is unlikely to feel like a home—with or without a housewife—unless he comes to identify with his house, acknowledging it as something more meaningful to him than a mere object, a belonging in his possession. It requires *work* to maintain a house, let alone a home—let alone a house *and* home. This is the baseline work of the domesticated housewife, her role expecting and demanding ever more of her. In essence, the wife becomes assimilated with the house as she becomes the housewife. Through her assimilation the housewife brings personality to the house, allowing it to become home. The house and the housewife are bonded as one in their ascribed femininity and purpose of making home.

## 3.6 Conclusion

In a civilized area, the natural world is tamed and groomed into pleasing environment features. Animals are domesticated and become pets, lawns are mowed, gardens are cultivated, and the nature around one's house is enrolled into the built environment to create a sense of belonging in the space. People establish belonging in the environment by exerting control over the nature which falls inside their property line. However, humanity is insecure in its power over nature. This is to be expected as humans have no real control over their environment, just the hubristic perception of power and mastery.

The Gothic Body makes plain that humans are nature by showcasing pain and suffering. To the onlooker, the pain is intellectual and they can experience it sympathetically. For the individual physically suffering, the pain envelopes their being and exposes their raw emotions. The Gothic Body enrolls humans into nature, making explicit human existence as a part of nature. Themes of biophobia prevalent in Haunted House films bely humanity's fear of its natural body and how the mind cannot be separated from the body.

These fears manifest in the Haunted House as it is a representation of the body: the house is the body and it is haunted by the mind and memories of past experiences. Through supernatural phenomena, symptoms of the human body personify the Haunted House, namely the experience of infection and assimilation. The Haunted House turns evil into an infection, offering a supernatural metaphor for mental illness, unexplained sickness, and viral infections. It also brings to life the feeling of losing one's individuality and sense of self to a larger collective. Capitalism uses the term "incorporation" for the legitimization of a business venture; perhaps those with gross capital should look to Derrida and Cholodenko (2001) for an alternative understanding of incorporation and the consequence of sacrificing one's Self to a larger entity.

I conclude the Haunted House is more closely aligned with nature than with civilized society. In North American culture, the Ideal Home is the epitome of civility whereas the House of Doom is the ultimate turn-away from that civility. Houses of Doom show the decay of civility, the dirty underbelly of our society and what happens when the mirrored image begins to crack. The Haunted House showcases the middle-ground of these two extremes: there is often the beautiful house in the suburbs that looks like the ideal home on the outside but is—in reality—a house of doom on the inside. Not only that, but it is often alive and possessing a will of its own. *House* (1986) features an excellent example of an incognito Haunted House with a malign will living on a suburban street.

The contemporary Haunted House is no longer a castle or mansion, but a suburban two-story structure. The Haunted House is a chameleon, blending in with any socioeconomic background imaginable in North American culture. However, the urban Haunted House is usually a dilapidated single-family house with a violent history.

"That's not even a haunted house; it's just poverty housing, like in a ghetto or on the res," my friend points out while watching haunted house flicks with me. Their words follow me, and I continue to wonder why white people are so frightened and alarmed by the living conditions of poor people? Do they not know that white settler colonialism and venture capitalism force lower-class communities into dilapidated housing? Do they think poor and minority persons deserve to live in shambles, closer to nature because they are somehow atavistic? Analyzing contemporary Haunted Houses in conjunction with their societal background puts a mirror to society's ruling class. North America's reflection is utterly monstrous.

# Chapter 4: Domestic Horror and the Haunted Heroine

Haunted House films reveal how dangerous the home can be. The danger does not always come from the house, though. Haunted House films highlight the relationship between inhabitants and their house and the relationships between people inside the house. In the previous chapters I focus on how the house victimizes its inhabitants, but in this chapter I focus on the victimization that happens within the house at the hands of people. Studying Haunted House films reveals that there is more to a haunting than ghosts; there is trauma, victimization, violence, and violation. Haunted House stories belong to a category of horror I call domestic horror because the events occur at home.

In the North American understanding of home, activities which take place inside the home are private affairs, insulated from the public eye by curtained windows and closed doors. Goldsack (1999) describes the home as being the "cornerstone of the private sphere" remaining separate and secondary to political public life (p. 121). The home is defined in its relation to the mainstream worklife of nuclear fathers; it is identified as a place of rest and respite where one can escape the pressures of work; after that, it is also the site of marriage, family, and childrearing (Goldsack, 1999). This is, of course, the understanding of a patriarchal society which aligns women with the private sphere and men with the public.

Looking to crime prevention literature, Goldsack (1999) identifies a change in the conceptualization of the home from the 1970s onward: "the home emerges, not as a place of danger, but as a space vulnerable to predatory invasion" (p. 126). This delineation separates the concept of danger from the home, relocating it to obviously unsafe sites, such as the House of Doom and the Haunted House. However, removing danger from the home is dangerous itself because it gives a false sense of security to the average household. Goldsack (1999) spells out the impact: "The more that the home is constructed as a space vulnerable to incursions from a

threatening external world the less evident the interpersonal dangers within domestic space become" (p. 126).

What Haunted House narratives do is showcase the threats coming from within the home and within the house. It is the main character, the Haunted Heroine, who lives through the horror of suffering violence within her home. She is unique to the Haunted House narrative because of her victimization in a place one expects to be safe. Her harmonious relationship with the home is perverted by the presence of miasma, some sort of evil entering her domicile. In this chapter, I explore the different ways a woman is haunted in her home: by a past relationship, by emotional abuse, by confinement, and by home invasion. I show how domestic horror takes shape by looking at *Rebecca* (1940), *Gaslight* (1940), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and *Hush* (2016).

## 4.1 The Female Gothic

My systematic viewing of movies to understand the nature of the Haunted House reveals a connection between bodies, particularly feminine bodies, and the structure of the house. This harkens back to the delegation of the western housewife to making home as her purpose, while paying black servants to maintain and staff the house. *Rebecca* (1940) and *Gaslight* (1940) both use structure and social order as tools to constrain and domesticate women and feminine bodies. I look to feminist scholarship in this analysis of feminine bodies in North American horror, namely an essay by Carol Margaret Davidson (2004) entitled "Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" Mentioned in title alone, the Haunted Heroine deserves further investigation and exploration as a non-moralizing archetype for women and femmes in horror.

The Haunted Heroine is consistently present in the haunted house subgenre, reinforced over time with film upon film: *The Haunting* (1963, 1999), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The*

*Exorcist* (1973), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *Halloween* (1978), *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *The Shining* (1980), *Beetlejuice* (1988), and *Casper* (1995). She is as important to the Haunted House narrative as the House itself. The Haunted Heroine emerges as an iconic feminine figure in horror early in the 20th Century with *Gaslight* (1940) and *Rebecca* (1940).

Inspired by Davidson's analysis, I root the Haunted Heroine in Davidson's Female Gothic lens. In a footnote, Davidson (2004) explains the origins of the Female Gothic (p. 48):

> Literary critic Ellen Moers coined this term in her 1976 publication Literary Women, where she used it in relation to the works of Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley. Based on her interpretation of the latter author's Frankenstein, Moers defined the Female Gothic as characterized primarily by anxieties associated with childbearing and artistic creativity. As [Davidson] illustrate[s], Moers's rather succinct sketch of this genre is extremely applicable to Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper."

The characterizing elements of the Female Gothic resonate with my findings of Haunted House narratives and the latent themes which become manifest in emotional, severely traumatized heroines subjected to differing forms of domestic abuse and violence.

Davidson distinguishes the female gothic from traditional gothic, describing the main thematic focus "on a young woman's rite of passage into womanhood and her ambivalent relationship to contemporary domestic ideology, especially the joint institutions of marriage and motherhood. As such, the Female Gothic deploys the supernatural for political ends" (p. 48). The Female Gothic is evident in the Haunted House narrative as the haunting puts the supposedly harmonious relationship between the house and housewife in jeopardy. The haunting is a means by which to explain the woman's discomfort with her position as a domestic homebody, a way to grapple with the heteropatriarchal expectations for her purpose to be making home. The haunting and supernatural forces become a way for the woman to story and

make meaning of her feelings of non-belonging. By translating her existential discomfort with marriage and her experience of domestic abuse into supernatural phenomena she is better able to grapple with her relationship with her home because the haunting helps her imagine something to interact with. The Female Gothic uses the supernatural as a conduit through which she can imagine and explore her relationship with home and homelife.

Meehan (2020) likewise finds the Female Gothic a fitting form to the discussion of haunted houses on film (p. 65):

> The conventions of the gothic romance form, sometimes referred to as the "female gothic," were established in the mid-19th century in Charlotte Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Emily Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Both of these novels featured conflict arising from unlikely romances between persons of the upper and lower classes, cursed marriages, and domineering male figures. More importantly, both were set against the backdrop of eerie old houses.

Meehan continues to discuss gothic romances, mentioning further stories wherein a lower-class woman meets and marries a wealthy man, and a haunted house plays background to their romance. Namely, Meehan (2020) uses *Rebecca, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, The Ghost and Ms. Muir, Dragonwyck, Elephant Walk,* and *Crimson Peak* to explore haunted romances. He delineates romance haunts from other haunted house stories because of their focus on the psychological nature of hauntings, and the near-mandatory feature of a secret room. In these tales, romance may manifest between the main character and her beau, or between her and the spirit haunting her abode.

Haunted House narratives are stories of domestic disease and trauma – they are the epitome of the Female Gothic form. By only applying the Female Gothic to what he sees as romance haunts, Meehan (2020) misses the opportunity to analyze feminine gothic motifs as

they appear in non-romantic films. Meehan's understanding of the Female Gothic would be enriched by integrating Davidson's scholarship, and I aim to do exactly that.

