Supernatural Spectacle Cinema: The Anxiety of Un-Belonging and The Haunted House in Contemporary Hollywood Horror Films

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Abstract

Much recent scholarship involving ghosts has focused upon spectrality as a metaphor for trauma. While this is a fruitful area of research, in the case of Film Studies, this risks flattening haunted house films to the status of 'text' and overlooking their filmic quality, which sets them apart from other artforms.

This thesis centres the supernatural as a diegetic reality, focusing on the cinematic representations of ghosts, demonic entities, and haunted houses in the period between 1979 and 2015. To examine these hauntings, the thesis reads the films using three technical languages of filmmaking; cinematography, set design, and sound design. These languages make the mechanisms of hauntology visible, making this a complementary approach to traditional readings based on spectrality and trauma.

These readings are underpinned by theoretical and thematic work around belonging, the influence of technology, and the cultural stagnation created by neoliberalism. Mark Fisher's work on the weird and the eerie becomes the starting point for belonging, and reading the languages of filmmaking reveals that in these films, it is the living that do not belong in these spaces, rather than the dead. The supernatural keeps these haunted houses caught in the past, unavailable for occupation in the present. While Fisher's assertion that neoliberalism created a post-millennial cultural stagnation in the UK, these films reveal the same problem in the United States, where these Hollywood-produced films are haunted by the spectres of *The Amityville Horror* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1979) and *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982). The discussion explores the extent to which the living can return the domestic spaces to the present.

This thesis examines how the technical languages of filmmaking represent haunting on screen and visualise aspects of the Gothic around space and isolation, while revealing this preoccupation with the weird and eerie as central components of a haunting.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all critical and other sources (literary and electronic) have been specifically and properly acknowledged, as and when they occur in the body of my text.

Signed: 

26 March 2024

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Acknowledgements

It seems only right that I dedicate this thesis to the late Justin D. Edwards, who first brought me to the University of Stirling. I appreciated his tireless support and endless patience in guiding me through this process. I never got the chance to thank him while I could, so this will have to suffice.

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Introduction

> "There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can 'invoke' or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in" (de Certeau 1988: 108).

In 2007, a low-budget horror film about a couple besieged by a poltergeist appeared on the film festival circuit. Following its widespread distribution in 2009, it grossed over $193 million worldwide.[1] The film was *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli), and its success highlighted a continuing deep interest among the wider public in supernatural phenomena. By late 2023, the film had spawned six sequels, along with a host of 'copycat' titles, such as *Paranormal Entity* (Shane Van Dyke, 2009).[2] Haunted houses remain popular within the horror genre, while Netflix-based dramas such as *American Horror Story* (2011—ongoing) and *The Haunting of Hill House* (Mike Flanaghan, 2018) and UK-based podcast *Uncanny* demonstrate a strong appetite for the paranormal outside of the cinema. The investigatory nature of television programmes such as *Ghost Hunters* (Jason Hawes, 2004—ongoing), and *Ghost Adventures* (Zak Bagans, 2008—ongoing) reveals an interest in the supernatural and its relationship to history, while reflecting the predilection for haunted house films in the last four decades to engage with parapsychology and the practices of paranormal investigation.

The cinematic representations of both ghosts and haunted houses are the focus of this thesis, based on André Bazin's assertion that photography and cinema offer the closest experience of realism in the plastic arts (1960: 6). Each film presents the supernatural as an objective part of reality, and the greater psychological realism offered by cinema supports its role in representing haunted houses as having an ontological existence. The technical aspects of cinema make the haunting visible, offering a crossing point between this study of filmmaking that focuses upon the haunting as literal, and those hauntological readings that read the spectral as metaphorical. While the term 'haunted' can be understood in a variety of ways, I apply it to those domestic spaces that are represented as being subject to supernatural

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[1] This data comes from IMDB.com and is correct at the time of writing in September 2023.

[2] This film also 'borrowed' a great deal of the plot from *The Entity* (Sidney J. Furie, 1982), in which a woman is raped by an invisible incubus.

entities or disturbances. Ghosts may not always appear within the films as fully formed apparitions, but the results of their activities may manifest on screen as doors open and close seemingly of their own accord, or clocks stop at a specific time, among others. The discussions also take those films into account in which a demonic entity conducts the haunting, since the focus is upon the supernatural, encompassing a variety of figures.

I argue these haunted house films suggest it is not the supernatural that should be evicted from the property, but that it is the living that do not belong in the house. I take this concept of 'belonging' from cultural theorist Mark Fisher's theory of the weird. While this is discussed and defined more fully below, it is worth briefly summarising the theory here. The weird refers to a juxtaposition between an established world and something that arrives into it, creating "the conjoining of *two or more things which do not belong together*" (2016:11). The element that does not belong is considered "weird" and would refer to HP Lovecraft's Elder Gods or the triffids in John Wyndham's 1951 novel, *The Day of the Triffids*. Fisher pairs the theory of the weird with that of the eerie, which "concerns the most fundamental metaphysical questions one could pose, questions to do with existence and non-existence: *Why is there something here when there should be nothing? Why is there nothing here when there should be something?*" (2016: 12, emphasis in original). As per the weird, the living become the weird element that does not belong in these haunted houses. The eerie appears more as an effect, with the technical practices of filmmaking generating ambiguity about the level of presence within the house.

This relationship between the living and the dead becomes apparent through reading the technical practices of filmmaking, prioritising an understanding of the films as *films*, rather than simply as cultural texts. The practices under discussion in the thesis are set design, cinematography, and sound design, all employed during the production phase of filmmaking and working as interconnected departments.[3] Reading the films in these terms allows for a way to view ghosts as something that viewers can conceptualise as 'real' alongside the existing focus on ghosts-as-trauma. Reading the ghosts as literal and reading spectrality as metaphor are not incompatible approaches, since understanding *how* the haunting is created supports a reading of the ghost as a sign of trauma. I prioritise a reading of the creation of the ghost using filmmaking, although the readings also consider more metaphorical perspectives, demonstrating ways in which these two approaches can and should co-exist.

[3] Sound design also takes place in the post-production phase, demonstrating the overlap between departments.

This chapter next poses the research questions answered by this thesis, followed by an explanation of my methodology and justification for the films under discussion. I outline the argument and how it provides an original contribution to research in the fields of Gothic Studies, Film Studies, and Horror Studies. The chapter then presents the critical context of the work, particularly around spectrality, before defining the terms used in the thesis. A discussion of the historical context of these films follows, including a justification for the chosen period. It also explores horror film production in this period to situate the films in their cinematic context. Finally, a chapter breakdown outlines the contents of the three following chapters.

The films discussed cover a range of haunted house 'types'. It includes the films that set the template for the haunted house in this period, which are both the original version of *The Amityville Horror* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1979) and *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982). *The Conjuring* (James Wan, 2013) harks back to the 1970s, both with its period setting and its reliance on the 'Satanic witch' trope, bringing it into alignment with 1970s religious horror. I discuss *Stir of Echoes* (David Koepp, 1999) and *The Sixth Sense* (M Night Shyamalan, 1999), both films released in the 1999 wave of haunted house films. This wave preceded the early 2000s trend for remaking Japanese horror films begun with *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002). I also include *The Skeleton Key* (Iain Softley, 2005), a film which borrows visual motifs from *The Amityville Horror* while presenting 'haunting' in an atypical fashion; the spirits of hoodoo practitioners exist within stolen bodies. I also discuss several instalments from two of the most popular franchises of the 2010s; *Paranormal Activity* and *Insidious*. *Insidious* (James Wan, 2010) and *Insidious: Chapter 2* (James Wan, 2013) involve a more unusual aspect of haunting through the practice of astral travel. *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007), *Paranormal Activity 2* (Tod Williams, 2010) and *Paranormal Activity 3* (Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, 2011) blend the contemporary fascination with paranormal investigation and the haunted house film.

Research Questions

The thesis answers three central research questions in order to analyse these cinematic representations. The first two questions ask, "In what ways does the representation of the haunting depend upon the technicalities of filmmaking?" and "How do the technologies of cinema work to visualise Gothic space and its supernatural inhabitants?" This thesis understands the 'technicalities' in question as being the practices of set design,

cinematography, and sound design. Each practice is the focus of its own chapter since the approach is to examine both how these practices *create* the haunting, and also how this makes visual aspects of the Gothic. The central aspect of the Gothic under discussion is the use of space, with liminal space being a key component of haunted house narratives. These filmic practices are also vital in representing the Gothic preoccupation with revelation. I define my conception of Gothic space more extensively below.

Space is also a key component of filmmaking through its many incarnations within the production process: the set provides a physical space, while cinematography defines the extent of the available screen space through the manipulation of the frame. Sound design allows for an exploration of acoustic space, while supporting the depiction of physical space and the manipulation of cinematographic space. These technical spaces support both theoretical and literal notions of space.

The final question asks, "How do the weird and the eerie as modes emerge within and affect the representation of the haunting?" The focus upon the weird and the eerie, identified by Mark Fisher and defined below, allows for a movement away from the uncanny, which was previously a popular theory when reading haunted house narratives.

Methodology

Many of the films in this thesis have been discussed before, often at length, and each chapter highlights this pre-existing work. Yet little of the existing critical work foregrounds the technical aspects of filmmaking. Where it does so, it is often of secondary importance to the focus of the author's arguments. While each discussion is valid, not engaging with the technical aspects of filmmaking risks overlooking the nature of filmmaking itself; writers may flatten all films to the status of 'text' while disavowing the mechanisms that make films different from other cultural formats. While my approach to reading these technical aspects of a film is not unique and bears much in common with the formalist approach of analysing films, it is less common within Gothic Studies. My work complements the work of Xavier Aldana Reyes and Adam Daniel in Affect Studies, discussed below, particularly where it intersects with Gothic Studies. This approach to reading a film conceptually complements the Gothic, given the mode's reliance on artifice to create a desired atmosphere and its preoccupation with spectacle. Filmmakers employ these technical aspects of filmmaking to create the setting and atmosphere required by the narrative. The benefit of this approach, focused as it is upon the technical aspects of filmmaking, is that scholars may equally apply it

to television and even video games since these formats use the same technical aspects. It also complements more metaphorical readings of films by providing supplementary perspectives of the film that are rooted in the language of filmmaking.

I have limited the discussion to set design, cinematography, and sound design since they interact with each other in such a clear way. For example, specific sounds support the visual appearance of the set or reinforce the dimensions of the setting depicted on-screen. Aspects of cinematography, such as insert shots or close-ups, draw attention to elements of the set, such as notable props. Makeup and costume design are also important to the creation of hauntings, and while I will touch on these briefly where they pertain to the ghosts themselves, they also dovetail with considerations of performance, and would be better discussed in such a fashion. Cinematography, set design and sound design are not the only means of generating ghosts on screen, but they are three technical practices rooted in the presentation of space. Technical practices such as editing, extensive visual effects, or the musical score become important during post-production and do not comprise the discussion here. Further work may be done to examine these films using these post-production practices.

These three practices also map onto the most common ways that people report experiencing ghostly activity. The cinematography references seeing ghosts, sound design refers to hearing ghosts, and set design corresponds to a more tangible experience of changes wrought within a room or items being moved. Crossover is inevitable since the moving of a prop requires the ability to see or hear the effects of ghosts. In his social history of ghosts, Owen Davies discusses the number of reports across the centuries of people seeing ghosts, and notes that these experiences encompassed other senses in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries since "there are numerous accounts of people feeling an indefinable sensation of a presence, which is sometimes connected with a perceived drop in temperature" (2009: 26). In folklore, one belief stated that "flames turned blue when spirits were around", demonstrating the ability of the dead to affect the physical world (2009: 26). Elsewhere, Davies notes the common sounds associated with "passive auditory ghosts", often related to sounds they would have made in life, such as footsteps or noises related to their occupation.[4]

[4] Some ghosts apparently announced their presence through smell, with witnesses claiming to smell a specific cigarette brand or muscle rub used by a deceased loved one. While these reports became more prevalent following the emergence of spiritualism, it is clearly unhelpful to follow this logic with cinema.

Such commonalities from spirit belief made their way into spiritualism and affected the ways in which sitters experienced ghostly manifestations during a séance. Spiritualists assumed they had made contact during a séance by feeling changes in temperature or the movement of the table beneath their hands (Owen 1989: 44). Following the establishment of this 'connection', spirits communicated using knocks and raps (Owen 1989: 45). Such tricks were borrowed from a combination of earlier forms of entertainment such as the Phantasmagoria, and many have made their way into the somewhat unscientific field of paranormal investigation. They re-emerge within films both through the techniques employed by the production teams, but also the narratives themselves, since many of these films feature parapsychologists or sequences of amateur paranormal investigation. This approach foregrounds the material nature of the hauntings in these films and adopts a position that emphasises the supernatural activity within the texts and the ways in which the filmmaking disciplines create this activity.

The Films

I have focused on American productions for this thesis, in part due to the role of *The Amityville Horror* in initiating a new cycle of haunted house films in 1979, partly in reference to the American origins of paranormal investigation-as-entertainment, and also through a wish to speak to American film history.[5] Given the emergence of ghost films from the cinema of attractions, and their status as 'spectacle', these films enjoyed a theatrical release, rather than more recent titles that have only been available through subscription-based streaming services. In terms of the technical filmmaking used, there is some overlap with titles from other territories, particularly *The Ring* given its status as a remake of a Japanese film, but the focus remains on American films so as not to impose a Western cultural framework on other cultures and their beliefs regarding the supernatural.

The cinematography chapter focuses on *Poltergeist*, the remake of *The Ring*, and the first three films in the *Paranormal Activity* series. *Poltergeist* is an early example of the contemporary haunted house film, and while it is more famous for its visual effects, much of the supernatural activity occurs within the cinematography. This makes the film an excellent

[5] In his historical survey of set design in the Golden Age of Hollywood, Juan Antonio Ramírez explained his decision to focus on Hollywood films since "the American film industry is acknowledged to have produced the only universally disseminated cinematic language" (2004: 14).

case study for the ways in which framing, colour grading, and lighting can create a haunting. *The Ring* emerged as the first in a cycle of remakes of Japanese horror films, and it is notable because of the 'film within a film' created by the ghost on the haunted videotape. The ghost demonstrates a form of independent cinematography, able to affect technology and leave an imprint of her psyche from inside the supernatural realm. This stands in contrast to the *Paranormal Activity* films, which combine static and hand-held cameras to 'record' the haunting. They are the only example of the 'found footage' subgenre within the thesis, but this offers an opportunity to focus on the use of cinematography to create a haunting within a series of films that purport to be genuine. The presence of grainy film noise and time codes adds a verisimilitude to the films that heightens the sense of paranormal activity within the home, while drawing on existing ideas around haunted media. It draws attention to the mechanics of filmmaking through the chosen media while referencing the 'ghost hunting show' that became popular on television in this period.

The set design chapter focuses on *Stir of Echoes*, *The Skeleton Key*, and *The Conjuring*. This choice allowed for an examination of three environments that are important to the American cultural imagination: urban Chicago, a former plantation home in the Louisiana bayou, and a former Rhode Island farmhouse, respectively. These physical locations relate to historical spaces, where Chicago represents the industrial North and its focus on migration, New Orleans and the bayou represents the tensions of the Deep South, and Rhode Island refers to the American foundation myth and the landing of European pilgrims.

The difference between environments allows for an exploration of different types of set and their impact upon the haunting. *The Skeleton Key* is also unusual among these films for its focus upon the attic space, where *Stir of Echoes* and *The Conjuring* foreground the basement. *Stir of Echoes* was part of the 1999 renaissance in haunted house films which included *The Sixth Sense*, and the appearance of so much supernatural content at the turn of the century echoes the popularity of Gothic literature at the turn of the twentieth century. 2005 was also a notable year for productions featuring the supernatural, although the weaving together of ghosts and hoodoo in *The Skeleton Key* provides an interesting opportunity to

explore a different setting and the effect this setting has upon the haunting.[6] *The Conjuring* appeared in the aftermath of the global financial crisis (GFC), with its emphasis on the cost of property an echo of the economic concerns of the 1979 *The Amityville Horror*.

The three films also feature different forms of perceptual framework to access the supernatural: hypnosis, hoodoo, and Catholicism, respectively. Each method provides alternative ways to view the world, impacting the use of props within the production design as each method produces a different form of haunting. They also diverge from the expected viewpoint of a WASP or secular audience; even hypnosis may be viewed as frivolous entertainment by those unfamiliar with hypnotherapy. The accoutrements and processes of these practices become othered, given their unfamiliarity to these audiences.

The sound design chapter uses *The Sixth Sense*, the original and remade versions of *The Amityville Horror*, and the first two films in the *Insidious* franchise. The original version of *The Amityville Horror* marks the first contemporary haunted house film, making it an important film to include, yet it is the remake (Andrew Douglas, 2005) that uses sound in a more nuanced way to create a haunted soundscape. Comparing it with the original allows for an exploration of the differences between uses of sound design throughout the period under discussion. *The Sixth Sense* sold itself as being about "seeing" dead people, yet much of the activity is auditory and the intentional use of sound design to create a haunted soundscape throughout the film makes this a valuable addition. It also marks the start of a more concerted engagement with the haunted house film after a lull in production, coming as part of the 1999 rush of haunted house films that prefigured the new millennium—these being *Stir of Echoes*, *The Haunting* (Jan De Bont), and *House on Haunted Hill* (William Malone). The *Insidious* films also use sound to demarcate the Further, the spiritual dimension of the dead, and the appearances of supernatural entities within the realm of the living. This marks a deliberate engagement with sound that is missing in the 1979 *Amityville Horror*, allowing for an evaluation of the changing nature of sonic spectrality.

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[6] The list of 2005 films includes *The Amityville Horror*, *Dark Water (Walter Salles)*, *Urban Legends: Bloody Mary (Mary Lambert)*, *The Fog (Rupert Wainwright)*, *The Ring Two (Hideo Nakata)*, *An American Haunting (Courtney Solomon)*, *White Noise (Geoffrey Sax)*, and *Constantine (Francis Lawrence)*.

The Argument

I argue that in these films the living are cast as the weird element that does not belong in the space which has already been claimed by the supernatural. Yet this is because the living *cannot* belong in these spaces since the hauntings within them exemplify the postmodern stranglehold that the past has over the present, thus preventing onward movement into the future. That these films appear during the period characterised in wider society by the emergence and establishment of neoliberal economic policies also indicates a feeling of cultural 'stuckness' that leads to a disengagement with the future. On a narrative level, these films reflect the precarity of the housing market and the encouraged engagement with capitalism, notably through the acquisition of consumer technology, further underlining the neoliberal climate in which these films emerge.