I begin with *Rebecca* (1940) and expand Meehan's discussion to include a full breadth of films which feature feminine gothic motifs. He contextualizes the impact of *Rebecca* on America and the gothic form (Meehan, 2020, p. 68):

> The gothic romance received a boost with the publication of Daphne Du Maurier's 1938 mystery thriller *Rebecca,* a work that updated the female gothic genre into a 20th century milieu. The novel was such a monster hit that its adaptation for the big screen was inevitable. The task fell to the acclaimed producer David O. Selznick, who in turn brought the equally acclaimed British director Alfred Hitchcock to Hollywood to make his first film in America. Hitchcock, in turn, assembled a fine cast of English thespians to act in this prestige production. Du Maurier's chief innovation to the female gothic formula was to transform the gothic novel's ghost from supernatural being to psychological construct. The theme of the haunted house remained, however, in the form of the stately British manor called Manderley.

Rebecca, the character after which the story is named, never makes an appearance. Only featured in memories and imagination, Rebecca is an enigma. How can *Rebecca* be named after a character who dies before the book even begins? True to the novel, Rebecca remains long dead in every cinematic retelling. Along with Rebecca, Manderley is always the same. Immortalized by her very presence in its halls, the legend of Rebecca exists as a lively spirit in Manderley kept alive by the unchanging architecture and decor, her perfectly maintained suite, and Mrs. Danvers' fervent admiration of Rebecca long after her death.

This kind of horror is often categorized as psychological horror, insinuating that the supernatural phenomena which take place are caused by psychological trauma rather than otherworldly spirits. Meehan (2020) labels *Rebecca* as such (p. 69):

> Because of the novel's popularity, producer Selznick insisted that the screenplay adaptation by playwright Robert E. Sherwood and Joan Harrison conform strictly to the book's narrative. The main peculiarity of both the novel and the film is that the young woman who is the story's central character has no name. She was reportedly referred to simply as "I" (i.e., the narrator) in the film's shooting script. Rebecca was a modern-day ghost story in which the ghost is not a supernatural specter, but instead is psychological in nature.

I posit that the term 'psychological horror' is misleading and an inadequate label to represent a sector of the horror genre which grapples with complex trauma narratives and the impact of trauma on individuals' everyday lived experiences. I do not accept "it is all in their head" as an explanation for supernatural elements in horror films. Explaining away spooky phenomena as individual and psychological puts into question the victim's sanity and mental health, and it denies a pattern of phenomena and what that pattern reflects in society. In haunted house films, so-called psychological thrillers, characters are blamed for their spiritual circumstances.

The common attribution of haunting trauma narratives to the psychological realm is equivalent to blaming the victim for their domestic trauma and its impact on their life. One can control their situation to a certain extent, but not their haunting ordeals. One controls the way in which they view the events around them, but they do not control those events. In haunted house narratives, the haunted aspect of the house causes those events. The haunting, however, is not necessarily caused by a spirit or supernatural being. In *Rebecca* (1940), it is the memory of a woman named Rebecca which haunts the halls of that house. Her lingering presence puts pressure on the narrator's marriage, bringing into question the position she occupies as the

second wife. Her replacement of a woman whose spirit remains speaks to the Female Gothic as she occupies an unusual marriage space.

Regardless of source, someone can become a victim in their home by having their authentic, lived experience explained away with rationality or dismissed without consideration. I demonstrate this point with the following discussion of *Gaslight* (1940), a psychological thriller adapted from a novel.

## 4.2 Domestic Abuse by Gaslight

In her article on women's experience of domestic violence, Goldsack (1999) outlines the importance of one being on their own in order to feel "at home;" the protection from public view offers a safe place for the family to retreat, but not necessarily a safe place for a housewife to get away from danger. Safe at home one can always relax—right? Along with the advantages of privacy, Goldsack draws attention to the accompanying isolation, especially when confined to the home behind heavy iron locks and thick panes of glass. For a victim of domestic abuse, the home can be better represented as a cage than a respite from work life. Goldsack (1999) summons the image of a cage to illustrate how a victim of violence perceives the home, a motif I see frequently in haunted house films, particularly when focusing on a slightly older heroine.

In the same year *Rebecca* was turned into a film, so too was *Gaslight*. Akin to *Rebecca*, *Gaslight* (1940) tells the story of a non-supernaturally haunted house. However, rather than the ghost being a figment of the characters' collective imagination, *Gaslight*'s ghost is created by the heroine's husband. The husband intentionally undermines his wife's sanity, making her believe herself insane through subtle manipulations. *Gaslight* (1940) brings to the foreground the layering constraints put on women's lives throughout colonial history by means of their body, their house, and their existential purpose as homemaker.

To high society in London, they make a queer couple. He is mysterious, and she is rumoured to do strange things. Viewers are soon made voyeurs into the homelife of Paul and Bella Mallen. What seems queer from outside the apartment is revealed as controlling and degrading behind closed doors. Without casting her a glance, Paul controls every movement Bella makes; he stops her as she goes to call on the muffin man, instructing her to call for the maid instead. “Ring for Nancy, Bella,” he drawls, reclined in his armchair. Bella obeys, remaining in the house, in the parlor, in the shadow of her husband’s dominating presence.

Nancy, one of the household’s two servants, promptly arrives with tea. Paul riddles off instructions for her to retrieve, warm, and serve the muffins. Paul effectively forces Bella to sit and watch while a servant is ordered to do what she *wanted* to do but was forbidden from doing. Paul condescends a look at Bella. She sits on the settee, submitting to his gaze. Paul makes one further request of the maid, waylaying her from Bella’s stolen errand. “Light the gas, Nancy,” he says, moving toward the mantle piece, closing the distance between himself and Nancy. “You’re looking very impudent and pretty tonight, Nancy,” he flirts.

*Figure 14* - The frame is crowned by an antique gas lamp as Nancy strikes a match. Paul watches her intently, purposefully. Nancy goes to ignite the gas lamps as Paul flirts with her.

Nancy lights the first lamp, a soft gasp of air as the flame swallows a gulp. While in the room, Nancy ignores Bella entirely, as does Paul. Nancy is staff; *she* is supposed to be ignored.

Paul flirts once more, then dismisses Nancy. She closes the door on her exit. A moment passes, Bella's eyes alight with a torrent of emotion. Her gaze flicks to Paul. He has degraded her, humiliated her in front of a servant. Paul proceeds to gaslight her, "Oh, Bella, I was only trifling with her." There is a hiss in his words, a smug pleasure he takes in uttering them.

"So humiliating for me. That girl laughs at me enough as it is."

"Oh, nonsense, Bella. You know perfectly well how you imagine things." Paul provokes, explaining away her behaviour and reinforcing her dependence on him for grounding.

She is taken aback by his words. First, he dismisses her feelings of humiliation which he intentionally provoked, and then he turns the conversation back onto Bella's flaws. "Don't say that," she says defensively. "I have been better the last two weeks, haven't I?"

"What do you mean?" He makes a face of concern, reinforcing Bella's self-doubt.

"You know very well what I mean. I... I've been trying so hard. And I have been better because you've been kind to me." A smug smile comes to Paul's lips. He is obviously pleased by Bella's reaction, pleased by the attribution of her wellness to his clemency. She is a problem wife, and he is a loving husband, despite her many apparent faults. She paints him as generous and kind, a magnanimous man for enduring marriage to a deviant. She stands to meet him. "I'll be perfectly all right if only you'll be patient and gentle with me."

"Of course, my dear, of course," he purrs. He touches her cheek with two fingers and pecks a kiss on her lips. She reaches up, draping her arms over his shoulders, and engages another, deeper kiss. He embraces her and turns them in a circle. For the first time, Paul wears a big smile, showing his teeth.

*Figure 15* –Paul smiles at his bride, holding Bella in a romantic embrace. His expression recalls that of a predator stalking its prey, baring its fangs at the thrill of the hunt. His eyes are fixed on her, leering, plotting.

“Shall I stay in this evening,” he muses.

“Would you?” she murmurs. She asks, but it is not a question, it is a pleading surrender. She is enchanted by Paul once more, forgiven for her embarrassment and her shame. Behind closed doors, he is kind to her, he is sweet on her. Yet, once Nancy closed the couple into the actual privacy of their parlor, Paul’s smile lit up as the gas lamp did. As soon as Paul got Bella alone, his performance as her doting husband began. “Mhm,” he sounds, still smiling.

Bella chatters earnestly about the evening plans, and Paul joins in, enthused to play her music. He sits at the piano, keying a jaunty tune to match the gaining excitement as Bella’s mood becomes joyful. She is smiling and comes to stand at his shoulder. “We’ll have an evening just like we used to.” She sounds wistful, tired.

*Figure 16* - Paul sits at the piano and plays. Bella stands behind him, her hands on his shoulders as she watches him play.

They are the picture of intimacy, marital bliss, and domestic happiness. For the moment, Bella enjoys the company of Paul at his most charming and winsome. She dances, elated by his upswing in mood, and personality. Her joy, however, does not last long.

Done with his strategic husbandly act, Paul drops his facade. As quickly as the flame of love and blind devotion flares up, Paul snuffs the fire of Bella's hope, freezing her in terror. Paul builds dramatic tension from nowhere by reacting, emoting at something behind Bella—something that has been behind her this whole time. What could he see that she could not? Paul creates space for Bella's anxiety to fill.

Paul lashes out, admonishing Bella before she has a chance to turn and look. Suspicion begins to creep over her. Bella connects the dots between Paul's behaviour and events of a fortnight past. Her eyes go wide, suddenly afraid to turn and see her suspicions, and fears, confirmed. To Bella's despair, like twice before, a picture is missing from the wall.