Mark Fisher noted this tendency of culture to become stagnant under neoliberalism, endlessly recycling the past and unable to innovate. This continual regurgitation of culture means "the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion", something Fisher refers to as "[t]he slow cancellation of the future" (2014: 8). Fisher blames neoliberalism for this "culture of retrospection and pastiche" through its destruction of security, which prompted a hunger for the familiar, in which people were overstimulated by a combination of precarious work and the 'always on' nature of digital communications (2014: 14). In addition, a changing means of production put artists under greater pressure to produce commercially successful work (2014: 15). While Fisher's focus is Britain in the early 2000s, a similar degrading time loop of culture can be found in American cinema; these haunted house films are haunted by the spectre of *The Amityville Horror*. The Lutz family may have left their house on Ocean Drive by the end of the film, but they return to cinema again and again, with different names and faces, each time confronting their inability to belong. Only *The Ring* truly breaks this pattern, thanks to its Japanese heritage. *Stir of Echoes* and *The Sixth Sense* also offer an alternative, in which the living co-exist with the dead, helping them to right wrongs and move on, although the psychic abilities of the living keep them trapped in the past through their communication with the dead. The difference lies in their acceptance of the situation.

Fisher's earlier work, *Capitalist Realism* (2009), also provides insights to the American sense of 'stuckness' through its exploration of the era's wider capitalist context. He advances 'capitalist realism' as a term instead of postmodernism since there is no longer a political alternative to capitalism as there was when Frederic Jameson was writing in the

1980s. By contrast, capitalist realism "is a deeper, far more pervasive sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility" (2022: 7). Cinema struggles to differentiate itself as a cultural artefact capable of interrogating the capitalist context in which it emerges since "[t]he power of capitalist realism derives in part from the way that capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history: one effect of its 'system of equivalence' which can assign all cultural objects [...] a monetary value" (Fisher 2022: 4). Just as the home itself is reduced to a financial signifier under neoliberalism, so the film is reduced to a cultural 'product'.

This cultural 'stuckness' reflects the nostalgia mode identified by Fredric Jameson. He notes the ability for cinema to reinvent films from earlier eras, yet these new films do not purport to be *from* that era, instead capitalising on nostalgia for those eras while updating them with contemporary references (1998: 8). His example is *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981), yet the same can be said of the more recent films in this thesis. They recall the earlier films, such as *The Amityville Horror* and *Poltergeist*, through their narratives, but they update these stories with technological touchpoints familiar to the audiences to feel more contemporary, and through an increased engagement with consumer capitalism. This haunting by previous films reflects the cultural sterility of capitalist realism, in a production environment in which innovation seems impossible. The nostalgia mode of these films becomes clear when reading their use of cinematography, set design and sound design, which largely remains the same across the films. Jameson thinks a prevalence of this nostalgia mode is because "we were unable today to focus our own present, as though we had become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience" (1998: 9). For him, this becomes both an "indictment of consumer capitalism" and "an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history" (1998: 10). This symptom emerges within these films as the inability of the living to belong in those spaces claimed by the supernatural, since the past continually loops in these houses and around these families, preventing their engagement with the future. Therefore, these films are haunted by the spectre of *The Amityville Horror*, neoliberalism, and the wider cultural stagnation of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Where hauntology represents a metaphorical haunting, the technical aspects of filmmaking turn this metaphorical spectrality into diegetic fact through their creation of a cinematic haunting.

These anxieties about belonging also occur at socioeconomic moments of financial precarity, which have further implications for the security of home occupation. At the time of writing in mid-2023, the current wave of haunted house films in cinemas coincides not only with the global cost of living crisis, but also the rebuilding of national economies in the wake

of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting a renewed anxiety about the security of the domestic space. Haunted house films also emerge at moments of technological development, revealing anxiety about the extent to which technology is embedded within contemporary society, particularly given the dominance of the supernatural over audio-visual space. While the discussion is restricted to those films released up to 2015, it is notable that supernatural films at the time of writing in early 2024 emerge into a society gripped by discussions about artificial intelligence and its potential impact through the creation of deepfake avatars to stand in for humans, and the dangers posed by encounters in the Metaverse. Such technology raises questions about both *who* and *what* we interact with in digital space.

There is a difference in the type of hauntings depending on the wider location of the film. The films set in cities offer an investigation into the haunting to lend aid to the ghost to help them move on, which partially explains why *The Sixth Sense* and *Stir of Echoes* escape the long shadow of *The Amityville Horror*. Yet the films set in suburbs or rural locations cannot escape the spectre of Amityville. The prevalence of rented property and the occupation of apartments as opposed to houses contributes to this difference, while suburbs and rural locales offer the fantasy of the single-family home familiar as part of the 'American Dream'. These films feed an ongoing uneasiness with the suburbs as a concept, which is discussed further below. This difference between locations occurs as part of a debate over space and its ownership, with the supernatural laying claim to their 'property' in the suburban and rural films, compared to the 'stuck' ghosts that require help to move on in cities.

The use of the city also provokes a consideration of isolation, a concept related to the ability to belong, but also a common trope within the Gothic, where locations include castles, country houses, or ruined monasteries. Isolation becomes a plot point, separating the protagonists from sources of help. This is often the case in these haunted house films, as Mikal J. Gaines explains that, "families in the haunted house film are constrained by [...] a neoliberal construct wherein discipline has been sutured to debt. The house isolates them, holds them captive, and prevents substantive connections with neighbors or their larger communities" (2020: 182). Neoliberalism proves here to be the generating force of isolation, since a central tenet "is its focus on independence and its rejection of social networks and support systems" (Macfarlane 2017: 151). Yet isolation also serves a secondary purpose, as part of the unconscious anxiety about belonging. The threat of isolation, both physically and socially, links these films across their varied settings, where characters rarely interact with their neighbours, or neighbours prove unable to help. The three technical disciplines under discussion in this thesis emphasise isolation; long shots of the houses show them physically

isolated within their setting, while in sound design, the lack of elements of auditory setting, or ambient noise used to fill in the aural background to ground us within a familiar space, underlines the sense of isolation. Such a depiction of isolation supports the anxiety about the ability to belong.

Children often play prominent roles in these films, with many of them able to perceive the dead or communicate with them. This aligns these psychic children with technology in these films, in which they eschew the need to use equipment to register the presence of the supernatural, since they *are* the equipment. With their abilities ranging from mediumship to astral travel, even Samara (Daveigh Chase) in *The Ring* becomes less monstrous and more the ultimate evolution of the psychic-child-as-technology. Yet this ability to converse with the supernatural belies the lack of a future facing these children in the neoliberalism-generated cultural time warp; they can only look back to the past for companions.

The occurrence of hauntings in cinema also reflects a supernatural preoccupation by the public, particularly in relation to the haunted house. At the time of writing, the search phrase "is my house haunted" returned over 205 million results on Google.[7] Anthropologist Joseph O. Baker researched ghost belief in twenty-first century America in 2014, and his research showed that 49% of respondents believed in ghosts; 21% of respondents believed the living could speak with the dead; and "39% agreed that places can be haunted" (2014: 572). A YouGov America poll in 2019 showed similar results, in which 45% of Americans believed in ghosts, while 36% of Americans reported they had seen or felt the presence of a ghost (Ballard 2019). Taking the lead from ghost belief and a fascination with paranormal investigation among potential cinema audiences, my turn towards the materiality of hauntings is not without precedent. In 2018, Vanessa Stevens and Jeffrey A. Tolbert sought to re-centre the haunting debate within the field of geography in order to restore "literal ghosts" to their discussions, since "in seeking to metaphorize the spectral, scholars have tended to ironically strip experience of its immediacy in-place and in-body (as well as out-of-body)" (2018: 29). As they sought to explore "the experience of haunted places" through a lens wide enough to accommodate literal phantoms, so I seek to do likewise with the haunted house film.

This approach to reading the ghost as tangible, rather than merely as a metaphor, offers an original contribution to research. There is a sense of irony in discussing the

[7] The search was run on 10 March 2024 at 12:13 pm.

materiality of the ghost, yet in cinema, this materiality is necessary since the technologies used to create films depend on the material world in order to function. Supernatural activity emerges *through* the technical aspects of filmmaking, making hauntological concerns visible. Even in those cases where the ghost does not take on a visible form, its behaviour is still apparent through its interaction with the space it occupies. It is my exploration of this ability of cinema to literalise hauntology, to find that common ground between the ghost-as-metaphor and the ghost-as-ontological-truth, that provides an original contribution that offers an additional perspective on the already rich studies of spectrality, further discussed below.

Cinematography is preoccupied with the ways in which the film is told in visual terms using the camera. Camera movements and lighting allow cinematographers to emphasise or hide supernatural activity within the frame. Set design becomes the way through which the production designer renders the world on screen, and its manipulation by the technical department to achieve the effect of haunting reflects the ghost's manipulation of the physical environment. Sound design is the newest technology under discussion, with the focus here being upon sound effects. Their volume, positionality in terms of stereo sound, content, and emanation from either within or without the frame becomes the means by which a sound designer generates an aural haunting.

The discussion of cinematic technique is often lost amid other approaches to reading a film, such as psychoanalytic readings and symbolic interpretations of textual analysis. While these readings are valid and offer fruitful results, an exploration of the technical aspects helps to re-centre filmmaking within Film Studies, allowing for an engagement with the technical history of film alongside these other approaches. Understanding how the haunting is created through cinematic technology also offers a useful complement to Affect Studies; understanding how the supernatural moment was created can help to support discussions of the affect this has upon the spectator. I do not suggest that this approach to reading the technical aspects of filmmaking should replace other approaches, but rather be used alongside them to anchor other forms of reading within the mechanisms of cinema itself.

My approach to space within the Gothic also offers an original contribution since space is so intrinsically linked to filmmaking. The Gothic is often preoccupied with the notion of liminal space, in which secrets may hide before being brought back to light. In cinema, such space translates to off-screen space since camera movements allow for a renegotiation of this space; pans and zooms renegotiate the extent of the off-screen space through the movement of the frame, allowing for the revelation of what previously lay beyond the frame. This makes the off-screen space more 'plastic' and open to liminality.

While these films exploit this plasticity, they also renegotiate the boundaries of the Gothic through their ability to show the ghost's interaction with the material; set design provides this material container for the haunting, and the ghost may interact with both the wider set and its props. Such interactions can also be captured by sound design, particularly when the framing denies an accompanying visual of the ghost. By granting ghosts this form of tangibility, they cross from the liminal space into diegetic space. Yet this is only possible *through* the techniques available to these technical filmmaking disciplines, making these films a specifically cinematic representation of haunting.

Critical Contexts

This work does not exist within a vacuum and sits within a body of existing critical work. This section discusses the critical work that provides a context for this thesis, before defining the terms used throughout the work.

For André Bazin, cinema offers the closest form to 'reality' of the plastic arts, which provides a useful perspective given my interest in the 'reality' of the hauntings depicted on film. In 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', he argues painting has struggled with its inherent need for illusion should it aspire to realism (1960: 6). Only able to offer "pseudorealism" as a means of "fooling the eye", painting cannot compete with photography and cinema as a means of producing psychological realism (1960: 7). For Bazin, it is the intervention of the human hand in painting and sculpture that disrupts the quest for realism, and only the mechanical processes of photography and cinema can offer the objectivity required to render realism (1960: 7). Only the camera lies between the object and the method of capturing its likeness, and while Bazin admits that the photographer's personality still intrudes into the process through their choice of what to capture, the image forms "without the creative intervention of man" (1960: 7). This impacts on "our psychology of the image", since the apparently objective photographic or cinematographic image gains credibility denied to painting and sculpture (1960: 8). The images created through mechanical means force the viewer "to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re*-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space" (1960: 8).

This has ramifications for the cinematic representation of a haunting since the credibility conferred onto a mechanically captured image supports the conceit of the film that the ghost is real, if only within the confines of the filmic universe. The key to this

ramification is the method with which the image is created; the lack of "the human hand", so necessary to painting and sculpture, lends this psychological realism to the image, and it also supports the exclusion of digital visual effects from this thesis. While human intervention is necessary for the building of the set in the same way that it is required for sculpture, the photographing of the physical space is folded into the film's depiction of psychological realism since the viewer knows this built environment existed, and films shot on location confer a higher degree of realism. Bazin's distinction between aesthetic and psychological realism supports these films in their presentation of the supernatural figure as being 'real', although his work is more appropriate to the discussions within the cinematography chapter.

This thesis also acknowledges existing film criticism in the field of Horror Studies. The work of Robin Wood proved to be influential in discussing the ways in which the American horror film explored the return of the repressed. For Wood, Karl Marx provides an awareness of the dominant ideology, while psychoanalysis provides the means to examine how that ideology is transmitted (2018: 73). This explains the seismic impact upon film criticism of both Marx and Sigmund Freud. The intended overthrow of patriarchal capitalism through such interrogation finds a companion in the Gothic, in which "[m]onsters [...] demonstrate—and criticise—the cultural practices of making others, interrogating the legitimacy of condemnation, prejudice and exclusion" (Botting 2015: 14). Wood discusses the extent of the link between Marxism and psychoanalytic theory since psychological repression upholds or challenges the bourgeois ideology critiqued by Marx.

Repression and the creation of the other are the two main tools used to uphold this ideology, where "[o]therness represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with [...] either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it" (Wood 2018: 77). That which supports or promotes bourgeois ideology becomes synonymous with 'normality', forcing anything contrary to this into the position of the monster through the concept of the other. Other people, lower social classes, women, other cultures, ethnic groups, alternative political ideologies, other sexual orientations, and children are capable of being othered (2018: 78-79). While Wood asserts that the monster represents the other in horror (2018: 79), this does not necessarily apply to the haunted house film, since ghosts are the closest of the cinematic monsters to the audience. They are us, and they are only othered through being dead, though this is not othering in the strictest sense since it is a universal experience for humans and rises above individual difference. While the return of the individual after death contradicts the dominant ideology that life and death exist as a binary, popular belief in the supernatural implies the permanence

of death is only an assumption. This aligns ghosts with the *memento mori*, and the living may attempt to deny ghosts given their association with the reminder that the living too will die.

Despite this range of groups available to be othered, much of Wood's discussion rests on an exploration of sexuality and sexual expression, with detours into race and class, thus revealing the limits of his approach (2018: 76). That said, Wood is still helpful as a model of the combination of sociopolitical readings with psychoanalysis, especially to identify progressive horror films. If we map Wood's identification of 'normality' and 'the monster' onto Fisher's conception of the weird, the fact the living become the disruptive interloper offers new perspectives on these films, albeit perspectives that derive from a reading of the technical practices of filmmaking. This is especially notable since the living largely represent what would be expected as 'normal' under bourgeois ideology. Wood displayed an interest in these practices through an engagement with set design in his reading of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974). While my priority is a reading of technical practices, I also explore socioeconomic concerns appropriate to each film's release, using Wood as a model for combining a reading of film with an understanding of its socioeconomic context. Given Wood's seminal essay ends in 1978, and my work begins in 1979, I also hope to provide a degree of continuity for this approach to Horror Studies.

Where Wood employs more of a cognitive approach to horror films, Adam Daniel and Xavier Aldana Reyes have both applied affect theory to the genre. In 2016, Aldana Reyes discussed the corporeal nature of viewing horror films and their affect on audiences. While his focus was on more visceral films, such as *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) or *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008), Aldana Reyes explored the use of film technologies to influence an audience's feelings and called for an extension of affect "to cover all the elements that have an influence on viewers' perceptions of given scenes and of entire films", elements that include technical practices such as cinematography and special effects (2016: 8). He also notes the inability of psychoanalytic readings to account for the feelings experienced during horror spectatorship (2016: 2). Daniel's work on the evolution of horror reverses a common trend in Horror Studies to ask why audiences watch horror, and to instead ask what horror media does differently, and how its aesthetic choices create a different engagement with the audiences than classical cinema (2020). His work explores spectatorship and the affect of a film upon a viewer, which requires an awareness and an examination of cinematic techniques to investigate these aesthetic choices. Daniel combines existing work on spectatorship with the work of Gilles Deleuze in order to examine how spectatorship varies across different

audio-visual platforms. He also seeks to diverge from psychoanalytic readings of film by exploring "the somatic response" to horror (2020: 4).

Both Aldana Reyes and Daniel are concerned with the affective nature of film, exploring the physical impact of the medium upon the viewer through an emphasis on phenomenology. This has been a valuable area of research and, within Horror Studies, it returns visceral experience to a genre so closely associated with emotional responses. There is a corresponding discussion within their work of how the technical practices of cinema help to create the affect upon the viewer. They are also concerned with the representation of the body, though I propose to supplement the conversation by including the work of the film's technical team to create a haunting, an experience which diverges from representations of the corporeal body. I prioritise readings of the specific techniques used to generate the haunting through an awareness of their contribution to the cinema of attractions, and thus my approach seeks to supplement the work of Aldana Reyes and Daniel with a textual reading of technical practices to further broaden the possibilities for affective readings of Gothic films.

Aldana Reyes' prioritisation of the body and corporeality is a counterpoint to my interest in the depiction of non-corporeality, and even though most of these films use real actors to depict ghosts, this granting of corporeality does not contradict their position as supernatural. In Aldana Reyes' own survey of horror criticism, the ghost is understandably absent, compared with the zombie, vampire, and undead (2016: 4), and therefore my work on hauntings may help to address this absence. Aldana Reyes also sets aside an examination of a film's socio-political context due to the somatic experience of affect, whereas I feel a film cannot be divorced from its socioeconomic context. My work therefore prioritises a reading of the film's technical elements, set within its hauntological and socioeconomic context.

I will next discuss and define my other terms as part of an exploration of the critical contexts surrounding the issues raised by this thesis.

Spectrality and Haunting

Haunting or returning ghosts as a metaphor for trauma is common within Gothic Studies, and the recurrent nature of hauntings makes them an apt metaphor. In Maria Beville's work, the concept of haunting is divorced from its supernatural connotations and becomes the means by which an individual cannot access a "repressed past trauma", where the Gothic becomes the means "for managing the unspeakable" (2014: 52). Maisha L. Wester's valuable work on African American Gothic locates haunting in the context of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and

its ramifications for American cultural life (2012), while Carol Margaret Davison examines the haunted house within Southern Gothic as a site of trauma through its association with slavery (2016). Gina Wisker's work on postcolonial Gothic likewise uses the metaphor of haunting to explore the trauma of the colonial past (2020). Her work on the revelatory nature of hauntings as symptoms of domestic trauma within women's ghost stories uses spectrality as a form of social commentary within Gothic literature (2022). Monica Michlin writes about the haunted house as representing "the psyche itself" (2012: 1): doing so, she explores the haunting of white America by those with marginalised identities.

This haunting-as-trauma-as-metaphor also appears in the wider critical discourse. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren note the ubiquity of ghosts and spectre throughout both written and oral tales, and the varied roles they play across time and cultures (2013: 1). Their edited collection, *The Spectralities Reader*, was intended to examine the evolution of ghosts from "possible actual entities, plot devices, and cliches of common parlance [...] into influential conceptual metaphors permeating global (popular) culture and academic alike" (2013: 1). They also discuss the growing application of spectres and haunting to social, political, and ethical theory, among others (2013: 2). Vanessa Stevens and Jeffrey A. Tolbert concur, noting the use of haunting as a metaphor across a range of disciplines, including the humanities, literature, and the social sciences (2018: 28). Such a turn towards the spectral is often traced to Jacques Derrida and the introduction of hauntology in *Specters of Marx* (1994). In their introduction to the collection, del Pilar Blanco and Peeren acknowledge the intersections of the ghost story with other fields, including psychology, spiritualism, and science (2013: 3). Yet even when examining the ghost in an historical context, they still centre the ghost as a metaphor. This approach overlooks the validity of ghosts as "possible actual entities", ignoring ideas about haunting, life after death, and other spiritual concerns of non-academicians.

As valuable as this approach is, it limits the discussion to concentrate on the ghost as a metaphor, and it also elides the fact that many Hollywood films present the ghost as an ontological fact *within those films*. As Chris Baldick explains when discussing Gothic literature, "[t]he ostensible point of the ghost story [...] is to convince the sceptical reader of the palpable existence of phantoms" (1993: xv). The films do not intend to convince the *viewer* that phantoms exist, yet they seek to convince the *characters* that ghosts are real. Within these films, the supernatural is an ontological reality for the characters, despite the fact that the reality of such occurrences is difficult to justify (Johnson 2022). Instead, these films reflect both the slew of fictional and historical narratives that depict ghostly figures as

legitimate personalities and the cross-cultural belief in the supernatural.[8] Baker notes that "the cultural diffusion of the paranormal" coincides with the decline of traditional religious affiliations among Americans: this often manifests as an identity of being 'spiritual', while following no specific religion (2014: 571). In this scenario, so-called "paranormalism" offers an outlet for the exploration of the supernatural outside of religious institutions (Baker 2014: 571). Marc A. Eaton concurs, arguing paranormal investigation offers an opportunity "for authentic spiritual experiences" (2015: 390). Such an interest could account for the greater interest in haunted house films since the late twentieth century.

Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren claim the ghost as a metaphor permeated popular culture. While that is the case, the ghost *also* retained its ability to fascinate as a figure capable of manifestation—as it has done for centuries. In her study of Gothic tourism, Emma McAvoy notes the popularity for visiting London's Cock Lane thanks to the apparent phenomenon of a poltergeist at the address as long ago as 1762 (2016: 5).[9] The apparent tangible evidence of the phenomenon, enacted through rapping that allowed communication with the entity, captured the contemporary public imagination. Owen Davies (2009), Roger Clarke (2012), Colin Dickey (2016), Susan Owens (2017), and Catherine Belsey (2019) have all written about this enduring fascination, dating to the first recorded ghost story, preserved by Pliny the Younger in the first century AD. Owens and Belsey both focus upon the appearance of ghost stories within cultural history. Davies follows the social history of ghosts within a British context, while Dickey explores haunted places in the United States, and Clarke attempts to construct a natural history of ghosts charting the changing appearance and function of the ghost in the public consciousness.

Based on this alternative approach that accepts the existence of ghosts, it is prudent to examine those texts that engage with haunted houses and ghosts in film. Murray Leeder's survey, *The Modern Supernatural and the Beginnings of Cinema* (2017), explores the associations between early cinema and the supernatural, and he notes the drawbacks in trying to use early cinema to prove cinema is inherently 'ghostly':

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[8] See Clarke 2012 for further details on the Tedworth Drummer incident and Belsey 2019 for discussion of the ghost in *Hamlet.*

[9] Horace Walpole also attended one of the Cock Lane séances, though he was apparently disappointed by the performance.

> "The association of early cinema with the supernatural is an important subject, but the trope of cinema in general and early cinema in particular as a haunted, spectral or magical space has been deployed in scholarship with too little attention to historical specifics—often relying on generalized and ahistorical invocations of the supernatural" (2017: 3).

The techniques of filmmaking developed during the early cinema period *allow* for the creation of the supernatural on-screen, making the medium ideal for stories involving the supernatural, without cinema itself needing to be haunted. Given Leeder's focus on other technologies surrounding early cinema that likewise impact the experience of the supernatural, such as spirit photography, his work is valuable in terms of historical context, yet he does not explore the specific filmmaking techniques that allow for a creation of ghosts since this falls outside of the scope of his project.

Barry Curtis' 2008 architectural exploration of haunted space on film, *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film*, appears to occupy a similar theoretical space to this thesis. Yet Curtis does not restrict his discussion to the contemporary Gothic horror film, also examining the use of the haunted space within film noir, Expressionism and science fiction, and nor does he restrict himself to houses. His study is an introduction to haunted *space* on film, although it is still valuable for this thesis through its emphasis on historical context. These historical considerations allow for a better understanding of the Gothic overtones or iconography of the haunted house film, such as the representation of spirit contact, or the importance of sound. While Curtis does, on occasion, discuss specific uses of cinematography, set design and sound design, it is not sustained throughout the study, no doubt due to space constraints. Therefore, my thesis sits alongside Curtis' work as an extension of those areas left under-explored.

In his 2020 survey, *The Haunted House on Film: An Historical Analysis*, Paul Meehan explores the themes common to cinematic haunted houses, and while the book is a valuable discussion of haunted house films, the approach taken is a history of haunted house films told through case studies (2020). Other academic engagement with hauntings and ghosts on film comes in the form of book chapters, notably in the Murray Leeder-edited collection, *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era* (2015). Leeder acknowledges in the introduction that ghosts are not merely a metaphor, that "[t]hey are part of the worldview of billions, and the modernity has brought with it the hopes that we might document ghosts, objectively and scientifically, using modern media"

(2015: 2). He also acknowledges the abilities of early trick filmmakers to produce scenes of ghostly manifestations precisely due to "[c]inema's capacity for substitutions, transpositions, and other tricks" (2015: 4). Leeder even describes cinema as "a haunted medium, a haunting medium, a medium that puts us in touch with ghosts" (2015: 8), thereby encapsulating the capabilities that cinema has for rendering supernatural figures. Leeder's collection notes the popularity of readings of the ghost as a metaphorical spectre yet rejects psychoanalytic readings to focus upon the cinematic ghost. The essays cover a range of approaches, including critical reception (Jancovich 2015), auteur theory (Cinquegrani 2015) and socioeconomic (Murphy 2015), although many essays engage with the technical practices of filmmaking, including sound design, silent cinema inter-titles, and visual effects. Leeder notes this is the first collection of its kind dedicated to the cinematic ghost, and I situate my own analysis alongside this body of work.

Haunting

In order to place this work within Bazin's context of the psychological realism afforded by cinema, I take my definition of 'haunted' and 'haunting' from parapsychologist James Houran, who splits activity explicitly related to haunted houses into two groups. The first is "poltergeist disturbances", including "apparitions, sensed presences, hearing voices, and unusual somatic or emotional manifestations" (2020: 2). The second is "physical events", including such phenomena as "objects appearing to move by themselves, malfunctioning electrical or mechanical equipment, and inexplicable percussive sounds such as raps or knocks" (2020: 2). The persistence of such activity in a location elevates episodes to a haunting (Houran et. al. 2020: 2). At those points where I deviate from this definition grounded in parapsychology to discuss an instance of metaphorical haunting, this will be indicated in the text as being a moment of metaphorical haunting.

I also follow Leeder's example in taking the definition of 'supernatural' to mean "an order of existence beyond what is pragmatically visible and observable, an order of existence that is paranormal in the sense that it supposedly defies the laws of nature" (Anderson 2003: 125). While 'supernatural' also includes religious or 'divine' experiences, here I use it in relation to whether human consciousness can survive beyond death and return to communicate with the living.

Hauntology

Given the emphasis on haunting, and the ability for cinema to make visible the mechanisms of spectrality, hauntology offers value as a theoretical framework, although it is a term that by now has been so over-used as to potentially strip it of its meaning. Jacques Derrida coined the term 'hantologie' in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994), which created the field of hauntology. Despite his role in creating the term, the theorists that expanded the concept have been more influential in its cultural applications. Fisher was instrumental in bringing hauntology to a wider audience, and Fisher, Katy Shaw, and Merlin Coverley have helped to define my understanding of hauntology in order for me to examine the hauntological ramifications of these films.

While hauntology deals in metaphorical spectres, it provides a useful critical framework with which to view literal ghosts through its disruption of time; "In dissolving the separation between now and then, the specter points towards the dual directions of hauntology—the compulsion to repeat the past, and an anticipation of the future" (Shaw 2018: 2). As Shaw points out, ghosts "defy time and space" and in doing so, they "disturb the present with the possibility of alternative pasts and futures" (Shaw 2018: 7). There is a Gothic element to this bringing the past into the present, one which depends upon the space in which it occurs, discussed below. The haunting draws attention to space; it could occur nowhere else due to the connection between the ghost and the space, which exists irrespective of the time in which the ghost appears.

There is an element of the weird to this; where Fisher sees the weird as being the entry into this world by an entity from another, the present and past are worlds that *should* remain separate. The arrival of the living in the space claimed by the ghost sees these worlds collide, while this forced interaction between the living and dead "encourages an 'existential orientation' in the haunted subject, making the living consider the precarious boundary between being and non-being" (Shaw 2018: 2). The weird requires a change to be wrought in the world by the invading entity, which is often enacted by the changes made to the set by the living upon moving into the new home. The ghost may rebel against these 'unauthorised' changes to the physical space, and it "functions to highlight what has gone before us, to remind us of our responsibility to live consciously of this, and to use this knowledge to inform the future" (Shaw 2018: 12).

Hauntology has been deployed across a range of cultural areas, notably within music criticism, with writers such as Fisher exploring the tendency of music from the past to 'haunt' contemporary music. Shaw notes that "[a]s critical vehicles capable of disrupting the

narrative present, spectral visitations can perhaps be best understood as responses to our own cultural moment and the anxieties pertinent to our age" (2018: 14). While Shaw discusses the twenty-first century in Britain, the accelerated production of narratives about ghosts since 1999 would suggest simultaneous anxieties in the US. As explained above, the spectre of *The Amityville Horror* haunts haunted house films, prompted by the cultural 'stuckness' created by neoliberalism. Yet hauntology can work literally and examine the returning ghost as a representative of the past, of both the haunted house and the wider cultural landscape. I wish to return the ghost, and the house that it haunts, to the realm of hauntology through this exploration of Gothic space on film.

Hauntology even overlaps with the eerie since the exploration of the eruption of the that-has-been and that-which-will-be into the present calls into question both presence and absence. The ghost acts as both a presence, as an agent capable of independent action, and an absence through the presence of a person who no longer exists. Where the eerie requires doubt around the nature of this agent, being dispelled once the agent's identity becomes clear or their motivations emerge, hauntology still permits the presence/absence dichotomy to exist. The idea of 'the virtual' becomes important to hauntology "since the specter is not of the here-and-now, yet is capable of exercising a spectral causality over the living" (Shaw 2018: 2). This exemplifies the push/pull between presence and absence once the eerie has been satisfied. 'Virtual' does not indicate that the ghost is like a flickering digital hologram, except perhaps in the case of Samara. Rather, it refers to an entity that is here, yet it did not emerge from this moment in time and exerts influence in the here-and-now.

Hauntology is about the impact of the virtual upon the real, explained by Fisher through the impact of largely intangible capital upon society (2016: 18). It is worth noting that capital is one of the invisible forces in these films; while I examine ghosts created through film techniques, whether these ghosts are fully-fledged apparitions or not, the wider context remains capitalism. Capital therefore exerts an influence throughout the haunting, contributing to the sense of precarity common to these films in a neoliberal age, while referencing the denaturalising nature of the weird, explored more fully below. It is important to note cinema itself is a virtual medium, both through the ephemeral nature of the film, particularly in the age of digital filmmaking, but also through the creation of a diegetic space that does not exist outside of the film. Even films made on location curate the settings used for the film, meaning the film and its physical location never fully align. Following this logic, the ghost haunts what does not technically exist, yet audiences watch these narratives because they want to "see" a ghost. This complements the contemporary interest in paranormal

investigation, brought into the realm of public entertainment in 1977 with episode 12 of the television show *In Search Of* (H. G. Stark, 1977), and introduced to cinema in 1982 with *Poltergeist*. The cinema offers the audience the opportunity to experience a haunting, albeit a virtual one, reflecting the hauntological nature of these films. Using a hauntological approach, cinema is haunted by not only the spectre of *The Amityville Horror*, but also the development of pre-cinema technologies that coincide with significant cultural moments, such as spirit photography and the Phantasmagoria. This helps to explain both the desire to understand the spectre as an avatar of trauma, since the twentieth-century peak of spiritualist activity coincided with events such as the end of the First World War and the subsequent influenza pandemic, but also the construction of a tangible ghost through technology and the manipulation of the audience's attention.

It is important to note within hauntology that it is not always the deep past that returns, but rather the past of living memory. This holds true for the films within this discussion, since the ghosts lie either within the past of the characters, or within the living memory of the community. This preoccupation with time is likewise an important aspect of hauntology, with its two directions being *no longer* and *not yet*. The former remains active through the compulsion to repeat the past, while the future may not yet have happened, yet exists in the virtual to shape current events (Fisher 2014: 19, emphasis in original). The non-linear nature of filmmaking, in which scenes are shot out of order, places the hauntings of these films in both of these directions at once.

The Uncanny

Any examination of hauntings eventually runs into the uncanny. Sigmund Freud's conception of the uncanny is perhaps the most influential, preoccupied as it is with the importance of the familiar made unfamiliar, and vice versa (1985 [1919]).[10] His work on the return of the repressed is perhaps the most striking element of the essay that continues to appear within psychoanalytical readings of horror films, particularly Robin Wood's work. Yet it was not the first discussion of the uncanny, since Ernst Jentsch published his work, 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny', in 1906. Jentsch considers the uncanny to be more of an intellectual

[10] Freud also added a fear of the animate made inanimate (and its reverse process), fears of dismemberment or blindness, the phenomenon of the double, involuntary repetition, an irrational fear of primitive forms (e.g. animism), and a fear of premature burial to this list of those things capable of creating an uncanny effect.

uncertainty, related to "a lack of orientation" (1997 [1906]: 8). It is this intellectual inability of a person to find their way in their surroundings that provokes the uncanny.

Jacques Lacan revisited the uncanny in the early 1960s, exploring the association between the uncanny and anxiety. In this idea, it is "not just that what is homely can be rendered unhomely, uncanny, unfamiliar, it's that behind [an] uncanny and frightening image hides something more dangerous, more threatening, and unrepresentable" (Hewitson 2023). It is the uncertainty about what lies *beyond* the image that creates the anxiety. Julia Kristeva's work on abjection involves the uncanny, in relation to that which is cast out or repelled (1982). An observer may recognise what the 'thing' was prior to its ejection, while simultaneously being repulsed by the cause of its ejection; this moment gives rise to the uncanny. More recently, Masahiro Mori explored the phenomenon of the uncanny valley, the range of emotional responses provoked by robots that appear almost human (2012).

Tzvetan Todorov's version of the uncanny, which forms part of the fantastic, relies upon the idea that an unusual event may have either a rational explanation, which encompasses the uncanny, or a supernatural one, which leads to the marvellous. The fantastic occupies the liminal space between these two binaries and lasts for the duration of the doubt as to whether the event is supernatural. Todorov notes the appearance of these modes within the Gothic, through "the supernatural explained" approach preferred by Mrs Radcliffe and "the supernatural accepted" promoted by Horace Walpole (1975: 42). Yet Todorov's conception of the uncanny proves problematic in relation to the films in this thesis since the films present the supernatural as an unequivocal part of the universe in which each film is set. They cannot create the hesitation required for the fantastic and instead, the films sit within the marvellous. While any of these incarnations of the uncanny may prove useful to Film Studies, it also relies upon the element of doubt to function. The material nature of the hauntings in these films removes doubt, making the weird and the eerie more valuable.

The Weird and Eerie

While the uncanny has been a popular lens through which to view haunting, Fisher's work on the weird and the eerie, briefly introduced earlier, provides a different perspective from which to view haunted house narratives. This is an ideal viewpoint since the weird and the eerie share a common feature, "a preoccupation with the strange. The strange—not the horrific" (2016: 8). Fisher posits that this preoccupation comes less from a position of wanting to be scared, and more from a fascination for "that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience" (2016: 8). This fascination places the viewer outside

events, and this works well with the approach of this thesis, to occupy a position that emphasises the technologies used to create the depicted supernatural events.

Fisher characterises the weird as being "that *which does not belong*" (2016: 10, emphasis in original). The emphasis remains on the juxtaposition between the apparently weird elements within the narrative, and the elements characterised as being part of the material world. The impossibility of reconciliation between the two creates a sense of the weird. It forces a re-evaluation of the concepts we have used to make sense of the world. Yet as I argue, in these films, the weird elements are the *living*, not the dead, and this conclusion is drawn from the ways in which the technical aspects of filmmaking are used. While Fisher discusses aspects of the weird that create the juxtaposition through the arrival of something alien or beyond comprehension, he also acknowledges the weird through the work of HG Wells and David Lynch, with a focus upon the weird existing at the "threshold between worlds" (2016: 28). Doorways and windows may act as portals between the worlds astride this threshold, where "the notion of *the between* is crucial to the weird" (2016: 28). While this finds a literal counterpart in these films through the reading of the set, the frame itself acts as a window, dividing on-screen and off-screen space into separate worlds, and the movement of the frame, like the weird, destabilises these spaces. The element of destabilisation caused by the weird, its sense of disruption of the accepted order, creates a sense of things being out of place and time, without the alien or the unspeakable always being necessary. While there is a sense of *wrongness* to the weird, it can be read in two ways. First, that the thing should not exist, or second, that it should not exist *here* (2016: 15, emphasis in original). This is my reading of the weird in relation to these films; the living are not weird because they are so alien they should not exist, as in cosmic horror, but rather they should not be *here*, in the space claimed by the dead or the demonic. Regarding the dead, the *wrongness* is a temporal one, created by the distance in time between the dead and the living, while it is a spatial one for the demonic, created by the encroachment of the living into a space not intended for them. The weird thing is not necessarily scary; it is the juxtaposition between the space and the individual or group that enters it that creates the weird. It is the spatial aspect to the weird that most interests me here, due to its compatibility with film and its preoccupation with space.

There is a process of denaturalisation within these films, in which the dead that have already claimed these spaces find themselves unsettled by the arrival of newcomers, or the demonic find the living intruding into their realms. That the audience sees the perspective of the interlopers encourages us to intuit that there is a prior presence in the space, and that any habitation can only be provisional. The existence of previous owners unsettles the possibility

of belonging in the space. Fisher also posits the weird as a way of understanding the inside by approaching it from the outside (2016: 10). My approach to reading the techniques of filmmaking follows a similar line, allowing for an understanding of the film through its method of construction, which necessitates a position on the outside in order to see these moving parts.

By comparison, the eerie is more concerned with ideas around agency; "What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all?" (Fisher 2016: 11). While Fisher posits that the eerie "seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces", finding the eerie more likely "in landscapes partially emptied of the human" (2016: 11), I argue that the notion of presence and absence within the eerie still holds meaning within haunted house narratives. As Fisher explains, "[t]he perspective of the eerie can give us access to the forces which govern mundane reality but which are ordinarily obscured, just as it can give us access to spaces beyond mundane reality altogether" (2016: 13). The realm of the dead is surely a space beyond reality, and the eerie allows the living glimpses into this realm. These films become cinematic examples of these "landscapes partially emptied of the human", populated as they are with the shades of the dead. They borrow this concept of elastic spaces populated by the dead from earlier titles, including *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) and the Italian film *The Beyond* (Lucio Fulci, 1981).