*Figure 17* - A darkened patch of wallpaper highlights a picture frame's absence. It is flanked by ivory sentinels and rich drapery, delineating the missing picture as one of the room's focal pieces.

An argument ensues and Paul throws accusations at Bella. Moments ago he was singing happily, but now he berates his wife for stealing small objects in their home such as his pen. Bella is horrified and scrambles to placate Paul. But he has none of it, directing Bella to retrieve the picture from where she hid it. Having run through this scenario twice before, Bella heads to the place the picture was last found and emerges with it, Paul bellowing that her finding the picture is proof of her misdeeds. Caught off guard, unable to defend herself from his accusations, Bella is further framed as a kleptomaniac by Paul—the person who *actually* moved the picture.

He reinforces her deviance with circular logic, quickly escalating from Bella telling lies to her "losing control of herself" and her body. Thus, Paul steps up to the reigns, and sends Bella to her room as a punishment—as a parent would a child. She is isolated, sent away to be alone. Paul effectively restricts Bella's movement in the social world by virtue of their marriage contract, and he prisons her in her own home, even blocking her from access to an entire level of the townhouse. And now, Paul deigns to control Bella and her body, ordering her into semi-voluntary isolation. Paul asserts Foucauldian control over ever aspect of Bella's life and body. For some time, Paul has manipulated Bella, tarnishing her self-confidence and her reputation. The moment she enters London, it seems people are aware of her queer behaviour and eccentricities. This reputation serves to further isolate Bella from society, others staying away for fear of the stigma contaminating or negatively affecting their own reputation and status.

The example of gaslighting outlined above is only the first instance of emotional abuse and manipulation featured in *Gaslight* (1940). Caged in her room and the confines of her imagination, Bella is afforded no freedom. She cannot leave the apartment without Paul and walls prevent her from roaming the full expanse of her supposed home. Paul's manipulations escalate as the plot progresses, pulling the charade further into the public's view with each

manipulation. Utilizing the embarrassment brought on and amplified by exhibitionism, Paul heightens the precarity of Bella's sanity with the shame brought on by public ridicule.

In a particularly distressing scene, Paul accuses Bella of stealing his watch while at the theatre. Seated quietly, Paul provokes an emotional reaction from Bella, giving him reason to escort her back home. This episode both reinforces Bella's failing sensibilities to society and encourages Bella to isolate herself for fear of further embarrassment to her and her husband. *Gaslight* (1940) is horrifying because it is possible, probable, and, most unfortunately, relatable. This story informs our understanding of the term "gaslighting" as a particular form of emotional abuse. By manipulating identifiable items of the domicile, Paul turns Bella's home into a haunted house and uses it to isolate, frighten, and imprison her.

Bella's situation contrasts the discreditable veneer of a normal domestic household in two ways. First, Bella's secrets are maliciously dragged outdoors by Paul to be put on display for the public to witness. Second, Bella fulfills an extremely narrow definition of housewife. The wife's purpose is to make house into home, akin to the house staff's purpose of keeping the house and home orderly. Bella's interactions with Nancy provoke dissonance as their positions seem reversed: as the mistress of the house Bella has no power. But Nancy, as a servant, is paid to do the homemaking tasks Bella desires, and she is free to leave the apartment to live her life. As the mistress of the house, Bella has the power to order Nancy to perform tasks, but as a servant Nancy has the power to leave the house. However, both women are subject to Paul's whims and in that way are more equal than they appear.

Citing evidence from police and statistics agencies, along with feminist and localized research, Goldsack (1999) shows that the home is often a place of persisting violence and abuse for women. For men, the home is a safe place from the threat of violence in public spaces. However, for women "violence experienced in the home is more dangerous than public violence (Goldsack, 1999, p. 123). Indeed, women face greater threat of violence from men they know

than from strangers on the street; “they are more likely to be raped, assaulted, and even killed within [the home] than any other place” (Goldsack, 1999, p. 123). Counter to its function, homes are often unsafe for women because of the potential proximity to would-be abusers. Goldsack (1999) makes mention of domestic abuse against men, but sees women vastly overrepresented as victims, and that “the abuse of men by women is not comparable in prevalence or severity to the abuse of women by men” (p. 123).

Goldsack’s discussion continues to explore the experiences of victims, and she finds the topic of shame common in her research. Those feelings of shame compound when the abusing partner attempts to conceal the abuse. This concealment of violence, Goldsack (1999) posits, indicates that abusers develop a pre-meditated technique and method for abuse. “As one woman told us, ‘He used to do it where people couldn’t see—the tops of your legs, the tops of your arms, inside your mouth by squeezing your jaw and pounding your head until you just can’t think at all’” (Goldsack, 1999, p. 124). The way Goldsack describes abuse hidden behind the closed doors of the home mirrors not only Bella’s experience in *Gaslight* (1940), but also a common theme in haunted house films: appearances can be deceiving.

Within the privacy of one’s own home, people can do as they wish without fear of outside intervention. This idea works in favour of abusers: “Many women feared that their disclosure of the intimidation and violence they were suffering would result in public humiliation” (Goldsack, 1999, p. 124). And even when women do share their stories of abuse, friends, family, and official services display “a reluctance to intervene” (Goldsack, 1999, p. 124). In fact, abuse is likely to be ignored even when seen either in a public space, or by the public through a window or glass door: “outsiders chose not to get involved, even if they witnessed violence against women” (Goldsack, 1999, p. 124-5). Much akin to people’s reluctance to acknowledge supernatural phenomena as real, people are reluctant to accept that

abusers are as cruel and violent as they truly are. Thus, it is easier to ignore the abuse and not get involved rather than get involved and jeopardize their ontological security about the home.

The home is a place often associated as the domain of the women. However, for women who are abused by the men in their lives, the home is a place where they have little, if any, control. The power to define their domestic situation is taken from women by abusers, and they are seemingly defenseless because the home is supposed to be a safe place for vulnerability. Should these women bring attention to the violence they suffer behind closed doors, they are shamed and blamed for their situation. In a culture of victim blaming, "for women, the experience of domestic violence brought a sense of shame, the men who committed this abuse typically maintained public respectability. Victims found this extremely frustrating, for it demonstrated that other people were either not taking the issues seriously, or worse, did not believe them at all" (Goldsack, 1999, p. 125).

## 4.3 Caged into Motherhood

The film *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) centres around the marriage of Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse. At the onset of the film, the couple views an apartment at the Bramford, a large apartment complex. Before moving into their new apartment, they learn of the Bramford's bloody history: it was home to a known witch, two sisters that committed infanticide and cannibalism, and violence on the property. The legacy of the past tenants, as Rosemary comes to learn, haunts the Bramford to the present day. In this section, I highlight elements of the Female Gothic in Rosemary's story and how her experiences position her as a Haunted Heroine.

At first, Rosemary's life seems perfect: she is married to a handsome actor, they move into a large and beautiful apartment, and the next-door neighbours are kind and welcoming. However, akin to Paul's smile in *Gaslight* (1940), the neighbours' kindness hides sinister motivations. Unbeknownst to Rosemary, Guy becomes involved with the neighbours'

community in order to advance his career in acting. They do this through the practice of witchcraft. Indeed, the son of the witch who once lived in the Bramford is Rosemary's neighbour, and a coven has formed around him in the community.

In exchange for the boost to his career, Guy owes the coven a debt. He pays his debt through Rosemary by manipulating her, isolating her, gaslighting her, and offering her as a sacrifice. In her new apartment Rosemary should find privacy, community, and domestic bliss. Instead, she finds herself in domestic horror. Rosemary's experience is represented in Goldsack's (1999) depiction of women, domestic abuse, and how that violence affects one's understanding of home. "For women in the home, privacy can mean confinement, captivity, and isolation. In such circumstances the home is… a cage" (Goldsack, 1999, p. 121). The door to Rosemary's cage begins to close when she becomes pregnant.

On a romantic evening in, Rosemary and Guy are interrupted by their nosy neighbour at the door. The neighbour has made and delivered them chocolate mousse for dessert. Rosemary complains of hers tasting chalky, but Guy insists she eat the whole dessert. In her first act of defiance, Rosemary shovels the mousse into her napkin and pretends that she ate the dessert to appease Guy. At this point, Rosemary is unaware of the plot involving her and refuses the dessert for three reasons: it tastes strange, she does not like it, and she dislikes her neighbours interfering with her homelife.

It turns out that Rosemary was correct to be wary of the chocolate dessert as it was drugged. Having eaten some of the dessert, Rosemary falls unconscious and has to be carried to bed by Guy. That evening she had planned to make a baby with Guy but instead is raped in the basement of the Bramford by a beast, presumably summoned by the coven. Partially conscious, Rosemary recognizes that she is not dreaming the rape. However, when morning comes Rosemary dismisses her feelings and opts to believe she had a nightmare: "I dreamed someone was raping me, someone inhuman." Guy reinforces her assumption by taking the

blame for claw marks on Rosemary's back, saying that he had sex with her while she was unconscious.

Through the resulting pregnancy, Rosemary loses autonomous control over her body and her life. After seeing one doctor, she is strong-armed into seeing a physician recommended by the neighbours. Rosemary knows her body best, but this doctor insists otherwise; he forbids Rosemary from reading up on her pregnancy and from consulting friends, he is to be the expert on her body and only point of reference. Further, Rosemary is not allowed to choose what goes into her body and is prescribed a homemade vitamin drink made by her neighbour and delivered daily. Her pregnancy is painful and draining. Rosemary's loss of control over her body manifests visibly as her once-healthy body grows skeletal, her bones becoming an ornate cage. Rosemary is trapped in her body and soon becomes trapped in her home as she becomes sickly and stops leaving the apartment. Even when she does leave, she is quickly found by her neighbour and returned home.