Fisher discusses the inside/outside binary that characterises the weird and the eerie, where "they allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside" (2016: 10). In haunted house films, the weird and the eerie give the living protagonists a perspective into another realm that exists both within and alongside our own. In some ways, the collision between the worlds of the living and the dead that introduces the weird also allows the living to see the inside of their own world from a perspective obscured to those unaffected by the supernatural. Yet the two modes not only encourage a perspective from the outside in, but they also force us to venture inside and confront what is, or is not, inside with us. The eerie demands an investigation of the presence or absence that so characterises the space, while the weird requires the living to examine the juxtaposition in order to either abandon the space, or to find a way to integrate with the dead so as to continue to inhabit the now-shared space.

Space and Belonging

Given the reliance of the weird and the eerie on space, and what belongs in it, it is worth defining what is meant by the terms, 'space', 'place', and 'belonging'. Space and place are intertwined, and for Michel de Certeau, place is "an instantaneous configuration of positions.

It implies an indication of stability" (1988: 117). Things have their "own 'proper' and distinct location", and they exist in relation to one another (1988: 117). Meanwhile, space involves time, speed, and direction. Where elements have a defined location in a place, their mobility generates space, and space lacks the stability of place (1988: 117). Space also requires activity within a place to give it meaning; "In short, *space is a practiced place*" (1988: 117, emphasis in original). De Certeau gives the example of a street defined as a place by planners and turned into a space by those moving along it (1988: 117). This can be applied to the domestic space in which the house, as place, provides the "distinct location" and stability, and the activities within it create a sense of space. The nature of these activities colours this space as specifically 'domestic space', discussed in the next section.

The distinction also applies to the house on film, since the set or location provides a place, but is transformed into a space through the movement of the camera or actors within it. While my focus is upon these techniques of filmmaking, an acknowledgment of narrative is necessary since "[s]tories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places. They also organize the play of changing relationships between places and spaces" (de Certeau 1988: 118). Where necessary, the discussion acknowledges the narrative that organises activities within the domestic space.

The dimensions of a given space dictate what happens within it, but this also gives rise to the idea of boundaries. De Certeau raises "the traditional language of court proceedings" as part of his discussion of boundaries (1988: 122). This formalises a boundary as a fixed point that determines the scope of a space; the activities within or along its edge characterises the space. For David Morley, the concept of belonging is related to one of boundaries, asking who may define who belongs or what to exclude (2001: 432). In the films in this thesis, the *psychic* boundary of the house is porous, rather than its physical boundary, which forces the living into contact with the supernatural. Technology has helped undermine these clear physical borders, collapsing physical distances to create elasticity in the domestic space. Morley describes the home as "a 'phantasmagoric' place, to the extent that electronic media of various kinds allow the intrusion of distant events into the space of domesticity [...and] the 'far away' is now irredeemably mixed in with the space of the near" (2001: 428). This use of technology to cross a physical boundary aligns media with the ability of the supernatural to cross the psychic boundary of the house, which is explored in this thesis.

I follow de Certeau's suggestion of legal frameworks to define boundaries, and thus belonging within them, and I use 'belonging' in terms of whether a character has a claim to be within the specific domestic place of the supernaturally besieged address, the audio-visual

space, or even supernatural space, named in the films as the Other Side or the Further, as two examples. Yet such questions of belonging are poignant for these films set in the United States, given the contested nature of the land. For Renée L. Bergland, "[i]n another context, setting out to build a haunted house would be absurd. However, in America, where every white house displaces an Indian one [...] it may be inevitable" (2000: 60). Other theorists note similar issues, and for Teresa A. Goddu, "American gothic literature criticizes America's national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation's claim to purity and equality" (1997: 10). These haunted house films subtly criticise the foundation of the nation, since the difficulties in belonging may stem from this distorted beginning, which also contributes to the sense of cultural stasis.

Yet for Goddu, "the American gothic is haunted by race" (1997: 7). She identifies the South in particular as being "haunted by the ghosts of slavery" (1997: 76), and while the Transatlantic Slave Trade casts a long shadow across the foundation myths of the United States, it is not the *only* shadow. In her focus upon a genesis for American Gothic, Goddu often overlooks the genocide waged against the Indigenous population from the initial landing in what would become the United States, barbaric treatment that continues into the present. This land theft has ramifications within Gothic texts, particularly the films in this thesis in which an inability to belong within a domestic space because neoliberalism has foreclosed the future echoes an unspoken discomfort about living on stolen land; its inhabitants have likewise had their futures distorted. The appropriation of Indigenous land is not the *only* contributing factor to an anxiety about the ability to belong, since "[e]ven a cursory examination of US history shows that since its inception it has grown tremendously in terms of both territory and power" (Höglund 2014: 2). Johan Höglund discusses the establishment and maintenance of the US empire, and this colonial project could also contribute to a pervading sense that homes are not *quite* available to live in since the land on which they are built is not rightfully American.

Höglund also points out that "the American gothic becomes increasingly imperial and frequently casts the United States as a vortex of modernity beleaguered by the gothic Other" following the 11 September 2001 attacks (2014: 3). This helps to explain the sudden acceleration in haunted house film production from 2002 onwards. As Höglund notes, the American imperial gothic is concerned with "the profound anxiety connected to the experience that these borders are, indeed, constantly challenged, that the gothic Other is at the door" (2014: 3). My reading of these films complicates "the gothic's preoccupation with images of insidious, military, alien or gothic counter-invasions" (Höglund 2014: 19) since

applying Fisher's work to the cinematic technologies used to create the films reveals that invasion is a problematic concept when the dead or demonic were either already within the space, or they were invited into it by characters who transgressed into *their* space. Gothic as a mode offers two possibilities; revealing the monstrosity of modernity and offering a critique, while also reinforcing modernity's ideals and supporting colonial projects (Höglund 2014: 12). These films walk the line between those modes, critiquing the isolation created both by the suburbs and neoliberalism, while supporting the drive to own a single-family home.

Rebecca Duncan discusses the grand narratives of modernism and their contribution to the assumption that Western society is more enlightened, progressive, and emancipated (2022b: 305). As she explains, "Gothic as haunting becomes a means for hollowing out the narrative of modernity, revealing this to be precisely *only a narrative*, spectral and imperfect" (2022b: 308). The materiality of the ghost becomes important as it forces a confrontation with the dead and disturbs the modernist assumption that civilisation may control nature. As supernatural figures, ghosts and the demonic disrupt the boundaries of nature. Yet for Duncan, postcolonial Gothic is limited in its reference to a haunting reminder of colonialism, which implies that we live within an epoch *after* colonialism. Decolonial thinking, by comparison, recognises that "the history of colonial power remains as-yet unconcluded" (2022a: 220). The ease with which the families in these films seek to jettison existing supernatural entities from their homes suggests the continuation of this colonial legacy.

'Home' and the Domestic Space

The domestic space is intrinsically linked to the idea of home, a slippery term which can "mean both the physical place—the domestic household—and symbolic ideas of *Heimat*—the 'spaces of belonging' (and identity) at different geographical scales" (Morley 2001: 425). Yet in earlier work, David Morley also notes that "in the West a home is […] inscribed in the particular physical structure of a house" (2000: 19). Given the United States-based focus of these films, this is the principle that I apply when discussing the house, particularly since this focus upon the physical structure aligns with my analysis of set design, which comprises the physical structure of the house on screen. For the purposes of this thesis, concerned as it is with the physical nature of filmmaking, 'home' refers to the physical place of the house or apartment featured in the narrative, reflecting the film's depiction of this domestic space.

To conceptualise this domestic space, I use the work of Gaston Bachelard to frame the discussions of the house and its internal space; he explains that "a house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its

reality; to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house" (1994 [1958]: 17). This "body of images" that comprises the house is read in relation to film as the set design that comprises the house and the cinematography that captures the set. Within cinema, the body of images has an additional aural component, since sound design renders interaction with the set as audible, such as footsteps. Changes to the set, either through the intervention of the ghost or the interior design efforts of new inhabitants, forces a re-imagining of the house's reality through a reconstruction of its body of images.

Bachelard's work on the domestic space has a decidedly Gothic component, albeit through the spectral turn, since he engages with the ways by which previous occupants and their lives within the property may linger, remaining part of the house's body of images, since "[t]he function of inhabiting constitutes the link between full and empty. A living creature fills an empty refuge, images inhabit, and all corners are haunted, if not inhabited" (1994 [1958]: 140). Bachelard acknowledges the weight of presence that continues to haunt a house, even if the house is empty, thus revealing the importance of the domestic space to these films. Steffan Hantke supports this point, since "[v]isualizing the spectral presence of the ghost by registering its negative imprint on the space surrounding it [...] explains why so many horror films about ghosts are really films about the space they haunt" (2015: 184).

Bachelard primarily sees the house as a space in which to dream and imagine, and the phenomenological approach of his work also supports an engagement with Affect Studies, since "[a] house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space" (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 47). The fact that someone has *lived* in a house elevates it beyond its status as a building, and it becomes a space in which lived experience can occur, an approach which supports my work examining the ways in which these films present hauntings as a diegetic reality.

Gothic Space

Space is and always has been intrinsic to the Gothic. As Baldick notes, "[f]or the Gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration" (1993: xix). In this thesis, I define Gothic space as being the combination of the material space of the film's setting and the weight of its history. As Fred Botting explains, "[p]hysical locations and settings manifest disturbance and ambivalence in spatial terms as movements between inside and out" (2015:

4). The crossing of boundaries is dependent on the physical setting, engendered in these films through set design.

Even following its evolution from medieval settings to contemporary time periods, Gothic narratives kept "the enclosed spaces of the old building, with further associations of the past's destructive cruelty" (Baldick 1993: xv). Baldick notes the importance of this "enclosed space" to a Gothic story (1993: xv), and this association between the space and the past reveals the link between time and space that characterises Gothic space. This does not imply that all space is Gothic because Gothic space requires a combination of the *nature* of the events and the space. Gothic space offers an uneasy co-existence between the past and present, though it is the slippage of time, where "the tyranny of the past [comes to] stifle the hopes of the present" (Baldick 1993: xix), that makes the Gothic nature of the space apparent. In haunted house films, this can become visible through changes to the set décor, or the accumulation of physical belongings left by earlier occupants.

Through its embrace of time, Gothic space is larger than the physical space it occupies, since the Gothic is characterised by "patterns of transgression, excess and monstrosity" (Botting 2015: 8). Here, it is the excess of space, and the transgression across its borders, that becomes important to Gothic space. This excess does not apply only to the physical space of the set, or the amount of the set revealed and concealed by the movement of the frame; there is also too much diegetic space, where technology opens into supernatural realms and walls cover cavities used to hide bodies. This 'excess' references the plasticity of cinematographic space and acoustic space as it expands beyond the frame to encompass a turbulent past. Gothic space in the haunted house film occurs at the intersection of supernatural space, built space, acoustic space, and both on- and off-screen space, harnessing the technologies required to form this Gothic space on film.

Noël Burch

Gothic space is visualised on screen through cinematography, and Noël Burch's text, *Theory of Film Practice* (1973), has proven influential when examining the use of cinematography techniques regarding space. Burch divides the space of the film into on-screen and off-screen space; on-screen space lies within the frame, while off-screen space lies outside of the frame and is divided into six segments (1973: 17). It is the movement of elements within and between these segments that is helpful when considering the link between framing and the eerie. The off-screen segments become the liminal zone of Gothic space, and the space in which the agent makes its presence known. By keeping supernatural activity in the off-screen

space, the haunting can be extended to the audience, whose awareness of the ghost is dictated by the movement of the frame. Burch also discusses the relationship between the image and sound, further demonstrating how these technical disciplines depend upon each other to create a holistic presentation of the supernatural. This relies upon the use of off-screen space, with sound effects often emanating from beyond the frame. That said, the use of off-screen sound can also allow the audience to locate the ghost within the on-screen space, where the sound interacts with the materials used within the set. This removes the doubt as to the ghost's existence.

Filmic Techniques

When discussing the technical aspects of filmmaking, where possible, I have drawn from texts written by practitioners for practitioners. These detail how the disciplines work on a practical level and provide the terminology necessary to understand design choices made throughout the filmmaking process. For cinematography, the focus is upon *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die: The Power of Color in Visual Storytelling* (Bellantoni 2005), *Painting with Light* (Alton 1995), *Cinematography: Theory and Practice: Image Making for Cinematographers and Directors* (Brown 2012), *Cinematography: The Classic Guide to Filmmaking* (Malkiewicz and Mullen 2005), and *The Five C's of Cinematography: Motion Picture Filming Techniques* (Mascelli 1965). While some of these books might appear 'old', the principles of cinematography remain largely unchanged since the earliest years of cinema, and where updated editions exist, the updates merely include newer technology. The primary of such texts for set design is *Production Design for Screen: Visual Storytelling in Film and Television* (Barnwell 2017). Jane Barnwell notes about the text that "[p]revious studies tend to concentrate on either practice or theory. The approach discussed here employs the methodology of practitioners to inform both practice and theory" (2017: 7). For sound, the supporting text is *Sound Design: The Expressive Power of Music, Voice and Sound Effects in Cinema* (Sonnenschein 2001). While music and voice lie beyond the scope of this thesis, the discussion of sound design provides a director's insights into how and why particular soundscapes are developed. Such insights are invaluable in understanding how a haunting may be constructed through technology. That said, I have also found value in the work of specific theoretical work about each of the disciplines.

The taxonomy of set design, encompassing five distinct sets, developed by Charles and Mirella Affron in the 1990s is crucial to the discussion of set design within these films. At one end of the spectrum is the Set as Denotation, which establishes a time period, location,

and general overview of the characters involved with that set (1995: 37). The Set as Artifice lies at the other end of the spectrum, in which the set is so prominent that it allows the filmmaker to create unfamiliar and often unreal spaces (1995: 39). The Set as Narrative lies somewhat beyond this spectrum, since these films restrict the action to a single location that is so intrinsic to the narrative that it could not take place anywhere else (1995: 39). Reading the changes within a single set, or the differences between presented sets, allows for a better understanding of how spectral forces appear in the ways that they do. It returns the focus to the physical space of the activity, providing the material world with which the ghosts may interact, and this constructed space provides the location required by Gothic space and its role within a haunting. The eruption of spectral forces is often marked by changes within the set, such as the family pictures cast from a staircase wall in *The Conjuring*.

The work of Michel Chion has been most valuable when considering sound design. Chion is both a film theorist and a composer, and his work *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (1994) focused on the relationship between audio and visuals. It was one of the most influential books to consider the audio-visual experience as a whole, rather than focusing on sound *or* visuals. As Chion explains, "the reality of the audiovisual combination [is] that one perception influences the other and transforms it" (1994: xxvi). Chion's work provided much of the terminology used when discussing sound design in this thesis, which is explored further below, and his work also modelled how a reading of sound design can enrich an understanding of a film. It also demonstrates how the filmmaking process cannot be read in isolation, with the use of sound dependent on both the set design and cinematography to produce a coherent film. These films depend upon sound to underscore the nature of the materials that comprise the set, such as the continual creaking in the remake of *The Amityville Horror* to support the wooden construction of the house, while sound also draws the audience's attention to what they *cannot* see beyond the limits of the frame, thus creating temporary instances of the eerie until the source of the sound is revealed. Here, Todorov's theory of the fantastic proves to be relevant, where this instance of the eerie coincides with the uncertainty as to whether the sound has a rational or supernatural explanation.

Historical Contexts

This section discusses the historical context of the period from 1979 until 2015. It begins with a justification for the choice of this period, before examining American affluence during this

time, which underpins much of the narrative around the buying, selling, and renting of property necessary to the haunted house film, which was established with *The Amityville Horror*. Next, it explores the development of technology in this period, given the heavy focus on technology in these films, before discussing wider horror film production in this period.

The Choice of Time Period

I have chosen 1979 as the advent of the contemporary haunted house film due to the release of the original *Amityville Horror* film in that year, bringing the haunted house film back into mainstream cinema, while the upswing in the wider horror genre's popularity saw a new fan engagement with the genre through the creation of magazines. Fangoria launched in 1979, with Cinefex established in 1980, and such magazines examined the production of films, including conceptual art and interviews with the filmmakers. This focus on the technical elements of cinema demonstrated a renewed engagement with horror, particularly exploring its production methods through the same technical aspects emphasised in this thesis.[11] As an example, issue 10 of Cinefex features the article 'Stilling the Restless Animus' by Paul Mandell, in which visual effects supervisor Richard Edlund, mechanical effects supervisor Michael Wood and special makeup effects artist Craig Reardon discuss the making of *Poltergeist*. Issue 7 of Fangoria explored both the special effects and production design of *The Shining*, noting that much of the film's feeling of unease comes from Stanley Kubrick's personal selections "of odd furniture, creepy paintings and unusual props" (Wynorski 1980: 22). Such articles focus less on the stars or general publicity of the films, as was the case with the earlier *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine, and more on the technical aspects of their construction, demonstrating a greater emphasis on visual effects within horror. Even influential cultural institutions embraced filmmaking's technical aspects. In 1978, MoMA in New York held its 'Designed for Film: The Hollywood Art Director' exhibition. It was the first major celebration of the art director's contribution held outside the film industry. It suggested to the public that "designers impacted on the look of a film in individual ways" (Barnwell 2017: 7).

The late 1970s also saw a change in sound technology. Dolby technology arrived earlier in the decade, though the first use of the term 'sound design' as a screen credit was for

[11] This interest gained new outlets following the new burst or production in the twenty-first century, and Tamao Nakahara points out that the proliferation of additional material on DVDs, as well as film features in fanzines, allows fans to engage with the films, "often reading meaning into every detail" (2010: 140).

Apocalypse Now (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). This term created a holistic approach to sound design, stretching from pre- to post-production, while highlighting its importance to the film (Greene 2016: 3). The new interest in the discipline of sound design coincides with this greater fascination with the technical aspects of filmmaking, while capitalising on the earlier success of *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and its impact on sound design in horror. While *The Exorcist* is not a haunted house film, it could be claimed as a prototype for the ghost films that followed.

The release of *The Amityville Horror* marks the beginning of the mainstream contemporary haunted house film, rather than the contemporary horror film more broadly speaking.[12] The film claimed to be based on a true story, although it would be fairer to say it was based on Jay Anson's book of the same name, published in 1977. This was not the first time a horror film claimed to be based on real events, although it marked a turning point in the haunted house sub-genre.[13] The alleged veracity of the book and subsequent film conferred a degree of credibility on the subject, and its apparent authenticity marked a different engagement with the paranormal. Its lack of scepticism about its contents discouraged interpretation of the supernatural events. It also introduced the nature of the investigation to the haunted house film, with characters penetrating the history of the house to understand events within it, which paralleled the growing interest in paranormal investigation.[14]

Such a focus on 'based on a true story' also appears in the films set within *The Conjuring* universe, with their tangential links to the Warrens' case files acting as a badge of authenticity for the narrative. While the *Paranormal Activity* films are not based on a true story, their status as found footage relies on the conceit they are real. Surprisingly, this approach is not present for the other films in this thesis, or historical examples of the haunted house film, such as *The Innocents* (Jack Clayton, 1961) or *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963), which present as fictional narratives and are based upon novels. That said, where the relationship to real events occurs, it lends weight to the materiality of the depicted haunting.