Rosemary becomes a shell of her former self, the life growing inside her stealing her energy and sapping her health. As the pregnancy progresses, her marriage deteriorates. Guy becomes neglectful in favour of his career and cannot bring himself to look at Rosemary. No longer does he see her as his wife, but he sees her as the vessel for a monstrous child. Despite the pain, her ill state, and her unhappy home, Rosemary persists in living her life. She decides to throw a party for the friends she has not seen since moving into the Bramford. Rosemary fights off her isolation and the surveillance of her neighbours, barring them from attending.

At the party Rosemary asserts her domain over her body and goes against the instructions of her doctor. She consults with her friends about her pregnancy and the pain it has brought, deciding that she should get a second opinion. With the support of her friends, Rosemary begins to trust her instincts about the pregnancy and grows distrustful of her doctor and neighbours. Rosemary stops drinking the vitamin drinks and wants control over what is to

go in her body. Her resistance does not last long, however, when the pain brought by the baby suddenly stops. No longer in constant pain, Rosemary is lulled back into the routine of care by her neighbours.

That routine is disrupted when Rosemary's old friend dies, leaving her a book about witchcraft. In the book, Rosemary finds a photograph and name that link her neighbour to the witch who used to live in the Bramford. She brings up her concerns to Guy, who dismisses her, and to her doctor, who empathizes and feigns that he will get the neighbours out of town. The next day, Guy throws out the book on witchcraft, propelling Rosemary into a series of actions: she throws out a good luck charm given to her by the neighbours, purchases more books on witchcraft, and goes to see her original doctor.

Rosemary figures out that there is a plot against her, that her neighbours, doctor, and husband are colluding against her and her baby. Why, though, she knows not. Her behaviour follows accordingly: she feels unsafe and stops trusting people, becoming suspicious of strangers and fears being outside alone. Throughout her ordeal Rosemary is never concerned with herself, she is concerned only for her baby. "One thing is for sure, they have a coven and they want my baby." Her world revolves around her pregnancy and her status as a mother.

At her original doctor, Rosemary's trust is betrayed one final time. She shares her story and worries with the doctor, detailing how she has been lied to and manipulated. She rests, awaiting a hospital bed and finally feels safe. "Monsters. Monsters. Unspeakable. Unspeakable," Rosemary murmurs to herself. Rosemary is not haunted by ghosts; she is hunted by the monsters in her life. Soon arrive her lying doctor and traitorous husband to take her back home. They force her into silence by threatening to take her to a mental hospital. After all, she is a pregnant woman; it is easy to call her emotional, hysterical, and crazy. Rosemary is discredited by being in the very role she is expected to fulfill.

Taken home and forcibly sedated, Rosemary goes into labour. She is weak and bedridden, and told that her baby died in birth. She is gaslit, told she has the "prepartum crazies," sedated, and medicated. Rosemary knows she is being lied to by the people in her life, and although she is weak she does not give up on her baby. Discovering a passage in her closet leading into the neighbouring apartment, Rosemary arms herself and enters to find her stolen child.

*Figure 18* - Rosemary in her nightgown and housecoat, armed with a kitchen knife, silently stalks the halls of her apartment floor.

Rosemary finds her baby with the coven and it comes to light that the child is Satan's spawn. What Rosemary thought was her and Guy's child turns out to be a monster. Horrified, Rosemary still seeks to care for the child and rocks him in his cradle as the coven gathers around her in awe. Rosemary is the Female Gothic, at odds with her marriage and her position as a mother. Is she really a mother to this monster? Can she raise the product of deception, rape, and witchcraft? Rosemary's motherhood parallels the experience of women who are impregnated by rape and in abusive households, seeing the monstrosity of the father manifest in their child.

Rosemary's story does not end happily ever after. Rosemary, in the end, is a Haunted Heroine trapped in a Haunted House. *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) tells Rosemary's journey of

isolation, violation (the ritualistic rape of Rosemary by Satan, her husband aiding and abetting the coven), and consumption (the life-draining effect of the pregnancy on Rosemary's state of health) through a Haunted House narrative. Her story is that of the 1960s housewife; enforced conformity, social policing by nosy neighbours, submitting to the will of her husband, and serving as a vessel for life to come. Her status as a Haunted Heroine is owing to how she fights for control over her body in what seems a hopeless situation wherein she is unwillingly complicit in creating Satan's spawn.

Rosemary's Haunted House narrative is all too realistic in that it has no satisfactory resolution. We are left with no picture of happiness possible in Rosemary's foreseeable future. *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) ends on a haunting note: our Haunted Heroine is held captive, secreted away by a coven of witches as a means of reproducing evil in the most biblical sense. Surrounded by people, yet isolated from every aspect of her life, Rosemary is forgotten after bearing the product of rape, caged within the walls of the Branford forevermore. Stuck in her marriage to Guy, Rosemary is blatantly treated as property between him and the coven, livestock to offer up in satanic rituals. Aside from satanic covens of witches, Rosemary's story reflects a perverse version of the idea that it takes a village to raise a child. In this case, it takes a coven to cage an expectant mother.

## 4.4 Isolated Home Invasion

In this section, I look to a twist on the Haunted House narrative. Like many Haunted House stories, *Hush* (2016) takes place in a house isolated from society. The house, however, is not haunted at the onset of the film. The house becomes a Haunted House through the events of the film as two people are murdered on the property and the homeowner fights off a violent home invasion. By describing Maddie's experience of domestic horror, I highlight her as a victim of violence inside the safety of her home.

*Hush* (2016) tells the story of an author, Maddie Young, who prefers to live alone and isolated from civilization. She is an emblematic example of a Haunted Heroine as she survives violence in her home, fighting back in innovative ways. Unlike the women discussed earlier in this chapter, Maddie's home is her sanctuary, and she lives alone. She does not suffer abuse at the hands of a husband. Instead, the danger comes from outside her home and her life. Maddie is not trapped inside her home; she is trapped with her attacker in isolation.

She did not isolate herself from the world by choice, it happened to her when she was 13-years-old and lost her hearing and voice. On the back of Maddie's novel, the writer's bio reads:

> Diagnosed with Bacterial Meningitis at age 13, she suffered hearing loss and temporary vocal paralysis. Complications in surgery later that year made her speech and hearing loss permanent. Maddie found herself totally isolated in a silent world. She turned to writing for her new form of communication. Maddie quickly gained attention in school for her unique depth as a young writer. She won a scholarship to Scherschel University in New York City for Creative Writing and enrolled. Maddie left the city finding it too difficult to adapt but continued writing. Her first book "Midnight Mass" has gone on to receive international critical acclaim.

We learn this information through the rest of the film and the plot draws inspiration from her character's background story. Themes in her author biography are similar to those in the film, and to things Maddie later articulates. Of course, the bio hardly reflects the person that Maddie is; it is written to sell her along with her book, so she is made into a sympathetic hero for marketing purposes.

Maddie Young is an excellent example of a Haunted Heroine outside of a North American Haunted House. Her house is not the site of a gruesome murder (that we know of), it

is not possessed by a spirit, nor has it been built on some sacred soil. Her house is simply the house that she lives in alone in the woods with her cat, Bitch. Maddie never wants to move back to the city, preferring rural seclusion and quiet.

"It's not good for anyone to be alone, Squish," her friend says over a video call as the Man creeps silently in the background, mere steps from Maddie. The Man has already killed one person on Maddie's property, yet he waits with Maddie. From his behaviour and attempts to taunt Maddie or get her attention, it is clear that she is his next victim. Puzzled as to why she took no notice of her friend's murder against the sliding glass door to the kitchen, the Man investigates. He breaks into Maddie's home as she sits down to do work, being so brazen as to walk right up behind her. Why does he not kill her after breaking in? Maddie is the prime victim: she is clueless to his presence and is otherwise occupied, she would neither hear nor see his attack coming.

As the video call began, the Man ducked away from the field of view. He listens in to the call, oblivious to Maddie's half of the conversation, but able to hear her friend's vocalized responses. The friend, Max, is concerned for Maddie since her last significant relationship ended. "Isolating yourself the way you do—" Max begins but is cut off by Maddie.

"Isolation happened to me. I didn't pick it." Maddie, obviously, signs at her friend. Maddie, content to live alone in the woods, has a different understanding of isolation from Max, and likely most folks. Yes, Maddie sees herself as isolated, but it is not because of her geographical isolation from civilization. Her experience of isolation is more-so existential.

Max points out movement in the background, but any concern is quickly dismissed by Maddie as Bitch escaped earlier. Their call ends and Maddie scouts the house for her cat, shaking Bitch's food bowl as a way to beckon her. Unable to locate Bitch, Maddie cracks the backdoor open so the cat can get in, then dons a jacket and returns to work at her computer. Before she has the chance to write, a message arrives from her phone. Followed by another.

And another. And another… Pictures of Maddie, stalked through her house, arrive one after another. Then come photos of Maddie as she sits now. The tension is palpable as she pieces together the situation. The last pictures come from the darkness beyond the open back door. Maddie's eyes widen, her gaze going toward the door.

*Figure 19* - Realization dawns on Maddie as she discovers someone has followed her through her house.

This is the moment when I fell in love with Maddie and *Hush* (2016). Played by Kate Siegal, Maddie is a captivating performance from the moment you meet her to when you say farewell on the front porch.