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[12] Arguments exist that contemporary horror began as early as 1968. Yet the films within this earlier period of horror filmmaking do not include haunted house films, which makes it easier to locate a starting point for the contemporary form of the sub-genre.

[13] *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) would be a notable example in which the link between 'true events' and the film's content is tenuous at best.

[14] The 'Ghosts' episode of *In Search Of*, presented by Hans Holzer in 1977, sets the template for ghost hunting shows that would be later picked up by *Most Haunted* in 2002.

The period from 1979 until the present day has also been marked by a different mode of production, one characterised by sequels, remakes, and re-imaginings. The concept of the franchise allows monsters to return, and hauntings to recur, with each film in the series. This is unsurprising since several Gothic critics note that the inability of the monster to stay dead and its predictable return is a hallmark of the Gothic (Bloom 2010; Botting 1996; Spooner 2006). Several films in this thesis occur within franchises, including *Poltergeist*, the *Amityville Horror* films, *Paranormal Activity*, *Insidious* and *The Conjuring*, while the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a range of remakes of earlier films, including *The Ring* and *The Amityville Horror*.

American Affluence in This Period

With the release of *The Amityville Horror*, the house and its acquisition became intrinsically linked, something that reverberates through horror production in the twenty-first century. Horror novelist Stephen King identified that the success of the film was because "the picture's subtext is one of economic unease", and notes it "could not have come along at a more opportune moment" (2010: 151). The relationship between the house and affluence has continued into the contemporary moment, backed by a wider neoliberal approach to economics. For Karen E. Macfarlane, the house "is a symbol of the American position in the shattered global economy. It is a sign for affluence, American history and entrepreneurial spirit" (2017: 146). It meets its opposite in the so-called "terrible house", which for Robin Wood, "stems from a long tradition in American (and Western) capitalist culture. [...] Traditionally, it represents an extension or 'objectification' of the personalities of the inhabitants" (Wood 2018: 97). The neoliberal house is an object that represents affluence rather than family, while the terrible house objectifies the family and represents the worst excesses of its inhabitants.

Yet it is worth examining data as to whether the fears regarding the house are justified or based on perceived financial instability. The homeownership rate has remained between 61% and 65% since 1960, and it stabilised in the early 1990s after a decline during the 1980s (USHMC 1994). It rose throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, peaking at 69% in 2004. The US Census Bureau defines the homeownership rate as being the percentage of homes occupied by the owner (US Census Bureau 2023: 12). This makes it difficult to gauge households in which non-homeowning adults live within a property *alongside* the owner. It also includes those who own their property alongside households with a mortgage. This combination of mortgages and the occupation of houses without direct ownership may help to

explain feelings of precarity around property occupation. Renting offers its own issues since almost 25% of renters face housing costs that are more than half of their household expenditures (Dawkins 2021: 3). The foreclosure crisis prompted by the subprime mortgage crisis between 2007 and 2009 forced 7.8 million houses to foreclose (Dawkins 2021: 4); this crisis has been replaced by a crisis in housing affordability.

While the median household income increased at an average rate of 1.2% per year between 1970 and 2000, the growth of household income dropped to 0.3% between 2000 and 2018 (Horowitz et. al. 2020). The American middle class has shrunk from 61% of adults in 1971 to 51% in 2019, meaning that a higher share of household income goes to upper-income households, rather than middle- and lower-income households (Horowitz et. al. 2020). In this research, households were assigned to the upper, middle, and lower-income tiers based on a size-adjusted income, scaled to reflect a household comprised of three people. Precarity may not be attributed to ownership alone, but rather the varying levels of household income, pointing to a wider fiscal anxiety, rather than one solely associated with homeownership. Baldick also suggests that what separates Gothic narratives from wider horror stories is the preoccupation with "the antiquated tyrannies and dynastic corruptions of an aristocratic power" (1993: xxi). While this appears to disqualify the haunted house films discussed here, the vagaries of late-stage capitalism are in themselves tyrannical, and where earlier texts cast decadent aristocrats as a threat, impersonal financial institutions replace them in contemporary narratives.

Macfarlane discusses the relationship between the housing market and the haunted house in the first season of *American Horror Story* (Ryan Murphy, 2011), and while television lies beyond the discussion here, her remarks also apply to cinema. She identifies,

> "the conventional anxieties about the unfettered accumulation of territory through the dispossession that haunts the national narrative of the United States: that of the displaced Native population whose prior claim to land is most often represented by the synecdochal 'Indian Burial Ground' or the obvious exclusion of the always already dispossessed multi-generational poor" (2017: 146).

Macfarlane turns away from these anxieties and highlights a new one in which the American Dream itself dies, taking with it a sense of upward mobility and social stability (2017: 146). Following this hauntological concept, even the American Dream itself is haunted,

> "not only [...] by the ghosts of its own white bourgeois ideals but by the exclusions upon which those ideals were built: the dispossession of Native people from their lands, the ongoing segregation and disenfranchisement of people of colour, the hypocrisy inherent in discourses of immigration and upward mobility" (2017: 148).

For Macfarlane, the cause is neoliberalism, since its policies "kill off the ideal of the American home, leaving instead only its spectre, which haunts its replacement: the real estate investment" (2017: 148). While this may in part explain the financial anxiety present in post-2008 horror films, Herb Wyile also noted that the combination of policies leading to the housing crash dated to the 1980s (2013: 29). This explains why this sense of pervading unease and growing isolation hangs across these films from the late 1970s and into the 2020s. Yet in her discussion, Macfarlane also sidelines the ghosts in *American Horror Story*, preferring an economic reading in which the failure of the American Dream haunts the house. While this makes sense for a neoliberal analysis of the haunted house, it approaches the ghost as merely a representative of a concept, rather than a supernatural figure in their own right.

History also presents a combination of the supernatural and real estate. In 1991, Helen Ackley sold a Victorian property in Nyack, New York to Jeffrey Stambovsky. She did not mention alleged supernatural activity within the home during the sale, and Stambovsky took legal action over the lack of information provided about the haunting. While the New York State Supreme Court originally ruled against Stambovsky, an appeals court later ruled in his favour since Ackley had an obligation to disclose rumours of paranormal activity that might affect a property's value. While the court did not rule on whether the house was haunted, or if ghosts exist, they ruled the house was legally *considered* haunted (Meehan 2020: 7).

Such a connection between economic downturns and the re-emergence of the supernatural at the cinema is not new. Bernice M. Murphy examines the appearance of *Insidious*, *Sinister* (Scott Derrickson, 2012) and *The Conjuring* as symptomatic of the aftershocks of the global financial crisis, while it "can partially be attributed to the fact that economic crash has deepened the preexisting suspicion that the suburban way of life is one that cannot (and indeed, *should* not) be maintained" (2015: 243; emphasis in original). The appearance of such a suspicion at a time of economic calamity is part of the horror film's role, since as Wood notes, "[c]entral to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfilment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and that our moral

conditioning teaches us to revere" (2018: 85). Gothic horror becomes a critique of the suburban lifestyle that the dominant ideology seeks to protect. These films support Murphy's connection of the films with the failure of the *suburbs*, rather than housing as a whole, since the films set in the suburbs or rural locations see the family either abandoning the property or forcibly ejecting the ghost. Meanwhile, films set in cities see the living help the ghosts in their orbit, leading to the establishment of community (*The Sixth Sense*), the enactment of overdue justice (*Stir of Echoes*) or an uneasy armistice with the ghost (*The Ring*).

Technology and Haunting

Despite the precarious approach to home occupation, affluence can also be measured through the technological developments of the period. Technological developments before 2000 tended to be 'firsts' in terms of communications, or they pioneered changes in computing, such as the release of the IBM PC and MS-DOS in 1981, the launch of the first GPS satellite in 1989, or the technology required to avoid the Y2K bug in 1999. After 2000, technological developments have been concerned more with new iterations of consumer gadgets, such as the iPad, and the development of internet-based platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube (Gewirtz 2019). The number of 'firsts' declined as developers sought to streamline and improve existing technology. Consumer gadgets have made their way into horror cinema, as both props and the platform that enables the film's conceit to work, such as the Zoom-based séance film *Host* (Rob Savage, 2020), released during the first COVID lockdown in 2020.

Rapid technological development as a source of anxiety is a familiar element of the Gothic from the late nineteenth century, in which scientific innovation was "associated with alchemy and mystic powers" (Botting 2015: 116). Likewise, Curtis highlights the importance of scientific discoveries to hauntings, noting the discovery of "invisible rays", deep time, the telephone, and wireless radio "stimulated an interest in the possibility of spirit communication" (2008: 22). He also notes wider scientific developments, since the invention of cinema, the discovery of the X-ray and the earliest forms of psychoanalysis coincided at the end of the nineteenth century (2008: 150). The X-ray and psychoanalysis allowed practitioners to probe previously inaccessible interior spaces, both physical and mental, while the cinema allowed filmmakers to probe time and three-dimensional space.

These scientific developments coincide with considerations of the supernatural, and from the early days of spiritualism, believers sought evidence to support their beliefs through

the technological advancements of the late nineteenth century (Leeder 2017: 1).[15] Even inventor Thomas Edison dabbled with the supernatural, working on a so-called "spirit phone that would let the living communicate with the dead" (Tablang 2019). Edison dismissed the use of mediums yet was convinced that if communication with the dead was possible, it would be achieved using science. Such an attitude continues in the contemporary fascination with paranormal investigation and appears in haunted house films as early as 1963, with the scientific work depicted in *The Haunting*.

Technology also lay at the heart of supernaturally-themed entertainment once the Phantasmagoria developed out of earlier magic lantern shows, using special effects to create the illusion of supernatural activity.[16] These forms of entertainment paved the way for early cinema, and French stage magician turned filmmaker Georges Méliès developed techniques using multiple exposures and editing to create fantasy and horror on screen. British filmmakers such as G. A. Smith also made trick films using double exposures to create ghosts (Conrich 2009: 96). These films grew out of what Tom Gunning terms the "cinema of attractions" (1990: 57), emphasising the spectacle offered by cinema rather than its narrative. Such films predominated at the cinema before 1906, and as such, Méliès' early haunted house films such as *Le Manoir du Diable* (1896) can be considered as spectacle-driven rather than narrative-centric. The films in this thesis occur during waves of horror cinema that echo back to this spectacle-based cinema.

Ghosts continued to make appearances in films, and while an exhaustive study of the depiction of the supernatural in cinema lies beyond my scope, it is worth acknowledging those instances of film in which the technical elements of filmmaking were used to recreate supernatural moments in the decades before the period featured in the thesis to trace the heritage of the cinematic haunted houses in this thesis. British film *The Ghost Goes West* (René Clair, 1935) played the supernatural for laughs as a Scottish castle was dismantled and rebuilt in the United States, while double exposures allowed audiences to discern the castle's resident ghost from a lookalike descendant, with both played by Robert Donat. *The Seventh Victim* (Mark Robson, 1943) avoided overt supernatural elements, though its use of cinematography followed other RKO films of the decade in creating an atmosphere of tension and dread. In a far more overt display of supernatural spectacle, William Castle flew a glow-

[15] This includes the phonograph, telephone, camera obscura, X-ray, and kinetoscope (Leeder 2017: 1).
[16] See Warner 2006 for further discussion.

in-the-dark skeleton named Emergo above the cinema audience at a pivotal moment in *House on Haunted Hill* (1959) (Skal 1993: 257). The terrific banging on the walls in *The Haunting* and the bulging library door relied upon sound design and set design, while the supernatural impact of the viewpoint from inside the skull haunted by the Marquis de Sade in *The Skull* (Freddie Francis, 1965) relies on both cinematography and the acting skills of Peter Cushing.

The British horror film *The Legend of Hell House* (John Hough, 1973) makes an overt link between hauntings and technology, with séances documented by a scientist hired to investigate a haunted house. Contemporary audiences continue this desire to see paranormal investigation depicted in cinema through films such as *The Awakening* (Nick Murphy, 2011) and *Grave Encounters* (Colin Minihan, Stuart Ortiz, 2011). Each film depicts the ghost as an individual entity, rather than a metaphor, and the popularity of such films reflects an appetite for the paranormal across various forms of media, including podcasts, literature, ghost-hunting television shows, and the ever-popular city centre ghost walk tour.[17] As Katy Shaw notes, the ghost has been "[m]ade hyper-visible through the commercialization of ghosts as big business, and the popularity of haunting in tourist and heritage sites" (2018: 106).

Horror Film Production in the Period

The successful trend for religious-themed horror with a strong sense of place such as *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), *The Exorcist*, and *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976) helped to pave the way for *The Amityville Horror*, partly due to the Oscars won by all three films that conferred a degree of legitimacy on thrillers including demonic content. The 1970s and 1980s also saw a boom in horror fiction, notably led by Stephen King, whose novel *The Shining* (1977) was adapted for the screen and directed by critically-acclaimed director Stanley Kubrick in 1980.

As horror critic Kim Newman notes, "[f]rom the mid-1980s to the turn of the millennium, the classical ghost story was out of fashion" (2011: 410). The preference for body horror saw the release of a string of slashers, although both *The Amityville Horror* and *Poltergeist* each spawned two poorly-received sequels during the 1980s. Despite the commercial success of *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker, 1990) at the start of the decade, the 1990s saw a vogue for serial killers following the Oscar success of *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan

[17] As an example, The Paranormal Podcast began in 2005, with more podcasts dedicated to tales of real-life hauntings appearing every year.

Demme, 1991) and critical acclaim of *Seven* (David Fincher, 1995) and *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996). There were supernatural elements in *Candyman* (Bernard Rose, 1992) and *The Crow* (Alex Proyas, 1994), but the last two decades saw ghosts appear in horror-comedy titles including *Ghostbusters* (Ivan Reitman, 1984), *Beetlejuice* (Tim Burton, 1988), and *The Frighteners* (Peter Jackson, 1996) rather than more classic haunted house narratives.

1999 saw the release of *The Haunting* (Jan De Bont), *The Sixth Sense*, *Stir of Echoes*, and *House on Haunted Hill* (William Malone), which returned the haunted house to the cinema. *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez), while not about ghosts, returned the found-footage aesthetic to prominence, that would later appear in various haunted house productions. *The Haunting* and *The House on Haunted Hill* owed more to the visual effects bonanza of the big-budget *Poltergeist*, while later titles *What Lies Beneath* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000) and *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001) followed the less bombastic stylings of *The Sixth Sense*. The huge success of ghosts in Japanese horror cinema in the late 1990s led to a series of American remakes, beginning with *The Ring* in 2002, but followed by, among others, *The Grudge* (Takashi Shimizu, 2004), *Dark Water* (Walter Salles, 2005), and *Pulse* (Jim Sonzero, 2006). These remakes did not achieve the same viral quality as *The Ring*, and 2007 marked a move away from these remakes.

1408 (Mikael Håfström, 2007), based on a Stephen King short story, shifted its focus onto ideas around evil places, and the success of *Paranormal Activity* on the festival circuit sparked a renewed interest in demons. This change in haunted house films, featuring demons alongside ghosts, moved away from the more secular fare since 1999 and returned to the religious overtones of *The Amityville Horror*. This trend continues, with titles like *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018) using haunted house tropes in a film ostensibly about demonic worship, and *The Nun II* (Michael Chaves, 2023) featuring the demon from *The Conjuring* franchise. The appearance of the ghost in more family-friendly fare also continued, in *The Hole* (Joe Dante, 2009), *Ghostbusters* (Paul Feig, 2016), *Ghostbusters: Afterlife* (Jason Reitman, 2021), and *We Have a Ghost* (Christopher Landon, 2023), among others, demonstrating the ongoing fascination for ghosts among a wider audience.

Chapter Breakdown

I argue that reading the technical language of the films offers an additional perspective on how haunting works, with a primary focus on the haunting, rather than a metaphorical reading. Yet the spectral and the supernatural work together in these films, with these

technical disciplines used to make visual the mechanics of hauntology. That the films appear at moments of economic precarity underscores the instability created by neoliberalism, in which Western culture continually looks back, haunting itself with what has been, and highlighting how these films are themselves haunted by *The Amityville Horror*.

The thesis is divided into three chapters that explore the technologies of cinema and their relationship to the creation of the supernatural. The first chapter examines the ways in which cinematography is used to represent instances of haunting in *Poltergeist*, *The Ring*, and the first three films in the *Paranormal Activity* series. My specific focus is the use of lighting, composition, colour grading, camera angles and framing. This emphasises those parts of cinematography that can be achieved on set, either with lighting or by moving the camera or its constituent parts, such as the choice of lens or the use of a zoom. A discussion of visual effects lies beyond the scope of this chapter since this element of the filmmaking process happens during post-production.[18] This focus on cinematography highlights the importance of off-screen space and I argue that cinematography creates the visual space that may be manipulated to reveal or conceal the haunting through its use of off-screen space. The movement of the frame allows for the creation of the eerie, since it can show the ghost and its activity, or it can reveal the absence of a ghost where the living may expect to find one.

The second chapter discusses the use of set design to enable or enhance the materiality of the ghost through an examination of *Stir of Echoes*, *The Skeleton Key*, and *The Conjuring*. Set design provides both a technical and aesthetic support within these films since the design of the set and specific props enact examples of supernatural disturbance. The design includes both the set-dressing choices of décor, including props, and the dimensions of the set, which impact how actors move within the space. The aesthetics must be considered alongside the physical layout of the sets since it is the combination of the two areas that generates the sense of domestic space in which the haunting occurs. This layout also dictates what can and cannot be seen by the viewer based on the use of framing or camera movements, underscoring the ways in which technical disciplines work together to create a supernatural event. Changes in the set may also make visible the presence of an unseen agent through the movement of props or rejection of new decor and furniture.

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[18] I have written about the use of special effects to generate the supernatural in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic* (2020).

The final chapter explores how sound design creates and shapes the hauntings within *The Amityville Horror* (1979 and 2005), *The Sixth Sense*, and the first two instalments in the *Insidious* series, including the use of off-screen sound, point of audition, and acousmatic sound. My emphasis is on the ways in which the technologies of sound design, such as sound effects, create spectral activity within the film. The positionality of the sound technology on-set allows for sounds to be heard from the off-screen space, while other sounds are created through the interaction of the actors with the set, such as footsteps, or parts of the set, such as banging doors. The non-diegetic musical soundtrack lies beyond the scope of this chapter. I argue that the use of sound generates an acoustic space in which spectral activity can occur, highlighting the presence of the weird, or the generation of the eerie. The multi-dimensionality of sound also allows for the creation of a flexible space, reflecting the plastic nature of Gothic space, while the use of unfamiliar or unexpected sounds introduces the weird through the juxtaposition between what is visible and what is heard.

The Supernatural Spectacle: Cinematography and the Haunted Screen

While a 'haunted house' implies a sense of history, with the property collecting ghosts over time, or beset by older phantoms, contemporary Hollywood productions do not always follow suit. The dwellings within this chapter are recent constructions, reflecting architectural historian Anthony Vidler's assertion that modernism aimed to remove the weight of history from houses (1992: 64). These houses are not haunted by tradition, but rather through and by technology, the symbol of the contemporary age. This bears signs of the hauntological, since "spectral visitations" reflect the anxieties of the age in which they appear (Shaw 2018: 14). It is through the technology of filmmaking—or cinematography—that we understand "[c]inema's capacity to generate realistic effects of the unreal" (Botting 2015: 24). Cinematic techniques *visualise* the mechanisms of hauntology, demonstrating how metaphorical concerns become visible through cinematic technology. Cinematography makes a haunting perceivable for the viewer, making this aspect of the filmmaking process vital to discussions of supernatural cinema.

Chapter Argument and Outline

This chapter begins with an overview of its argument, including a justification for a reading of cinematography. Next, I briefly introduce the films discussed in the chapter, before providing a historical context for the technology depicted in these films. I include definitions for the cinematography terms used throughout the chapter, as well outlining Noël Burch's identification of screen space. I close the introduction by identifying and discussing existing critical work to situate my own analyses of these films in a wider context. Following the introduction, I discuss each film or franchise in chronological order.

The central premise of the films in this thesis is that ghosts are a diegetic reality, with varying motivations for haunting. Filmmakers visualise the mechanisms of hauntology using the techniques of filmmaking, centring supernatural figures as literal entities within the domestic space. That the films depend upon the techniques of filmmaking for their very existence helps to justify my approach for analysing the technical aspects of filmmaking before conducting any metaphorical interpretations. I argue these films use the language of cinematography to flip Fisher's concept of the weird, positioning *the living* as being those who do not belong in the space through techniques such as framing or colour grading. As Vidler notes, modern homes such as those in these films were intended to avoid bearing the

weight of their own history. Yet the supernatural still claims these spaces, which keeps the homes 'stuck' in a moment from the past. Such an action is a further reminder of the cultural 'stuckness' of this period. The living *cannot* belong in the space since it is already occupied by either ghosts or demons, both of which hold the spaces in the past. Reading cinematography reveals both the ghosts and their primacy in domestic spaces in these films.

'Space' in these films is also flexible, being either the domestic space of a home, or the televisual space created by audio-visual technology. This flexibility requires the fluidity of space created by cinematography itself, a fluidity that leaves the space vulnerable to supernatural activity. Pans, zooms, and Vertigo shots renegotiate on-screen space, while lighting guides the gaze within this space and colour grading identifies who dominates the frame. Cinematography is uniquely placed to create moments of ghostliness through its preoccupation with the creation of space and the guiding of attention within the frame. Visual effects added during the post-production process fall outside of this discussion, although future work should address their contribution to a creation of supernatural spectacle cinema.

The plasticity of cinematography reveals the inability of the living to belong; this is most often within the domestic space, although as *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002) demonstrates, the problems of belonging extend to the televisual space in which the living may only evade Samara's (Daveigh Chase) wrath by spreading her influence to others. Audio-visual technology, in the form of consumer goods, becomes a key theme within the films, highlighted by framing for its role in enabling the haunting. Technology also occupies an ambivalent space in these films since the living use it in a passive way to record and replay instances of haunting. These devices afford the living no opportunity to reply to the dead. By comparison, the dead use technology in an active way, both as a doorway and to capture their activity to reinforce their primacy within the domestic space (most commonly seen in *Paranormal Activity* [Oren Peli, 2007]).

These films also contrast with other haunted house films of the period in which economic pressures force characters to purchase and remain within haunted properties. In these films, characters engage with consumer technology both as a sign of their affluence and to reference the burgeoning Digital Age coinciding with these films. Using technology as a sign of the accumulation of wealth confirms the Gothic as a mode that acts as a barometer for the impact of economic shifts upon visual culture. As Rebecca Duncan notes in her work on decolonial Gothic, the Gothic was linked to the restructuring of socio-economic norms during the Industrial Revolution, and it has remained the mode that best charts economic turbulence (2022b: 312). Where other films in this thesis explore those economic choices that lead

characters to buy or rent haunted houses, these films invert this preoccupation with economics since they require affluence to access this technology, and in such proliferation.

The characters in the films in this thesis encounter the supernatural via the economic landscape, and in the films in this chapter, they do so from a position of economic privilege, represented by this consumer technology. Protagonists expand the boundaries of their homes into televisual space using a plethora of devices, suggesting that in doing so, the living intrude into space in which they do not belong. The living use devices to investigate hauntings in their home, or they investigate the technology itself to end the haunting. In each film, the dead turn technology against the living, revealing they dominate the televisual space as much as the domestic space.

The films in this chapter reflect Johan Höglund's assertion that following the 11 September 2001 attacks, the imperialisation of American gothic posits the onslaught of an Other against "the United States as a vortex of modernity" (2014: 3). The American imperial gothic is preoccupied by the anxiety that accompanies challenges to its borders, and in these films that heavily feature audio-visual technology, these consumer goods provide weak points in the borders of the home exploited by the supernatural. That *Poltergeist* does likewise and predates 9/11 by almost twenty years indicates that such anxieties were not new at the turn of the millennium, but rather exacerbated by 9/11. The reliance upon media technologies references existing anxieties about the perils facing the family from *outside* the home, which are exploited by the supernatural peril *within* the home.

These films also support Fisher's argument that culture has stagnated, endlessly recycling the same motifs and formulae. Fisher notes this in relation to British culture, where a change in the means of production under neoliberalism further changed the resources available to artists, while changing circumstances, such as higher rents, put artists under greater pressure to produce commercially successful work (2014: 15). This heralded "a culture of retrospection and pastiche", something that can also be seen in US culture of the time (2014: 14). While these films are not haunted by the spectre of *The Amityville Horror* in the same way that *The Conjuring* (James Wan, 2013) is, with the exception of *The Ring*, they continue the conceit of a single-family dwelling beleaguered by the supernatural. Yet the main difference is that the supernatural utilises technology to assault the family and goads them through the human desire to document activity. The link between technology and affluence maintains the economic focus of *The Amityville Horror*, albeit relocating the focus to the excess of abundance, rather than its absence, represented by the range of consumer devices and the ease with which the living acquire them. *Poltergeist* offers a counterpoint to

The Amityville Horror through its heavy emphasis upon audio-visual technology, which is recycled and refined throughout later films according to the technology available at the time of production. Like *The Amityville Horror*, *Poltergeist* comes to haunt the films that follow it.

The Films

The films in this chapter are about cinematography itself, where forms of audio-visual technology enable supernatural activity, captured using the techniques available through cinematography. I discuss the films in chronological order to better explore the change in technology within the time span involved (1982-2011), and the impact that such a change has upon how the living interact with both technology and the haunting.

I begin with the Steven Spielberg-produced big-budget film *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982), Hollywood's first original haunted house film to seriously engage with post-production visual effects following the emergence of the blockbuster in 1976. These effects are noteworthy, although in the spirit of Bazin, this chapter focuses on the use of 'in-camera' cinematographic techniques to represent supernatural activity, rather than those added in post-production.[1] *Poltergeist* engages with both scientific and consumer technology through parapsychological equipment and the television respectively, the latter used as a 'medium' for communication with the other side. Matthew F. Leonetti was the director of photography.

The second film is the US remake of *The Ring*.[2] The 'film' created by the ghost, Samara, on the haunted videotape demonstrates an example of supernaturally-generated cinematography. Viewing her assemblage of images marks an incursion into her world, and colour grading visually represents her pervading presence outside of the televisual space, which here represents an intradiegetic space. As in *Poltergeist*, the television becomes her access point into the domestic space, where shot patterns and composition reveal the extent of her powers over her victims. Being encoded on the videotape, Samara enters the home wherever she finds a television. Bojan Bazelli was the director of photography.

The final group of films are the first three instalments of the *Paranormal Activity* series (2007-2015).[3] I restrict the discussion to these instalments since the repetitive nature of

[1] The 2015 remake directed by Gil Kenan reversed this trend and emphasised its lacklustre computer-generated effects, which removes this from discussions around such 'in-camera' cinematography.
[2] The Japanese original, *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) lies beyond the scope of this thesis.
[3] In the interests of clarity, any discussion of *Paranormal Activity* (2007) refers to the theatrical release of the film, and not its directorial cuts.

this series means many of the cinematographic tricks of the first three films occur in the later films. These films use static and hand-held cameras to 'record' the haunting, while film noise, title cards, and time codes add a 'verisimilitude' that heightens the sense of genuine activity. Later films mimicked this trope, although these factors also parody the ghost-hunting reality television shows popular at the time of release. These films suggest a ghost, rather than depicting full-bodied apparitions as in *Poltergeist* and *The Ring*, with viewers unsure of what they have seen. The films' characters turn televisual technology onto the supernatural, though this offers no protection from demonic forces. Oren Peli was the director of photography on the first film, Michael Simmonds was the director of photography on the second film, and Magdalena Górka was the director of photography on the third film.

The films in this chapter display a regional bias for the west coast of the United States through their geographical setting in California and Washington state. This focus on the west coast suggests a fantasy of belonging in the United States related to the desire of early settlers to expand westward across the continent through the cultural belief in manifest destiny. This perhaps belies anxiety about the country's true origins, with the land haunted by the ghosts of those who perished during the nation's foundation, a concept already present in the Gothic, where "American gothic literature criticizes America's national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation's claim to purity and equality" (Goddu 1997: 10). Cinematography reveals this preoccupation with a sense of belonging at home, since the concept of home "is also an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings. These may be feelings of belonging, desire, and intimacy [...] but can also be feelings of fear, violence and alienation" (Blunt 2014: 2). In these films, the inability to belong manifests through alienation as once-dependable technology revolts against its user.

The Role of Technology in These Films

Technology takes the form of mass-produced devices in these films, used to commune with 'the other side'. While discussing the cultural history of the ghost, Susan Owens notes the impact of rapid technological change on the Victorian imagination, such as the development of Morse code and the electric telegraph (2017: 202). As the theory went, if the living could communicate across vast distances, could they not also communicate with the dead? Almost 200 years later, this concept reflects the preoccupation with 'capturing' or communicating with the dead using audio-visual technology both within these films and the paranormal investigation community. Technology expands our means of talking to distant people, or having knowledge of places we have never been, bringing such communication technology

into line with phenomena like extrasensory perception. These films literalise the ways in which we 'contact' other times and places through televisual communication methods.

For Marc Auge, consumer technology is important for its domestic role since the television has replaced the hearth (2008: vii). He evokes Hestia and Hermes, the Greek deities of the hearth and threshold respectively (2008: viii). The messenger god becomes the god of television because the television, not the hearth, now occupies our attention (Auge 2008: viii). Television became linked with the supernatural following its introduction into the home. In 1953, the Travers family from Long Island believed their television to be haunted by an unknown woman's face that would not disappear from the screen (Sconce 2000: 2). Experts referred to the double images caused by television malfunctions as 'ghosting', where earlier images 'haunted' the screen. The parallel growth of television and suburbia led to many fearing the harmful influence of television on the American family (Murphy 2009: 129). Television created a palpable and phantasmic "electronic elsewhere" (Sconce 2000: 126), and Barry Curtis notes the popularity of the haunted house genre "at a time when more viewings are conducted within the home" (2008: 30). Cinematography becomes the ideal vehicle to represent this 'electronic elsewhere' through its focus on viewing.

The viewing of images, particularly supernatural content, is part of the diegesis in these films. *Poltergeist* sees characters watch a ghostly procession on a screen. In *The Ring*, watching the haunted videotape invites the ghost into your home. Yet in *Paranormal Activity*, the living turn the camera onto the ghost, reflecting filmmaking tools being put into consumer hands. Audio-visual technology shapes how the haunting unfolds, making a study of technology and its relationship to the haunting a fruitful line of enquiry into the cinematic haunting. Yet these films emerged at a time when the featured equipment was about to become obsolete, memorialising technology within a media format already preoccupied with the dead. This is also the case since a film's production pre-dates its release by at least a year, restricting the production team to available technology (Shaviro 2017: 321).

Poltergeist resurrects old fears about suburbia and intrusive television at a point when the VCR was gaining traction in the consumer market.[4] JVC introduced their VHS format in 1977, and by 1987, the VCR market was worth $5.25 billion in the United States (Ganapati 2010). The VCR gave viewers greater control since they could access content "independently

[4] In an interesting twist, despite these societal anxieties about technology and its pervasive reach, none of the parents impose boundaries on their childrens' use of technology.

of the networks' linear program schedules" (Lotz 2007: 52). Yet *Poltergeist* remains faithful to the pre-VCR era, with the Freeling family left waiting for Carol-Anne's transmissions from the other side. The broadcaster remains in control of the schedule, not the audience. By the 2002 release of *The Ring*, the videotape was already an anachronism. Sales of DVD players in the US reached 80 million by that year, "making it the fastest-adopted consumer electronics device ever" (Kirsner 2007). The film uses videotape to stay faithful to the original 1998 Japanese film, yet it also provokes anxieties about public surveillance, since the VCR made CCTV more effective.[5] Samara's actions anticipate the move towards interactive media, which DVD brought to public attention.

These films memorialise the telecommunications media passing into obsolescence through their release at a point when new inventions emerge. This makes them as much about nostalgia for older formats as they are about a fear of the speed of technological change, reflecting the wider nostalgia displayed by these films for the haunted houses of the past. Yet the films are also about surveillance, featuring characters watching events unfold on screens.

Cinematography Terms

With its focus on the image, cinematography is well-placed for discussions around representations of a haunted space. The cinematographer creates the visual identity and *experience* of the film, where the "psychological reaction of the viewer is based, to a great extent, on camera angles and editorial treatment" (Mascelli 1965: 59). Cinematographer Joseph V. Mascelli identifies cinematography as being composed of camera angles, continuity, closeups, composition, and cutting (1965).[6] The following terms will be used throughout the discussion, making it pertinent to summarise them here. Close-ups are a key element of framing, since "[t]he camera is the eye of the audience. When it moves closer, the audience moves with it. When it concentrates on a particular item, the audience concentration is devoted to that item alone" (Alton 1995: 33). Mascelli also adds that "[a] close-up may visually clarify what is happening, if the action is too small [...] in a medium or long shot" (1965: 179). Medium shots bring the audience closer to get them involved but without focusing on one character (Brown 2012: 20). The shot/reverse-shot pattern enables the

[5] By 1998, the New York Civil Liberties Union found almost 3,000 cameras around New York City (Anderson 2002).
[6] There is some crossover with production design, since conversations must be had with set and costume designers to ensure choices will photograph correctly.

audience to both see the character and *as* the character, allowing for the creation of empathy. This pattern also allows the audience to discern the relationship between the character and what they are looking at (Brown 2015: 36). The pattern continues during dialogue to allow the audience to follow the conversation.

Cinematography uses lighting, focal point, and composition to guide the gaze towards the element most important to the narrative within the frame (Mascelli 1965: 197). This can be manipulated to produce misdirection, keeping audiences focused on one part of the frame when action suddenly occurs elsewhere in the frame, producing a jump scare. Movement within the frame also directs attention. Audiences are more familiar with left-right movement, meaning "[r]ight-to-left is stronger, because it is 'against the grain'" (Mascelli 1965: 205), while "[d]iagonal movements suggest [...] overcoming obstacles by force" (Mascelli 1965: 206). These movements communicate supernatural power through their use.

The final aspect of cinematography under discussion is colour grading. It is not instructive to consider every colour since the predominant 'supernatural' shade in these films is blue, appearing within both the lighting schema or the general 'colour cast'. One explanation is blue's opposition to warmer colours often associated with life, thus aligning anything blue with cold or deathly qualities. Patti Bellantoni refers to blue as "the detached color" in her seminal study on colour in visual storytelling, refusing attempts at emotional connection (2005: 81). The discussion will focus on the manipulation of these filmmaking techniques to capture the ghosts and hauntings as a diegetic reality.

On- and Off-Screen Space

Noël Burch identifies two types of screen space: within the frame, and beyond the frame. He further divides off-screen space into six segments, four of which lie beyond the borders of the frame. The fifth lies behind the camera, while the sixth continues beyond the on-screen set (1973: 19). Directors used off-screen space to *suggest* events, rather than showing them (1973: 24). This circumvented film certification issues, allowing audiences to imagine the contents of the off-screen space. The audience also sits in off-screen space, creating links between the supernatural and the nature of viewership.

What lies within the off-screen space is important to films about hauntings, something alluded to by a character's gaze towards something off-screen. This can be so intense that it renders the unseen character and "the imaginary space that he occupies" as being as important as the visible character (Burch 1973: 20). In cinematographic terms, the off-screen space creates a *cinematic* space in which the supernatural abides. Re-framing through the pan

and zoom becomes a method of revelation through time, renegotiating the boundaries of this space to bring forth that which was otherwise hidden. Meanwhile, static framing uses movement across the frame or lighting to guide the eye, creating a revelation in space. In these films, the ghost takes the form of Derrida's version of the spectre, "which is always both *revenant* (invoking what was) and *arrivant* (announcing what will come)" (Blanco and Peeren 2013: 13). Both memorialising and arriving at once, the ghosts destabilise the domestic realm, an idea made visual through the renegotiation of the off-screen space using the available cinematographic techniques, while demonstrating the power of cinematography to literalise hauntological concepts.

Existing Critical Discussions

Despite the rich material that can be unearthed through a study of the impact of cinematography on the film, much existing critical work focuses on what ghosts represent in psychological, social, and economic terms, and less on the *figure* of the ghost. These earlier discussions of the ghost and the haunted house are valuable, and the focus upon the house as a sign of the economic landscape unites the films in this thesis. I offer a complementary approach in reading the technical aspects of filmmaking and their impact *first*.

Yet in reviewing existing literature, several themes become clear. The house, in more general terms, becomes a neoliberal economic object of exchange in Gothic discussions (Macfarlane 2017). Critics discuss *Poltergeist* in terms of its representation of economics and politics, as a critique of 1980s consumerism, home ownership and class (Jackson 2016; Kellner 1995). These ideas dovetail with considerations of original land occupation and the establishment of the suburb as characteristics of the Suburban Gothic, which underscores the anxiety about the ability to belong (Gordon 2008; Mighall 2007; Murphy 2009; Roeger 2013). Yet the focus is less upon the evils of the suburb, and more upon the house as a status symbol. Other writers consider the representation of the family and the hypnotic effect of television upon its members (Gordon 2008; Paquet-Deyris 2012; Polan 2004). For Murray Leeder, *Poltergeist* celebrates the collapse of meaning (2008).

Much of the discussion of *The Ring* involves its relationship to the Japanese original film, *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) (Inouye 2012; Rawle 2010; Wee 2011). Other work explores Samara's role as the 'Gothic child', modifying and shaping space through her perception (Jackson 2010; Georgieva 2013). Further critics consider the relationship between *The Ring* and communication, television and media (Dudenhoeffer 2014; Jarvis 2007; Nelson 2005). Dudenhoeffer discusses the use of the close-up in *The Ring*, but only where it relates

to the biology of the eye (2014). Brian Jarvis explores the links between the Phantasmagoria and Samara, technology and communication with the dead, and the uncanny nature of television (2007). Yet despite the discussion centring technology, there is little engagement with the cinematographic techniques that create the haunting. While Michael Burke explores the ghost as relentless in her pursuit and oppression of the living, this discussion comes from a philosophical perspective (2021: 362).