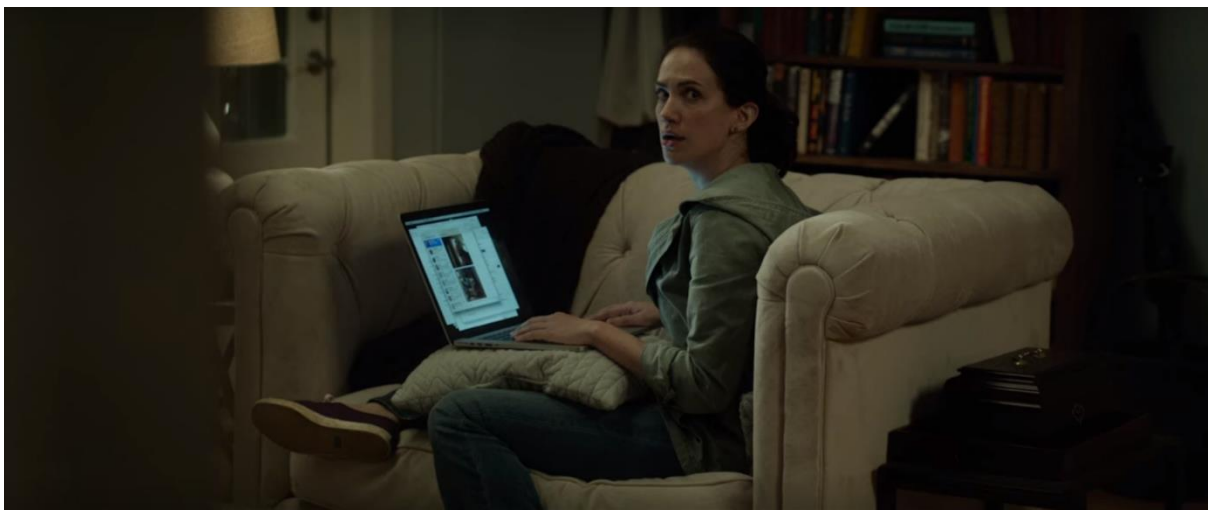

*Figure 20* - We see Maddie from her stalker's perspective, shock and fear paint her expression.

The shot above is chilling: we are shown the Man's view of Maddie through the door as she turns to face her stalker. Shots like this allow the viewer to step into the shoes of the voyeur

outside a beautiful young woman's home. Isolated but no longer alone, Maddie comes face-to-face with her stalker and would-be killer as she closes and locks the door. Their eyes meet for a moment before he turns to find another way in.

*Figure 21* - Maddie comes face to face with her stalker, an unknown Man wearing a white mask and toque. He appears nondescript.

It was delightful to see the stage being set and then to wait for the tantalizing moment when the action would start and our Heroine would kick into high gear. Maddie subverts expectations and her story is that of a Haunted Heroine who continues surviving. With nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and unable to wait for help, Maddie ingeniously uses the environment to her advantage. She weaponizes ordinary household items, including a flashlight, hammer, fire alarm, and corkscrew. She is roped into a strange Man's game at random and proceeds to fight for her life. Maddie, before much else, writes a short note to her loved ones should she fail, including a description of the Man.

Maddie endures a full day of violence in a domestic setting at the hands of a stranger who randomly selected her house to reign death upon. Although not a part of her household, this stranger invades Maddie's house, and he assaults her in her home. Although her research pertains to intimate domestic violence committed against women, Goldsack's (1999) analysis adds depth to the symbolism in *Hush* (2016). Maddie, choosing to live alone, should be safe

from domestic violence. However, her experience reflects that of abused women (Goldsack, 2016, p. 126):

> The home is the most common site of assault, its very fixtures, fabrics and furnishings the desired items of consumption which in reality are the most frequent weapons utilised in the violence (Walker and McNicol 1994). This research reports that kitchen knives, crockery, glasses, household and garden tools as well as items of furniture are among those used.

Maddie's quiet home in the forest becomes the site of her attempted murder. That which is meant to keep her safe within her house—her fire alarm—becomes an audiovisual weapon. The tool meant to aid in her libation—a corkscrew—becomes something sharp with which to stab her attacker. The ordinary household items in Maddie's home must become tools of her survival, akin to how a chef's knife turns from kitchen tool into deadly weapon when a housewife defends herself against abuse.

Abiding by the rules of the Haunted House, households affected by violence and abuse do not function according to expected norms. When violence violates the home, one should expect further norm violation; chaos has a way of spreading exponentially until it takes over normal order. Over the course of an evening, Maddie's home transforms into a House of Doom as her household norms go out the window. The violation of her home by a stranger upsets the safety of her house. Going forward, Maddie will have to cope with the fact that her house will not keep her safe; this experience of violence will haunt Maddie going forward and haunt her property with memories.

## 4.5 Conclusion

In North American horror there are few existing archetypes for feminine characters. Popular to gory slasher flicks is the Final Girl, a predominantly non-sexual or asexual character.

She is well-studied and established in horror scholarship (Calafell, 2015; Clover, 2015; Means Coleman, 2011; Paszkiewicz & Rusnak, 2020). The Final Girl is overwhelmingly white, however, excluding women of colour from the archetypal horror-surviving heroine (Means Coleman, 2011). To resolve this lack, Means Coleman (2011) identifies an equally strong counterpart to the white, asexual Final Girl. In her exploration of race and horror, Means Coleman (2011) forges a new categorization for black women who fight to survive horror films. Calling her the Enduring Woman, Means Coleman (2011) introduces the black horror heroine who owns her sexuality and lives under near-constant threat of danger. Means Coleman (2011) describes the experience of the strong black femmes of horror (p. 132):

> With no real way to defeat evil (systems of inequality) that surrounds them, Black women in horror films could be described as resilient "Enduring Women." They are soldiers in ongoing battles of discrimination, in which a total victory is elusive. The Black woman's triumphant walk into the sunset promises to take her, not toward a life of peace, but back into the midst of rogue police, sexist men, and "the Man" who is exploiting her Black community.

Unlike Final Girls, Enduring Women are poised by the horror industry as antagonists rather than protagonists: black heroines' transgressive sexuality is labelled as monstrous because it transgresses conservative white norms around sexuality (Calafell, 2015; Means Coleman, 2011; Sharrett, 1999). The antithesis to white heterosexual cult of womanhood, Enduring Women suffer the consequences of having their sexual expression moralized, hypersexualized, and made monstrous (Means Coleman, 2011). Horror exploits black feminine bodies[16], but there remains hope for the introduction of innovative Enduring Women; Jordan Peele's (writer of *Get Out*, 2017) horror, although beyond the scope of this thesis, is leaps and bounds ahead of mainstream horror trends in his use of symbolism to deepen the film's sociopolitical impact.

[16] For discussion of black exploitation (blaxploitation) in film and entertainment, see Means Coleman (2011).

In this chapter I introduce the Haunted Heroine, the persevering feminine figure featured in Haunted House narratives who survives horror set inside her home. The fact that she survives reflects qualities similar to the Enduring Woman. While the Enduring Woman is defined by her race, the Haunted Heroine is defined by the setting in which she is victimized. I suggest Means Coleman's Enduring Woman could also be a Haunted Heroine as she fits within my simple criteria: the Haunted Heroine is open to change, adapts, and survives her experience with domestic horror. In fact, the Enduring Woman inspires my exploration into a non-moralized feminine gothic survivor.

Goldsack (1999) shows that the image of the ideal home and crime prevention policies serve to "reinforce the insulation of the private sphere of the home in a way which endangers the lives of its occupants" (p. 131). Indeed, locking the front door may keep strangers from entering one's house, but it also prevents one's easy escape from the dangers lurking within. "The realities of domestic violence contradict the ideals of home and family. Furthermore, they do not sit easily with the political and social views on crime and the dangers to personal safety" (Goldsack, 1999, p. 126). Is it appropriate to call a house "home" in the case of domestic abuse? The Haunted House is a manifest personification of abuse and trauma done to house, the home, the household, and the individual. The memories and impacts of domestic abuse and compounding experiences of domestic abuse can haunt one's house and home for years, decades, generations, or even centuries. The spectres of trauma remain long after abuse ceases.

# Chapter 5: The Ending and Conclusion

I write this thesis as a love letter to Wendy who fought for her life and the life of her son, Danny, to make *The Shining* (1980) a horrifying masterpiece. Meehan (2020) discusses *The Shining*, focusing first on the opening scene to Jack's masculine narrative of isolation:

> The story centers around failed writer and recovering alcoholic Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson), who accepts a job as the winter caretaker of the Overlook Hotel in an isolated location high in the Rockies. Manager Stuart Ullman (Barry Nelson) explains that the Overlook is snowed in for weeks at a time during the winter months, and that a previous caretaker named Grady went crazy from cabin fever and murdered his family in the hotel. Despite any misgivings, Jack accepts the job, hoping that the severe isolation of his surroundings will allow him to complete a novel he is writing. (p. 105)

As scholarly literature stands, Jack's journey has no shortage of analysis. Wendy's, however, is overlooked. I contribute the counterpart to Jack's narrative: Wendy's feminine narrative of isolation and her fight for survival in the Overlook Hotel.

Attending to Wendy's story, I summarize *The Shining* (1980) different from above: Jack is a man with a temper who tries to stay sober and gets hired for a seasonal position as caretaker for a hotel. Along with his wife, Wendy, and his son, Danny, Jack lives in the Overlook Hotel through the tempestuous winter season. Jack is employed to take care of the Overlook, but as one might expect, the maintenance of domestic matters falls into the all-too-capable hands of Wendy. She cares for Danny and the Overlook by default; Jack is busy writing his novel and can't be disturbed. For if he is… bad things happen. What will Wendy do when she is armed and afraid? Will everything and everyone she cares for deceive her?

Remember to lock the door, Wendy. Though, in the Home, there are some dangers from which one cannot be protected (Goldsack, 1999).

## 5.1 Defeating the Haunted House

I defer to the words of a horror expert, Skull, to describe how best to defeat and kill a Haunted House. One of the few adults in *Monster House* (2006) to take supernatural phenomena seriously, Skull is the film's horror expert and source of information. He is also currently in the middle of beating a 2D platformer boss level. "What? I'm busy playing a video game without even looking at the screen. WHAT?" he exclaims.

The heroes of *Monster* House (2006) beseech Skull for advice on how to deal with the Haunted House across the street. Hearing the kids out, Skull reveals lore to the trio: "... Possessed house, you say? Hmm. In my travels to the video store and comic book conventions, I have seen many strange and wondrous things. And I've heard tell of man-made structures becoming possessed by a human soul so that the spirit becomes merged with wood and brick, creating a rare form of monster known as Domus Mactabilis-ssss-sss," he hisses.


*Figure 22* – The haunted house featured in *Monster House* (2006) is old, worn, and surrounded by skeletal trees.

After a pause, he adds, "Have fun getting killed." Skull knows the stakes are high when dealing with a Haunted House, no doubt having watched some of the films mentioned in this

thesis. No longer are haunted houses harmless and never known to hurt people, as they were in *The Haunting* (1963); by 2006 the Haunted House is a bloodthirsty monster who steals the souls of its victims and damns them to a fate worse than death: consumption and incorporation.

The children push Skull for further help, seeking how to kill the house. He shares that the only way to kill the house is to strike at the "source of life, the heart." Skull is correct in his advice; the most common way to kill a North American Haunted House is to extinguish its flame of life by delivering a fatal strike to the heart of the house. However, Skull is single-minded in his approach to Haunted Houses, mistakenly identifying that they must be destroyed. Skull plays a violent videogame on autopilot while explaining everything the kids need to know about Haunted Houses in order to fight, navigate, and to ultimately defeat the Haunted House across the street.

Skull's horror knowledge aligns with the haunting logistics of the *Monster House* (2006) universe. Skull's descriptions confirm certain exaggerations the boys imagine, and inspires the creation of further rules for the House to play by. The agentic, monstrous Haunted House of *Monster House* (2006) might be framed as a product of the children's collective imagination. It is brought to life through their playing pretend with vivid imaginations stoked by Halloween festivities and age-old stories of trick-or-treat sabotage. Further, over-imaginative adults under certain influences work to support the kids' construction of reality, and thus their understanding of the situation regarding Mr. Nebbercracker's so-called Haunted House.

According to Bailey's (1999) haunted house formula, *Monster House* (2006), ends in a traditional sense by obliterating the Haunted House with explosives. Bailey (1999) offers two archetypal defeats for the North American Haunted House: "the escape of the family and the destruction of the house **or** the escape of the family and the continued existence of the house… establish[ing] the recurring nature of evil"[17] (p. 56). *Monster House* (2006) serves as example

[17] Emphasis on "or" in original.

of the former, and *The Amityville Horror* (1979 and 2005) the latter. The Lutz family, in both iterations of *The Amityville Horror*, abandon their worldly belongings and their newly purchased water-front property as they flee for their lives. The house, High Hopes, is doomed to become quite the Haunted House; it is left with layers of legacy living in its shadows, lying in wait for a new family of victims to approach. Who next will be enchanted by the real estate deal of a lifetime, one almost too good to be true?

## 5.2 Opening the Door

Open doors allow us into the Haunted House, and open doors allow our exit. The Haunted House narrative represents a journey of self-introspection wherein one revisits their domestic histories. Golovátina-Mora (2018) speaks to this experience in her inquiry of haunted houses and their relationship to nostalgia, beautifully illustrating the deep personal exploration one has into their Self when entering haunted houses (p. 142):

> Nostalgia continues to be overlooked by the formal argument based on positivist rational thought as a negative or at least a useless activity. Yet, as any product of human mind nostalgia is relative. Its outcomes depend a lot on the perspective one takes and on the application. It may create a rosy mist that will not allow one to see one's present problems anymore but not necessarily to disappear in sweet oblivion, it may also mean to focus on what is good and take it as a motivation to explore more of one's life and relations. Like that nostalgia is a memory mechanism that provides more options for one's decision making and so provides conditions for critical revision of one's experience both shared and individual.
>
> Nostalgia helps to create not a sense but the actual continuity in space, time and relations and bring together forgotten pieces of one's past in order to

> make more sense of one's present existence and, so, give hope for the future. In other words, nostalgia is an irreplaceable mechanism of securing fulfilment of all levels of needs in Maslow's hierarchy to be able to grow into a happy (self-actualised) person. The key to make it work is in what we do with nostalgia. Opening the door to the haunted house might do some good after all.

I relate Golovátina-Mora's (2018) metaphor of opening the haunted house's door to how the Haunted House is a traumatic site; it is a space, a place within which the Self houses its memories of traumatic experiences.

In the case of the North American Haunted House, doors are complicated. They open, they close. They lock, they unlock. They can also be opened and closed, locked and unlocked. Doors are selectively permeable barriers within and without the house. Horror doors continue to evolve from simply blocking people's paths, to closing in their face and locking to seal that person's fate, forevermore trapped behind closed doors. Doors remain a mystery to me, however. When entering a North American house, it is normal to shut the door behind oneself. When entering a North American *Haunted* House, it is normal to leave the front door hanging wide open. Why? Why do I find it so disturbing that they leave the door open?

Thus far, I have yet to find a satisfactory explanation for open doors and why they are so often left ajar. In almost every film I studied for this thesis, the front door is inevitably left open by a character, usually upon entering the Haunted House for the first time. Are they so struck in awe by the foyer that they forget about the doorway altogether? Has the barrier lost its power? Is the barrier between outside and inside no longer applicable as the House has become Haunted and thus akin to the natural environment? Do they leave it open to aid in a quick escape? Perhaps it is another vestige of the Haunted House's aristocratic history wherein one leaves the door closing to servants?

Regardless of the mysteries hidden behind the doors of the Haunted House, one thing is for certain: history is doomed to repeat itself on a haunted property. As the Haunted House brings form to the Self, those who reside within that house are doomed to repeat the local history of the grounds over and over again. Should they never learn from history's mistakes and continue their unchanging patterns of behaviour, the inhabitant will be forever trapped in the Haunted House's unique temporal and spatial zone. Preserved like the past, they become part of the haunting which froze their action with fear, terror, and unimaginable horrors.

## 5.3 Let the Haunted House Become Home

When a house is abandoned, left by its so-called owners and caretakers to become enveloped in the natural environment, it becomes the haunt of anything natural, including the supernatural. What should one do when crossing paths with a Haunted House? The answer is simple: let it be. No Haunted House will be identical to another, so each technique of approach and interaction will be and look different. The Haunted House is fully embraced by Mother Nature. Let it rest undisturbed and keep respectful distance unless invited to approach. Do not take violent action against the house and home—be it Haunted or not.

Community-hosted haunted houses, such as the spooky haunted house one sets up at Halloween time, prove that *anyone* can survive the Haunted House narrative journey. Local haunted house events are usually open to all ages, meaning both children and adults regularly survive and escape haunted houses. The Haunted House is, ultimately, not the terrible creature we imagine it to be, with malignant auras, bad from birth, tainted from the soil up. No, the Haunted House is labelled with the master status of "haunted" by the people who fear it to further its stigmatizing legend. Fear fuels hate and encourages violent response; North Americans fear the unknown and supernatural and so seek to defeat it, to overcome their fears with force and violence.

North American strategies to defeat the supernatural involve trapping it, entombing it, destroying it, killing it, or releasing it from unresolved suffering. Those, in turn, are the exact ways in which the Haunted House defeats humans, with an addition: the eternal embrace of assimilation and incorporation. The Haunted House seeks to embrace the humans which bypass its warning signals and continue forth to the threshold from which there is no return. That is, there is no return for those unwilling to change and adapt.

The Haunted Heroine survives her haunted house journey of isolation because she is willing to adapt and change, become a stronger version of herself who can face that which she fears most. Others can use her methodology to persevere. Golovátina-Mora (2016) advocates for us to face our fears openly, with honesty and empathy, and Means Coleman (2011) shows us the Enduring Woman does that, survives, and yet returns home to insecurity and systemic violence. If she can overcome the ordeal of isolation and the Haunted House narrative, then why cannot the most privileged of the characters in these films?

Simple: they are unwilling to change. Be it their ego, pride, embarrassment, anger, pettiness, addiction, love, hate, or what have you. Something prevents them from letting the Haunted House ordeal change them. And those who do not change will be trapped and entombed inside the Haunted House, becoming forever a part of the unchanging past. Only those who embrace change can overcome the encroaching void that is the isolation narrative played out in haunted house stories.

"Haunted" is a master status attached to the house by humanity. It exists only in our collective imagination and perception; therefore, we can renegotiate what it means for a space to be haunted by its past. Haunted does not have to be a stigmatizing status for a house, and it does not necessarily the remove the house's label as "home." With honesty and empathy, one can find home in a haunted house. Haunted Houses are humanity's creation, and the North American Haunted House is a distinctly white and colonial creature.

Much akin the Haunted House, I may appear monstrous to some because I am an open book telling my own history. We wear the stigmatizing symbols of trauma openly, outwardly as warning to ward off those who fear precarity. Content warnings of what one may discover within should they dare read into our histories. Environmental tells of experienced and incurred trauma warn away those with thin skin. To those with thick skin, hardened with scar tissue, our doors hang ajar as an invitation for the brave to enter. The Haunted House is no place for the soulless for it is a place full of spirits, life long forgotten yet impactful. Those who venture near, around, and into Haunted Houses know the impact they can have on one. The Haunted House will change one, be it for their better or worse. For better, one need embrace change. For worse, one rejects change.