The anxiety around the isolating effects of technology (this time new media), marks discussions about *Paranormal Activity*. These films posit the isolated single-family home as a site of anxiety within an indifferent suburb (Roeger 2013). Some writers engage with the link between technology and the demon, doubling the demon with the camera (Dudenhoeffer 2014; Grisham 2016; Shaviro 2017). Others reflect on cinema's role within a society dominated by surveillance (Lefait 2013). Xavier Aldana Reyes discusses the films as an example of the affect produced on spectators by found footage cinema (2016). Further readings posit the films as being narratives involving consumerism against the backdrop of the global financial crisis (Hahner et. al. 2013; Leyda 2016; Liu 2015). Other theorists discuss the films in terms of the male gaze and psychoanalytic representations of gender (Jackson 2013; Joy 2013; Manon 2013).

Yet there is also an engagement with the techniques of filmmaking within these films, moreso than with other films in this thesis, perhaps due to their status as found footage horror. Spencer Everhart discusses framing, mise-en-scène and editing in *Paranormal Activity 2*, though he does so to explore the filmmaking aesthetic rather than discussing the haunting (2012). Alexandra Heller-Nicholas examines the franchise in terms of the found footage aesthetic, discussing its evolution of the trope beyond documentation and authenticity (2014). Allan Cameron discusses framing in *Paranormal Activity 4* (Henry Joost, Ariel Schulman, 2012), although his wider discussion is closer to Affect Studies. Cecilia Sayad engages with framing as part of the found footage genre, although her focus is upon the representation of the ghost as part of 'reality' (2021). Their work provides a starting point, though I intend to focus on how cinematographic techniques represent instances of haunting across the first three films of the franchise.

While these wider discussions are valid, they work from the Gothic assumption that hauntings are metaphorical. Ghosts and trauma have become inextricably linked in recent scholarship (Blanco and Peeren 2013). Yet these films capitalise on a concept that I term 'the supernatural as spectacle', conjuring perceivable ghosts within the mise-en-scène in a nod to the earliest examples of supernatural cinema and the cinema of attractions. As Sayad notes,

"[Photography and film] have been put to the use of science [...] magic [...], and spiritualism [...]—all of which raise questions about what images can reveal, omit, and forge" (2021: 23). The films have a pretence at reality since they are set in the contemporary period and in recognisable locations, particularly *Paranormal Activity*, whose scares rely on its status as found footage. Yet they are made in an industry that relies on the cinema of attractions, reflecting the fact that cinematography straddles the divide between depicting reality while conjuring the supernatural. The films use Fisher's absence/presence dichotomy to withhold and represent the ghost, a dichotomy that complements Burch's ideas of off-screen space, and the films do so using the language of cinematography. Techniques such as the zoom, framing, and the use of lighting focus the attention of the audience to both reveal and conceal. These techniques support the concept of 'seeing' a ghost. Yet the techniques used to do so are often absent from existing work on the films. This chapter will therefore discuss how and why cinematographic techniques 'visualise' supernatural events in both the on- and off-screen space, using the weird and the eerie to make the haunting perceivable for the viewer.

"They're Here!" Supernatural Events in the Suburbs in *Poltergeist*

This section focuses on *Poltergeist*, a 1982 release that marked the introduction of big-budget visual effects to the haunted house film, created by Industrial Light & Magic.[7] The Freeling family live in the new Cuesta Verde housing development, where father Steve (Craig T. Nelson) sells real estate. Mother Diane (JoBeth Williams) is a housewife and the couple have three children; Dana (Dominique Dunne), Robbie (Oliver Robins), and Carol Anne (Heather O'Rourke). After construction work begins on their new swimming pool, strange phenomena occur around the house. On the night of a storm, which sees the tree in the back garden attempt to eat Robbie, Carol Anne is sucked through a closet portal into another dimension. The family can only communicate with her through the television, and they call in a team of parapsychologists. With the help of a medium, Diane enters the realm and retrieves Carol Anne, but the supernatural forces in the house attempt to kidnap her again. When the attempt fails, the family leave and the house is sucked into the supernatural dimension.

Poltergeist addresses fears about the lack of community feeling in suburbia, and the potentially dangerous impact of the television upon the family unit. Consumer technology

[7] This is in contrast to special effects, which are created on set and are captured by the camera. Visual effects are usually created in post-production, and added to the film once filming has finished.

only allows the living to *see* the ghost; it does not grant the ability to evict the dead from the home. The supernatural forces pre-date the house, coming both from the supernatural realm and the graveyard beneath the property, referencing the hauntological hold that the past has over this new-build house. This hold becomes so great that the ghosts kidnap a child, the symbol of the future's potential. While *Poltergeist* references the 1980s economic boom through its use of a book about Ronald Reagan as a prop, it is the seizure of the child that marks the cultural 'stuckness' that will set in at the turn of the millennium. Such 'stuckness' sees the twenty-first century haunted house films haunted by both *The Amityville Horror* and *Poltergeist*, seemingly unable to innovate or initiate new narratives. *Poltergeist*'s cinematography portrays the living as the weird element that does not belong in a space already occupied by the dead; the house remains stuck in the past through its situation atop a cemetery. The Freeling family cannot collaborate with the dead to share or transfer ownership of the space, and the dead respond by pulling the child and later the house into their realm.

The section opens with a discussion of framing and its implications for a haunted house film, demonstrating that the dead hold the prior claim to the space. The discussion moves on to examining the value of the pan in creating a sense of a dynamic frame, in which the supernatural remains off-screen, compared with the zoom, which draws attention to a specific element within the frame. This comparison is followed by a discussion of composition, and what the placement of elements within the frame says about the haunted house film. The section then examines the on-screen movement of elements within the frame as examples of the supernatural as spectacle, including point-of-view shots involving the backyard tree. Finally, the section discusses the importance of colour grading to the visual establishment of the supernatural. Reading these elements of cinematography reveals that the dead hold the prior claim to the house, making the living the weird interlopers.

It is apt that *Poltergeist* opens with a tight focus on televisual technology, underscoring the importance of the film's use of framing. The opening shot is an extreme close-up of a television screen on which the images are abstract and unclear. A slow backward pan reveals the image of a soldier as the national anthem ends and the television broadcast switches to dead air. The extreme closeup obfuscates the action and only the slow transition to the medium shot allows the viewer to interpret the image. This opening shot emphasises the importance of the television, yet the extreme closeup also defies identification (Fig 1). Taken out of context, these shapes reference the Rorschach inkblot, in which viewers interpret the blots according to their own psychological preoccupations. In the context of a haunted house film, the abstraction caused by this extreme closeup helps to prime the viewer

for interpreting visual phenomena, and by using the framing device of a film called 'Poltergeist', this use of framing leads viewers to interpret such phenomena as supernatural. The cut from the image of a soldier planting the flag to static also indicates death through both war and the end of the transmission, in a blatant reference to American imperial gothic, and the use of a jump cut rather than a transition between shots is the first hint at the 'ghost train' nature of the jump scares to be employed later.[8]

Figure 1: The extreme close-up obscures the image.

This close-up of the static contrasts with the subsequent slow pan across the Cuesta Verde housing estate in daylight. Opening credits roll over this pan and these establishing shots create a sense of place. A focus on setting has been fundamental to the Gothic since Horace Walpole to establish suspense, since "[t]he Gothic is concomitantly bound to the place of evil" (Grunenberg 1997: 195). These camera movements are the first clue that the setting is not as it appears. The juxtaposition between the close-up of the static and the exterior pan creates an opposition between the worlds of the living and the dead, with the static close-up representing the stasis of the dead, and the pan representing the animation of the living.

The weird also demands an early establishment of 'normality' through the film's cinematography and production design to allow for the eruption of that which does not belong. However, opening with the television establishes that the dead were there first, and that it is *their* space, a point borne out by the film's climax when the house is sucked into the realm of the dead. The housing estate is also weird since it does not belong there, built upon a

[8] While this cessation of broadcasting was enacted by law, the fact it occurred at midnight is also notable. This highly charged time becomes a liminal space between the end of one day and the beginning of another, and such liminality opens up this space for gothic events to occur.

cemetery, and this Gothic inversion highlights the *living* as being out of their designated place. Using the television as the 'establishing shot' also implies the Gothic location is the televisual space, a contested dimension with porous borders, reflecting both the porosity of the always-negotiable film frame and the ever-present anxiety of American imperial gothic.

The pan allows the cinematographer to open up the cinematic space, moving the frame to reveal what lies beyond. In *Poltergeist*, these camera movements enable moments of supernatural activity by keeping the paranormal in the off-screen space. In one scene, the camera follows Diane from the dining table to a kitchen cupboard (Figs. 2-4). The audience expects the action to involve her since she is the focus of the shot. Instead, she stands and gasps, and the camera pans back to the table. The chairs are now stacked in a pyramid on the table. A cut would have shown the same image, but the pan moves the frame *through time*. The supernatural activity occurs off-screen while the camera follows Diane. The pan shifts the off-screen space to reveal the results of supernatural interference, renegotiating the space in which the supernatural operates. This creates a tension between the contents of the frame and that which lies beyond it, granting further power to the paranormal events.

Figure 2: Diane talks to Carol-Anne.

Figure 3: Diane looks in a cupboard.

Figure 4: Carol-Anne does not seem surprised by the chair-stacking.

In contrast to the pan, the zoom fills the frame with the static camera's point of focus. The zoom forces the viewer to look closely, and Leonetti's framing underlines the importance of the phrase "to *see* a ghost", referencing one of the primary ways through which humans experience supernatural events. In a later sequence, orbs and a female spirit descend the stairs and the parapsychology team captures the procession on camera. Upon replaying the footage, they discern figures within the orbs. The camera zooms in to their screen to show the audience what the team is viewing, rather than cutting to the footage. This distances the audience from the footage, watching it at one remove from the same viewpoint as the characters, placing the audience into the position of the investigators. The zoom highlights the role of audio-visual technology in capturing these ghosts in a way that would be lost had the film cut to the footage. The zoom shows the figures and the screen occupying the same frame, which returns our attention to the fact that *we are watching a ghostly parade* using technology as the viewing medium.

Both the pan and zoom renegotiate the frame, and thus the off-screen space, through time. Unseen events occur beyond the shifting border of the frame, posing questions about agency: who is behind these events? By comparison, static framing and composition place greater emphasis on the *contents* of the frame and show instances of supernatural activity where agency is clear. In an early example, a wide-angle shot shows the family sleeping, with their bed opposite the television (Fig 5). Ghostly hands emerge from the television screen and stretch across the room to disappear into the opposite wall. A static shot places the emphasis on their right-to-left movement across the frame, showing the supernatural as the dynamic object of this shot, compared to the sleeping parents. A pan would undermine the visual strength of the hands that are eerie through their lack of an accompanying agent.

Figure 5: The ghosts transition from televisual space to physical space.

The composition of this shot is important since Carol-Anne's placement in the middle of the frame demonstrates her position halfway between the living and the dead. She is not in bed with her parents; she is awake and present to see "the TV people" arrive. Leonetti's composition reinforces her status as an outsider within the family, set apart by her psychic powers. The television static is the only light source, directing the gaze across the darkened frame to the supernatural entry point. The wide shot allows the movement of the hands to draw our gaze from right-to-left, since they are the most significant element, rather than Carol-Anne. They represent the haunting to come and nothing prevents their movement, underlining the primacy of the dead within the space. The television plays a notable role since the threat posed by the ghosts lays bare the anxieties felt over the ability of television to allow outside forces to access the home.[9] As the point at which the existing supernatural entities make their presence felt, the television becomes the key battleground in the conflict between the living and the dead. Hermes may now be the god of the television as Auge suggests, yet Hermes was also a psychopomp who escorted the dead to the underworld. In this film, he escorts them back to the living through the preferred threshold: the television. The film also utilises set design to make this point, since televisions appear in several rooms throughout the house, demonstrating the family's affluence through their ownership of multiple sets. This heightens the sense of peril through the inclusion of so many potential supernatural access points within the home. A similar anxiety appears in *The Ring*, discussed below.

[9] See Sconce (2000) for further discussion of these anxieties.

Auge's hearth regains importance through the supernatural activity within the kitchen, which also features a television. Diane shows Steven how the ghosts move the furniture, marking start points and the direction of travel on the floor. A low-angle shot shows a chair sliding across the floor towards the camera (Figs 6-7). Halfway through the slide, the film cuts to a medium shot from Diane's point of view to show the chair's movement towards the wall. The combination of these two shots shows that neither character pushes nor pulls the chair, showing the material actions of supernatural forces. This activity occurs *on-screen* once Diane has accepted and welcomed the invisible "agent". Having been acknowledged, the ghosts need not lurk in the off-screen space. Their movement into the on-screen space is a moment of revelation and foreshadows the spectacular instances of activity that are to come.

Figure 6: The ghosts push the chair along the floor.

Figure 7: The shot shows no one pushing the chair.

Perhaps the most famous of these supernatural spectacles occur in two key parts of the film: the coffins bursting through the floor during the film's climax, and the tree in the backyard. The coffins are more relevant to discussions of James H. Spencer's set design than cinematography, although they literalise the contested nature of the Cuesta Verde land.

Poltergeist poses the question of ownership, putting the dead and the living homeowners at odds. While the living may *legally* own the house, the presence of the dead keeps the space stuck in the past; the dead reassert this existing claim to the land and exorcise the living. Questions of land ownership extend beyond those of physical people and remains, especially regarding the nature of haunting, since "[i]n another context, setting out to build a haunted house would be absurd. However, in America, where every white house displaces an Indian one [...] it may be inevitable" (Bergland 2000: 60). Given the rapid expansion of the suburbs since the postwar period (see Murphy 2009), this raises the possibility that all such homes *could* be haunted, which helps to explain the *Paranormal Activity* films.

This history of the land is visually referenced through costume design, both that of the skeletons and also the ghostly procession on the stairs. It implies the Old West's prospecting era, referencing the sudden influx of white settlers to the west coast in search of gold, and noting their forced displacement of Indigenous communities. The prospector skeletons thrust towards the camera, and the tight focus on them forces the viewer to make 'eye contact' with their empty skulls. The cinematography in this sequence turns the skeletons into cinematic *memento mori*. Yet despite this glorification of the skeletons, made using real human skeletons augmented with latex (Mandell 1982: 10), the framing treats them as moving props, highlighting their inability to *do* anything to the living. It is the apparently animated tree that holds more cinematographic interest.

Framing and point-of-view shots are used to draw attention to this tree and its relationship to Robbie. The first shot is angled down towards Robbie, letting the viewer peer over the tree's 'shoulder' (Fig 8). The following shot is angled upwards from behind Robbie, using the principles of eyeline matching to show the shots work as a pair (Fig 9). Giving the tree a point of view supports Robbie's later insistence that "it looks at me, it knows I live here". The framing illustrates the tree's height compared to Robbie's apparent powerlessness.

Figure 8: Gazing down at Robbie 'as' the tree.

Figure 9: Robbie gazing up at the tree.

A second two-shot occurs that night when Robbie looks out of his bedroom at the tree (Figs. 10-11). These scenes, and their use of eye-line matching, animate the tree, foreshadowing the tree's imminent murderous intent. The shots also destroy the uncanny suspicion that the tree *might* be animate: the shot pattern confirms it is and suggests agency on the part of the tree. While the sudden animation of the tree would render a familiar garden landmark suddenly unfamiliar, the removal of doubt as to its animation moves the tree into the realm of the eerie, where it is unclear whether the tree is animated by its own spirit, or by the ghost of someone buried in the cemetery. This ambiguity makes this an eerie moment since it confirms the presence of an agent, but their identity remains a mystery. Dialogue reveals the tree pre-dates the housing development, linking the tree with the land and its earlier use. While the cemetery is the burial site of settlers, the tree likely pre-dates the

cemetery, referencing the land itself. It becomes a reminder of the Indigenous communities who are conspicuous by their absence in the film.[10]

Figure 10: Robbie gazes at the tree.

Figure 11: The tree gazes back.

The movement of the tree, hinted at through these shot/reverse-shots and explicitly shown when it attacks, demonstrates the ability of the ghosts to manipulate physical matter, including the physical fabric of the house, used to divide the family. This manifests through cinematography as a 'Vertigo shot' in an upstairs corridor as Diane attempts to reach her trapped children (Fig 12). The Vertigo shot transforms the corridor, in reality a few meters long, into a daunting passageway, turning the supernatural control of the material into a striking visual. While Fred Botting notes that fragmentation of the family is key to the Gothic (1996: 156), in *Poltergeist*, the reverse is true. The family begins the film as a disjointed group and becomes a cohesive group of survivors by its close. This example of corridor-

[10] *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* (Brian Gibson, 1986) attempts to rectify this through the inclusion of an Indigenous character.

stretching cinematography demonstrates the literal lengths to which Diane will go to protect her children. It also shows the power of the ghosts, whose control of the house reinforces their ownership of the domestic space and prefigures the long shot at the film's climax in which they suck the structure into their realm.

Figure 12: The ghosts attempt to withhold Diane's children.

The ghosts not only exert control over the physical structure of the house, but also the colour within the frame. Whenever Carol-Anne talks to "the TV people", the television static takes on a blue hue. This colour cast is repeated when Carol-Anne is on the other side and speaks to her family. The static remains monochrome in scenes during which no paranormal activity occurs. Blue becomes the visual signature of the supernatural inhabitants, alerting the viewer to their presence, even when they are not directly shown. This allows them to remain in the off-screen space while controlling what is on-screen, demonstrating their domination of the space. Blue represents a force acting *upon* an individual, indicating the will of the ghosts as they exert their force against the human characters. The over-saturation of blue in the scene in which Diane enters the portal is also notable since blue can "effect inertia" in those exposed to it (Bellantoni 2005: 83) (Fig 13). The ghosts aim to thwart human intervention at every turn. This use of cinematography makes visual the 'weird' concept of the living as "that which does not belong", rendered passive by paranormal power and exorcised by the dead.

Figure 13: The supernatural light show inside the closet portal.

Such colour grading reflects the use of the technical aspects of filmmaking to visualise the haunting. *Poltergeist* was not the first narrative to bring the haunted house to the suburbs, though it located the terror within a *new* home, devoid of the accumulation of personal history common to other haunted houses. While it embodies the Gothic themes of isolation and the return of a buried past, it shifts the problem of belonging from the dead to the living. The housing estate encroached on the cemetery, making the occupants the weird figures that do not belong. This reading makes the narrative more subversive than its big budget might suggest, though it references director Tobe Hooper's earlier film, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). In this earlier film, the victims of the Sawyer family can be read as trespassers who do not belong in the house where they die, and the murderous family punishes them for their intrusion. While existing readings highlight the economic disparity between the Sawyer family and the intruding teenagers, a similar preoccupation around belonging and intrusion into an already-occupied space appears again in *Poltergeist*.