When facing one's own personal Haunted House, trust the haunting process and embrace change as Nature came to embrace the house. Heed these words and witness the Haunted House become a Haunted Home. White and transparent, I am the ghost which haunts my home. I bring the label of haunted with me to every home I make and every house I reside in. Like *Insidious* (2010), my haunting follows me because I bring my past and baggage with me wherever I go: they are part of me. I carry the scars of my history, learn from it, change, and strive to never repeat my past mistakes. That is what it means to be a Haunted Heroine, to emerge stronger and stranger from the North American Haunted House with willpower to live. Like the Haunted House, the Haunted Heroine's haunting master status attends to the domestic trauma she has survived and the fact that her histories, if disclosed or discredited, will likely stigmatize her in others' eyes.

## 5.4 Concluding Discussion

In this thesis, I argue that the Haunted House is symbolically significant in colonial North American culture, and that it belies the concerns of contemporary society through

thematic symbolism. The Haunted House adapts to embody the current mainstream fears in North American society because it is designed to scare its cinematic audience; to scare consumers, production teams target widely shared cultural anxieties. These anxieties belong primarily to the ruling class, those who have capital and influence, as those are the anxieties prioritized in 21st Century North America.

I predict that the significance of the Haunted House will continue for the foreseeable future as North Americans—and humanity in general—grapple with the existential relationship between home, belonging, and the natural world. What will the Haunted House of the future look like? Will it remain the house abandoned to nature which becomes dilapidated with neglect and accumulates lost souls? I expect that the Haunted House of the future will look more like a smart home. The Haunted House embodies feelings of disease, insecurity, and threats from the inside and the outside: monstrous smart homes will see home surveillance becoming voyeurism, security systems utilized to trap inhabitants within and give access to invaders, spirits becoming one with the electronics of the household, and abuse heightened with online access at all hours of the day.

One can only fear what they can fathom, and because of this one can guess at what others fear by attending to their nightmares. It is the boundaries of one's imagination which limit their nightmares, not the normal boundaries of reality, science, and a pragmatic truth. By analyzing the accrued nightmares of contemporary North American society through film, the boundaries of the collective imagination surrounding the experience of home become salient. Several fears manifest in Haunted Houses, revealing key aspects to the white North American horror experience: fear of the unknown, fear of change, fear of the past repeating itself, fear of repercussions of past and present events, fear of failure, fear for limited time, fear of falling behind. The fear of contamination and miasma, the fear of isolation, the fear of invasion, the

fear of entrapment and entombment, and the fear of assimilation emerge as primary tensions in Haunted House films.

Tension and emotions are neither good nor bad, the same as spaces. We attach meaning to emotions; we can detach it, too, and make new meaning through social production. Along with Means Coleman (2011), Kerr (2015), Newmahr (2011), and Golovátina-Mora (2016), I advocate for a new interpretation of fear. Meanings can, will, and should change. This includes one's ontology. Having one's ontological security shaken is discombobulating, scary, unpleasant, but it is not necessarily bad. It is up to the individual whose security is breached to interpret the meaning of that invasion. It is also up to the individual how they choose to respond to said invasion—do they accept or reject? Do they change or remain unchanged?

In the case of the Haunted House, change is inevitable and embracing change does one well; it frees one from the person they were and allows them to become the person they are. The key to escaping one's past is to embrace change. Change is the key which unlocks the front door in the final scene of the film. Without change, however, the front door remains shut, locking the inhabitant within the house, doomed to forever repeat the history they never learn from. Learning brings change and it frees one from continually repeating past mistakes. Change brings surprise, an emotion as deeply rooted in the Haunted House as fear.

This exploratory research into what the Haunted House can reveal about the culture whose imagination it lives in focuses on the intersection of house and home, safety, and Nature. The North American Haunted House reveals fears surrounding the home about insecurity and invasion. Haunted House narratives bely mass biophobia, particularly fears of contamination and assimilation. Finally, the North American Haunted House tells the experience of trauma in the home and how survivors of domestic abuse experience living indoors. These are the primary themes which emerged as salient, but this analysis is far from exhaustive.

I touch on the fetishization of feminine youth in horror, but the idea deserves further investigation. For example, *The Exorcist* (1973) centres on 12-year-old Regan who sits at the meeting point of adolescence, youth, femininity, and Christianity. The fact that my analysis skirts Regan's story attests to the fact that this thesis adds to the foundation of horror scholarship but requires further research. The scope of this study is limited in the topics covered to theoretical saturation; facets of the Haunted House remain unexplored. What is the relationship between immortalizing youth and the Haunted House? Is this associated with the cult of femininity, or is youth divorced from gender distinctions? What role does religion play in the formation of the Haunted House? Catholicism is the most common religious reference in North American Haunted House films, but does this maintain for the Haunted Houses outside North America? How does the North American Haunted House contrast the Haunted House imagined and manifested by other cultures? This study is white, ethnocentric, limited in scope and reach, and far from exhaustive.

My routes of inquiry are limited to the intersecting relationship between the Haunted House, home, and Nature. Primary among the popular topics in horror is discourse around sex and sexuality (Calafell, 2015; Means Coleman, 2011). However, my analysis is notably lacking in a deep analysis of the sexual aspects of the Haunted House. The Haunted House is filled with sexual metaphors given its status as a body; it has windows for eyes, walls for ears, the front door is its mouth and the doors inside its sphincters, opening and closing at will to aid in the digestion of prey. Beyond the House's personification and bodily imagery, the gothic body touches on the eroticism of death, and films such as *Halloween* (1978) heavily feature sexuality and sexual themes. Much like the Final Girl, this thesis is as asexual as it is white.

This exploratory venture into the Haunted House is limited in reach. To return to structural imagery, if I have opened and entered the Haunted House's front door, I have gone no further in than its foyer and looked around. My analysis build bridges across disciplinary

gaps in knowledge because the Haunted House sits in the Twilight Zone of scholarship. The Haunted House occupies a bizarre theoretical space with endless potential for interdisciplinary connection; be it the scholarly pursuit and study of society, symbolic interactions, phenomena, folklore, culture, history, space and place, emotions as sense and as biological mechanisms, human migration, realms of the natural and supernatural, civil court cases involving property crime, entertainment and media, literature, architecture and design, the tourism industry, or the economic systems involved with the purchase and sale of real estate.

This thesis contributes to broader sociological, phenomenological, and symbolic interactionist literature, along with film and literature studies. My analysis branches into the area of stigma and deviance, and discussions of domestic trauma and violence. Similarly, my analysis speaks to the experience of isolation, safety, and security. I problematize the security afforded one by the house and household, and I bring into question the oppositional relationship between humanity and Nature. However, I leave untouched numerous directions for study. Through these five chapters, I breeze through the intricate detail of the Haunted House, offering but a taste of the symbolic meaning imbedded in collectively imagined spaces.

My findings make salient themes involving youth, the carnival, the circus, and toys; they manifest in North American films featuring haunted houses, primarily in relation to adolescent characters. The Haunted House has a historically significant relationship with travelling circuses and carnivals. Manifest themes related to the traumatic legacy of circuses in North America become apparent in latent qualitative analysis of Haunted House films. What is the relationship between the Haunted House and the Circus, both as culturally significant spaces in North America and as structures which embody the institutional trauma brought by stigma throughout the history of entertainment? How do my findings on the Haunted House align with the sociological literature on social deviance?

What would an extended monster-centric analysis of the Haunted House in North American film yield? Related to the natural theme of this thesis, scholarship on monstrosity is well-suited for analyzing the Haunted House, the supernatural, and extractive consumption of non-renewable resources. Because the topic of nature organically emerged as a prominent theme in the North American Haunted House, this thesis overlaps with environmental studies. Could findings about the Haunted House of a particular culture inform the creation of practical domestic-oriented strategies to boost household environmental conservation efforts?

Future analysis of the Haunted House would also benefit from applying gender theories and queer theory. Although not the focus on this thesis, I interact with gender on a feminine–masculine spectrum, and queerness is laced throughout not only my perspective and process, but also the materials. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) features Dr. Frank N. Furter, a queer-coded character who provokes a discourse around gender play, the scientific community, science fiction, horror, existentialism, and cannibalism. The depth to which I analyze *Rocky Horror* in this thesis is shallow, leaving the door open to future investigation. This non-binary perspective on the gender work done by gothic bodies in horror films contributes a unique perspective to discussions of sex and gender in the broader horror community.

I invite further research into the Haunted House to investigate the relationship between poverty, Nature, and why the modern suburban North American Haunted House looks like a normal lower-class home. How has poverty come to be associated with hauntings and nature? How has this relationship between Nature and Others become part of the white Haunted House narrative? Why is the Haunted House of North American film so racist against Indigenous people, and how can the haunted house genre apologize and make reparations for its poor choice to invest resources in perpetuating anti-indigeneity propaganda disguised as plot?

To the existing Haunted House literature, I contribute this ethnographic content analysis of the Haunted House as it is featured in North American film (1940–2020), particularly in the

horror genre. In this research I seek to make myself at home in the Haunted Houses of North American horror, a task easier said than done. To accomplish this purpose, I use ethnography and content analysis, a method termed 'ethnographic content analysis' (Altheide, 1987). Including thematic analysis of forty (40) films[18], along with ethnographic memos and saturation in popular haunted media content, I find that the manifest Haunted House starring in the North American imagination is unsafe, alive, and more closely aligned with nature than it is with civilization. Its alignment with nature is heightened by themes of contamination, infection, and assimilation with the house. I find that the surviving character of Haunted House narratives is often a woman suffering from domestic abuse, a character I name as the Haunted Heroine. The Haunted House is the embodiment of North American fears surrounding home, namely insecurity, biophobia, and privacy.

As I sit and write these closing remarks, I anticipate the conclusion of this thesis journey. I anticipate my reprieve from the Haunted House to be brief as there are many theoretical branches and topics left unattended. Immersion in the realm of the Haunted House by doing ethnographic content analysis of 40 North American films featuring haunted houses taught me about the Haunted House from the outside in and the inside out. I emerge changed, stronger and stranger for my efforts: I am one of many Haunted Heroines. The catharsis from having survived my venture through the domestic horrors wrought in the shadows of the Haunted House is addictive. The Haunted House demonstrates the power of my imagination to reify fear into the shape of home. I demonstrate the power of my honest conviction by opening the front door to my personal Haunted House, entering humbly, learning, adapting, changing, and growing until I feel ready to leave. Maintaining status quo is easy, changing is difficult, and to survive one must muster bravery to face difficulty.

[18] For a full list of films studied, see Appendix A.

My ethnography of the North American Haunted House yields one final finding: my personal Haunted House becoming my Haunted Home. In the process of completing this thesis, I moved back into the childhood home belonging to my family since I was nine months old. It is the seat of my domestic trauma, my sexual abuse, my gender violence, and my bedroom closet contains skeletons I hung there decades ago. Returning retraumatizes me; the ghosts of my past Selves haunt each room, follow me up and down the stairs, whisper secrets of my forgotten pasts, gossip about my lineage, and recall my darkest moments of despair. Coming back home takes bravery, dedication, persistence, work, and openness to change. It is not my memories or histories which change, but my perspective on my past and my past Selves. With understanding, compassion, and forgiveness I embrace my own history in this house. Embracing my past Selves is what allows me to continue living in my Haunted House—the house I once haunted as I grew into an independent adult—and make it my Haunted Home. I am the ghosts which haunt my house: I am the skeleton in my closet, the monster under my bed, the creature hidden under the staircase, I am the living embodiment of my worst nightmare.

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# Appendix A: Filmography

**Filmography, n = 40 films**


Amenábar, A. (Director). (2001). *The others* [Film]. Las Producciones del Escorpio, SL; Sociodad General De Cine, S.A.

Beck, S. (Director). (2001). *Thir13en ghosts* [Film]. Columbia Pictures, Dark Castle Entertainment.

Bettinelli-Olpin, M. & Gillett, T. (Director). (2019). *Ready or not* [Film]. Mythology Entertainment, Vision Films.

Bousman, D. L. (Director). (2005). *Saw II* [Film]. Twisted Pictures.

Bousman, D. L. (Director). (2006). *Saw III* [Film]. Twisted Pictures.

Bousman, D. L. (Director). (2007). *Saw IV* [Film]. Twisted Pictures.

Burton, T. (Director). (1988). *Beetlejuice* [Film]. The Geffen Company.

Castle, W. (Director). (1959). *House on haunted hill* [Film]. William Castle Productions.

Craven, W. (Director). (1996). *Scream* [Film]. Woods Entertainment.

de Bont, J. (Director). (1999). *The haunting* [Film]. DreamWorks Pictures

Dickinson, T. (Director). (1940). *Gaslight* [Film]. British National Films.

Douglas, A. (Director). (2005). *The amityville horror* [Film]. Dimension Films, Platinum Dunes, Radar Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Eigeman, C. (Director). (2018). *Seven in heaven* [Film]. Blumhouse Productions.

Flanagan, M. (Director). (2016). *Hush* [Film]. Blumhouse Productions, Intrepid Pictures.

Friedkin, W. (Director). (1973). *The exorcist* [Film]. Hoya Productions.

Hitchcock, A. (Director). (1940). *Rebecca* [Film]. Selznick International Pictures.

Hooper, T. (Director). (1982). *Poltergeist* [Film]. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, SLM Production Group.

Hough, J. (Director). (1973). *The legend of hell house* [Film]. Academy Pictures Corporation.

Kenan, G. (Director). (2006). *Monster house* [Film]. Columbia Pictures, Relativity Media, ImageMovers, Amblin Entertainment.

Koolhoven, M. (Director). (2016). *Brimstone* [Film]. N279 Entertainment, X-Filme, Backup Media, Filmwave, Prime Time, The Jokers Films.

Kubrick, S. (Director). (1980). *The shining* [Film]. The Producer Circle Company, Peregrine Productions, Hawk Films.

Malone, W. (Director). (1999). *House on haunted hill* [Film]. Dark Castle Entertainment.

Medak, P. (Director). (1980). *The changeling* [Film]. Chessman Park Productions.

Miner, S. (Director). (1986). *House* [Film]. New World Pictures.

Minkoff, R. (Director). (2003). *The haunted mansion* [Film]. Walt Disney Pictures.

Polanski, R. (Director). (1968). *Rosemary's baby* [Film]. William Castle Enterprises.

Raimi, S. (Director). (1981). *The evil dead* [Film]. Renaissance Pictures.

Rosenberg, S. (Director). (1979). *The Amityville horror* [Film]. Cinema77, Professional Films, Inc.

Selick, H. (Director). (2009). *Coraline* [Film]. Laika, Pandemonium Films.

Sharman, J. (Director). (1975). *The rocky horror picture show* [Film]. Michael White Productions.

Shimizu, T. (Director). (2004). *The grudge* [Film]. Ghost House Pictures.
Silbeling, B. (Director). (1995). *Casper* [Film]. Amblin Entertainment, The Harvey Entertainment Company.
Simon, N. (Director). (2017). *Truth or dare* [Film]. CineTel Films, Angel Cake Truth.
Sterling, R. (Writer), & Stevens, R. (Director). (1959, October 2). Where is everybody? (Season 1, Episode 1) [TV series episode]. In, *The twilight zone.* 173-3601.
Summer, P., & Urbano, C. (Director), & Patterson, R. (supervising Director). (1987). *Scooby-doo meets the boo brothers* [Film]. Hanna-Barbera Productions
Tarantino, Q. (Director). (2012). *Django unchained* [Film]. A Band Apart, Columbia Pictures.
Wan, J. (Director). (2004). *Saw* [Film]. Twisted Pictures.
Wan, J. (Director). (2010). *Insidious* [Film]. Haunted Movies, Stage 6 Films, Alliance Films, IM Global.
Wayans, K. I. (Director). (2000) *Scary movie* [Film]. Wayan Bros. Entertainment, Gold/Miller Productions, Brad Grey Pictures.
Wheatley, B. (Director). (2020). *Rebecca* [Film]. Working Title Films, Big Talk Productions.
Wise, R. (Director). (1963). *The haunting* [Film]. Argyle Enterprises.

# Appendix B: Thematic Haunted House Motif Chart

**Youth**

| | |
|---|---|
| Boys on Bikes | Playing Games |
| Carnival Elements | Imaginary Friends |
| Terrifying Toys | Hiding Monsters (closet, under bed) |
| Rocking(chair) on its Own | The Adolescent Body |
| Clockwork Music Box | Caves, oft near Water |
| Halloween | Eternal Youth |

**Nature**

| | |
|---|---|
| Cobwebs | Animal Omen |
| Corpse of an Animal | Atmosphere |
| Fear | Rotting Flesh |
| Infestation of Insects | Pools of Water (Liquid) |
| Death, smell of, by act of:<br>Drowning, Hanging, Suicide, Beheading, Falling, Neglect, Car Crash, Bleeding Out (re: Torture et al.) | Trees; Blowing in the Wind; are Alive; |
| Dark and Stormy Night | In the Dark of Night, Full Moon Light |
| Contamination & Disease | Thunderbolt and Lightning |
| Cold Spots | Haunted Soundscapes |
| Fire | Autumn |
| Time | Some Sacred Soil |

**House**

| | |
|---|---|
| Atypical Architecture | Hidden Passageways |
| Chandelier in the Foyer (Shaking, Falling) | Creaky Floors, Doors, Steps, and More |
| Assimilation with House | Grandfather Clock |
| Plentiful Doors | Gently Wafting Curtains |
| Wrought Iron Gates | Symmetry (nature) |

| | |
|---|---|
| Many Rooms | Extravagant Decor |
| Lots of Hallways | Serving Staff |
| Secret Studies | Hidden Treasure |
| Freedom from House | Squeaky Door Knobs |
| Fixer-Upper | Locks |
| Must be Marketable | Pounding on the Walls |
| Heart of the House | Spiral Staircase |
| Talking Directly to House | Leaving the Front Door Open |

**Home**

| | |
|---|---|
| Strength of Doubt | Family Matters; Inheritance |
| Child in Peril | Wood Burning Fireplace (Hearth) |
| Marriage and Marital Themes | |

**Isolation**

| | |
|---|---|
| On a Hill, On a Cliff | Outside Town |
| “This is your room” | Liminal Space |
| The Twilight Zone | Split the Party |
| Time & Space | Privacy, Civil Inattention |
| Feeling of Being Watched | Water-Front Property |

**Reflection**

| | |
|---|---|
| Mirrors | Character Growth |
| Pools of Water | Portals to Another World |
| Reveal Truths | Repeating the Past |
| Echo | Unearthing the Past |

**Self**

| | |
|---|---|
| Personal Trauma Narratives | Fear, Phobias |
| Superstition | Humour Negates Fear |
| Question Sanity | Destiny and Fate |

| Haunted House Narrative | Haunted Heroine |
| --- | --- |
| Self-Policing | Burning the House Down |
| Startling Oneself | Relationship with the House as Self |
| Ontological Security Threatened | Gaslighting and Self-Doubt |