Even if we discount the ghosts created in post-production, the film conjures supernatural activity through Leonetti's cinematography since techniques such as Vertigo shots or the renegotiation of off-screen space using pans and zooms allows the film to control what is revealed and what is hidden. Even colour grading alerts the viewer to the presence of the supernatural, demonstrating that ghosts can stay off-screen and still control what is on-screen. This underpins the creation of the supernatural as spectacle and complements the discourse about the ghost as a trauma metaphor: it shows *how* cinematic languages visualise metaphor on screen. The shifting frame keeps early ghostly activity off-screen to preserve a sense of the eerie, which is important since the identity of the agent (here comprising a collective of spirits) contributes to the weird. The agent owns the space, and the combined weight of the dead keeps the house stuck in the past, unavailable for occupation in the

present. This focus upon 'non-belonging' is notable given the film's location in the fictional development of Cuesta Verde, southern California, whose name belies the cultural changes experienced by the region following the arrival of the Spanish in 1542 (National Park Service, no date). Such changes contribute to the anxiety of belonging through the lack of ancestral regional roots for the homeowners of Cuesta Verde.

It is notable that the closing shots of *Poltergeist* feature the ejection of a television set from the family's motel room, a defiant rejection of audio-visual technology, followed by a backward tracking shot away from the motel. The backward motion implies a move *away* from the haunting and a re-establishment of the living's place in the world, yet the movement of the frame reveals more of the off-screen space, somewhere the audience knows that the supernatural lurks. This establishment of off-screen space becomes more nebulous in *The Ring*, where the repeated viewing of the haunted videotape brings the ghost on-screen even when she is not present. Like *Poltergeist*, *The Ring* focuses upon technology as a sign of affluence, yet it also maintains concerns about the pervasive nature of television. *The Ring* does not suggest that the living have encroached into physical spaces set aside for the dead, although the living intrudes upon the audio-visual space *claimed* by the dead. Yet *The Ring* continues to explore the use of technology as a means of belonging—even for the ghost.

"In seven days, she'll show you": Supernatural Cinematography in *The Ring*

In this section, I discuss the ways in which cinematography both creates the haunting and is manipulated by the ghost, while examining how technology works for Samara and against the living. Journalist Rachel Keller (Naomi Watts) investigates the mysterious death of her niece, Katie (Amber Tamblyn). The investigation leads her to the cabin where Katie stayed with friends, all of whom died at the same time as Katie. Rachel finds a strange video and discovers that watching it curses the viewer to die seven days later. She enlists the help of her filmmaking ex-partner, Noah (Martin Henderson), and seeks to break the curse after their son, Aidan (David Dorfman), watches the tape. They discover the identity of the video's creator, a girl named Samara who has become a literal ghost in the machine, and who burned the video onto the tape using her psychic powers. Rachel retrieves Samara's body from the well where her adoptive mother imprisoned her but learns that only making a copy of the tape and showing it to someone else breaks the curse. This revelation comes too late for Noah, who falls foul of Samara's wrath in his apartment.

The Ring follows the lead of *Poltergeist* in making the television a focus, although in this remake of the Japanese 1998 film *Ringu*, only the ghost may control the television. The similarity ends there, since in *Poltergeist*, the dead are bound to their graveyard. By contrast, Samara enters the world anywhere there is a television near her victim. Consumer technology remains central to the haunting, and while it remains a sign of affluence through its accumulation in the domestic mise-en-scène, it grants the supernatural access to the living. The film highlights the active control of the ghost over audio-visual technology since Samara also creates her own imagery on the videotape. She is a cinematographer and manipulator of technology within the diegesis, and she controls the audio-visual space, where the living do not belong. The discussion of cinematography will explore the ways in which Samara visually haunts the on-screen space through colour grading until she finally appears on-screen to dominate the living, at which point she controls the static frame.

The section opens with a discussion of colour grading and lighting and their relationship to the pervasion of the supernatural. An exploration of shot patterns follows in which I discuss the inclusion of the television as a source of threat, highlighted by these changing shots. The section next discusses the 'battle of the gazes' between Samara and her victims, achieved through shots and reverse-shots, before exploring the act of looking and its relationship to technology as part of the haunting. Finally, the section explores the surrealist montage comprising Samara's videotape and both its impact upon its viewers and its contribution to the haunting.

The Ring condenses the haunted space onto a videotape, created by accident by a group of teenagers in a holiday cabin attempting to record a football game. By recording the game to watch later, the teenagers circumvent time-based viewing, opening a space for the revenant to arrive, and capturing unconscious anxiety about liberating viewership from a prescribed time and space.[11] The living do not belong in the audio-visual space, since watching the tape is an intrusion into Samara's world. Sayad poses an interesting question that relates to the value of cinematography in representing a haunting: "Can photographic and audiovisual images give access to other temporal dimensions, if ghosts are to be a trace of the past, or to things immaterial? Or is the image's ability to record a spirit an indicator of a spirit's materiality?" (2021: 20). *The Ring* suggests that the answer is not a binary either/or

[11] It is perhaps ironic that Samara puts viewers onto *her* 7-day schedule.

response, rather a nuanced both/and reply. Samara is both an image from another dimension, and a material artefact from the recording she creates herself.

The colour grading bathes the film in blue hues to represent the passivity of the living in the face of Samara's power. It also allows her to haunt the frame through colour even when she is not on screen. Bazelli marks the change in colour cast to show Samara's entry into Katie's life through Katie's vacation photographs. Rachel collects them following Katie's death and the film cuts to close-ups called 'inserts' to highlight the importance of these photos (Figs 14-15). Rachel's sequential progression through the prints shows the change in colour temperature from the autumnal tones before the group watched the tape, to cool tones after they watched the tape. The colour change, combined with the distortion of the faces, marks the point at which the haunting begins. It also reflects the colour change in the television static in *Poltergeist*, turning blue at the arrival of "the TV people", with *Poltergeist* now haunting this later film. For Dudenhoeffer, the distorted faces in the photographs see the characters "in a process of erasure comparable to the rewriting or deletion of the information on a magnetic tape" (2014: 71). This doubles the characters with Samara, whose image degrades with each copy made of her tape. Yet it also underlines her power over them, that Samara can 'delete' them from existence.

The flaws of videotapes reflect both Samara's technological prowess and the flawed nature of photographic mediums, recalling the Victorian photographic attempts to capture the supernatural. John Ellis describes the cinema image as "a half-magic feat in that it makes present something that is absent" (1982: 58), which also applies to the photograph. It resurrects the deceased Katie within the cinematic frame, creating an eerie space in which she is both present and absent. Cinematography becomes the ideal vehicle to bring forth the presence that should be absent, combined with the set design necessary to fabricate the physical photographs used as a prop to convey information.

Figure 14: Rachel examines the photographs.

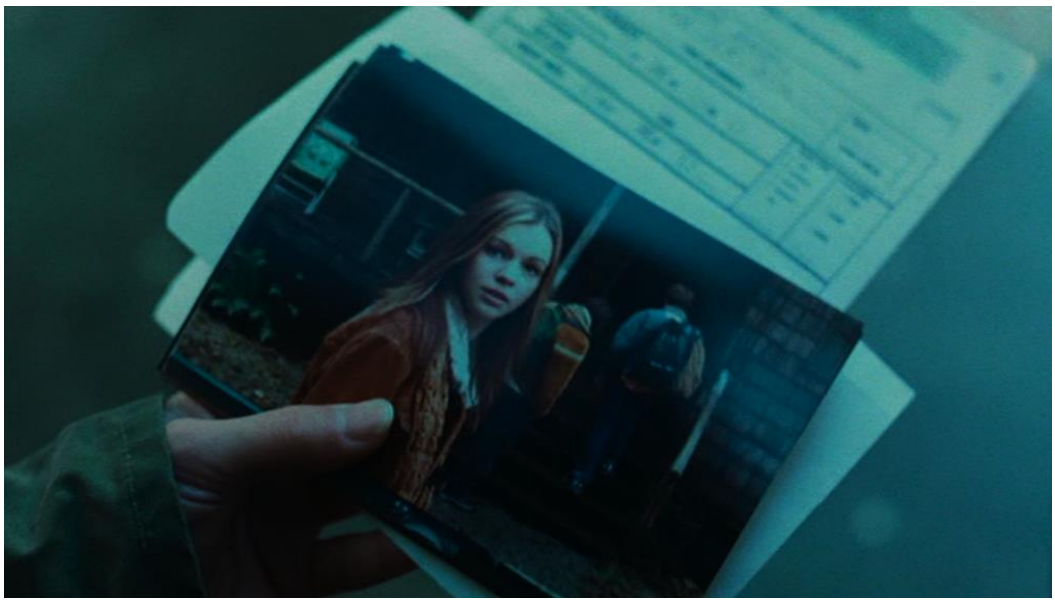

Figure 15: An insert of the photograph of Katie.

The autumnal, pre-Samara tones from the photographs are echoed later to demonstrate an on-screen space now free of Samara. The morning after Rachel retrieves Samara's body from the well, warm daylight floods Aidan's room. This sunlight mirrors the flaming red tones cast across Rachel's face when she watched the video in the cabin. The red motif contrasts with the blue colour cast since primary colours draw the eye, and visual repetition allows cinematographers to use colours to represent a chosen theme, concept or character (Malkiewicz and Mullen 2005: 151). Bazelli's use of sunset tones to mark Rachel's physical descent into Samara's world mirrors the sunrise tones marking Rachel's re-entry into the

world of the living. Free of the curse, Rachel is now liberated from the blue-green colour grading of Samara's influence.

This use of colour contrasts with the use of lighting throughout the film, where locations are well-lit with few shadows. Even the mental hospital archives are bathed in electrical light.[12] No ghosts lurk in the shadows because Samara does not exist in the shadows, but as an analogue image, embedded within the light show produced by the television screen. Samara *is* the audio-visual space, granting her a sense of omnipotence where she embodies the threatening aspects of both television and surveillance: television, because she penetrates the home and broadcasts to a passive audience, and surveillance through her CCTV-esque image. Just as people cannot avoid the ever-watchful gaze of CCTV, Samara's victims cannot escape her lethal glare. It also creates a new context for the later *Paranormal Activity* films, which embrace surveillance to capture evidence of the supernatural.

As in *Poltergeist*, the image of a character watching a screen becomes a repeated motif throughout *The Ring*. Medium shots show characters crouching or sitting before the television, almost dwarfed by its size. The only time we see rooms depicted in darkness is while the characters watch the cursed tape, setting up a visual feedback loop with the original cinematic presentation of the film: the characters watch a strange movie in the dark, while the audience watches them do so in the dark. The darkness allows the television screen to dominate as the main on-screen light source, drawing attention to Samara's film. Where *Poltergeist* used a zoom towards a screen to put the audience at one remove from the footage, *The Ring* uses cuts between the watching character and Samara's video to do the same. This focus upon the screen in *The Ring* also recalls the use of the screen as a supernatural portal in *Poltergeist*; while *The Ring* is largely unaffected by earlier American haunted house films through its Japanese origins, this reveals that even *The Ring* is not immune from the hauntological reach of *Poltergeist*. This focus upon the screen and the act of staring at it continues in the *Paranormal Activity* films, with static shots showing characters watching themselves on recorded footage. The placement of a screen between the audience and what the characters watch distances the audience while drawing attention to the act of watching.

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[12] This stands at odds with the traditional representation of the mental hospital in horror cinema, and this gleaming bright interior is more terrifying due to its absence of shadows. The lighting underscores the nature of the mental hospital, as doctors seek to explore the 'shadows' present within their patients. The hospital is a space of revelation and is lit as such.

Cinematography haunts the image through the emphasis on being able to 'see' a ghost, and the films place a great emphasis on the consumer technology required to do so.

The audience never sees the video in its entirety, its surrealist montage interrupted by reaction shots, which hint at something dreadful lurking within the unseen footage (Fig 16). Static framing and shot patterns place the visual emphasis on the source of the supernatural threat: the television and the videotape. They also underline the importance of viewing within these films. The act of viewing the characters and viewing *as* them allows for a sense of surveillance *of* the characters and investigation *by* them.

Figure 16: Rachel is disgusted by a shot of writhing maggots.

Shot patterns underscore the threat of the television on a wider scale. While Noah watches the videotape, long shots show Rachel standing alone on her balcony, surrounded by identical balconies (Fig 17). These fixed-frame shots reveal no evidence that the neighbouring apartments in her building are occupied, updating ideas around loneliness and isolation to accommodate contemporary concerns, while highlighting the television as the 'solution' to this frustrated need for company.[13] Long shots from Rachel's point of view reveal the building opposite, where television screens dominate the set design of each apartment. Each television is on, drawing attention to the audio-visual technology within these apartments (Fig 18). Rachel's neighbours become images on a 'screen', figures she can watch but with whom she cannot interact, which "casts the spectre of the televisual everywhere" (Dudenhoeffer 2014: 61). The mute viewership of characters revealed by these long shots and reverse shots turns the characters into phantoms, watching human activity

[13] Olivia Laing writes about the "particular flavour to the loneliness that comes from living in a city", noting that "mere physical proximity is not enough to dispel a sense of internal isolation" (2017: 3). Her definition of loneliness, that it can include an absence of connection, can also be applied to isolation, where a lack of connection to others leaves characters in a state of physical peril.

while unable to connect with it. The television becomes their point of connection with the 'outside world'.

Figure 17: The apartments around Rachel's appear to be uninhabited.

Figure 18: Rachel watches a character whose television dominates her apartment.

This shot/reverse shot creates a visual 'conversation' between figures. It is repeated during the two fatal interactions between Samara and her victims, enabling her to 'win' the battle of gazes. The first interaction involves Katie in the prologue, though the discussion will focus on the second interaction between Noah and Samara. This sequence occurs at the film's climax after Noah and Rachel think they have vanquished Samara and begins when Noah's television switches itself on, announcing Samara's impending arrival. The use of television static references *Poltergeist*'s television access point, although the televisions in *Poltergeist*

are always left on when the channels switch to dead air, with the 'portal' left open. Yet Samara turns the television on herself, finds her own channel and broadcasts the image of the well, granting her further control over the audio-visual space that the living can only passively observe.

After climbing out of the well, Samara emerges through the screen (Fig 19), and a tracking shot sweeps to one side, moving the frame while keeping Samara as the focus. This movement through space and time reflects Samara's entry into this world. While the discussion of visual effects lies beyond the scope of this chapter, the flickering nature of her image associates Samara with television static. It also references the "haunted realm" of CCTV, with "its degraded, repetitive images of the recent past" (Curtis 2008: 19). Samara represents the 'recordability' of the past, ready to be replayed at will in the present, though the shots from her point of view looking down at Noah indicate Samara may also enact her will as more than a simple replay. Such a crossing finds its precedent in the Victorian séance, where electromagnetic science was used to "conceptualise séance phenomena" since electricity was both a theoretical concept and practical tool (Sausman 2010: 53). Electricity, with the proper conductors, crosses time and space. Samara demonstrates the supernatural ability to do likewise, aligning herself with the animating principle of technology. Her re-birth into the world of the living marks the point at which electricity is made manifest, as well as the point at which she moves from the off-screen space into the on-screen space.

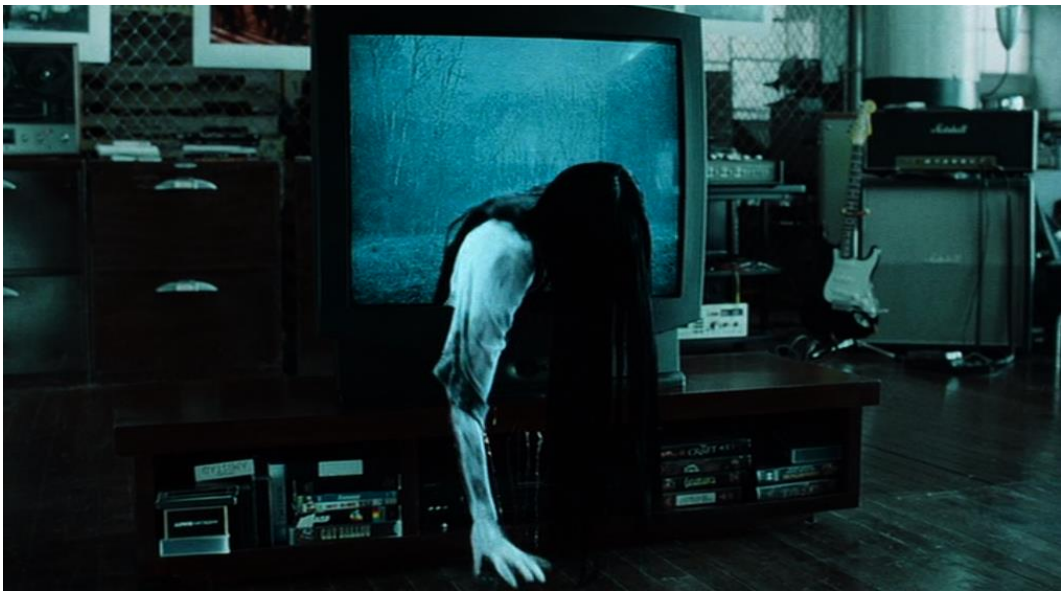

Figure 19: Samara climbs out of the television.

A series of shot/reverse shots show Samara's approach and Noah's horrified expression (Figs 20-23). Shots from Noah's point of view are angled up at Samara, indicating

her power over this encounter. A tight close-up of Samara's eyes is the final shot of the sequence (Fig 24). Bazelli's framing and shot pattern leaves Samara the victor in the battle of the 'gaze', withholding a view of her defeated opponent until Rachel discovers his body and a jump cut shows a brief glimpse of his grey face contorted into a terrified expression. Richard Morgan (Brian Cox) explains that Samara puts images in her victim's heads, so it is assumed these *images* scare victims to death, not the sight of Samara. The audience must imagine what she shows him to frighten him to death, but this underscores the deadly result of viewing dangerous images. Such a 'victory' is crucial to the film, and it is only possible through the use of framing and point-of-view shots.

Figure 20: A shot from behind Noah shows his view of Samara.

Figure 21: Noah finds himself unable to best Samara.

Figure 22: The reverse shot shows Samara in the centre of the frame.

Figure 23: Samara's perspective downwards towards a stricken Noah.

Figure 24: The final shot centres on Samara's gaze.

This cinematographic emphasis on the act of 'looking' through the use of tight close-ups is crucial since watching the videotape activates the haunting. The living intrude into Samara's audio-visual space and provoke her retaliation in the domestic space. The film represents virality, with the need to make a copy the means of distributing her rage, and she operates as a cinematic precursor of contemporary malware.[14] Yet each viewing is an unwanted incursion into her audio-visual space, making the living the characters that 'do not belong'. The death she brings becomes a punishment for our 'need to see', and Samara anticipates the current boom in so-called "trauma porn" now widely distributed on social media.[15] While "ghosts are often forced to repeat the same thing over and over again or at least to stay in the same place forever" (Meteling 2010: 187), Samara repeats her actions having been 'goaded' into doing so by the act of watching the tape—the tight close-ups on watching viewers highlights the importance of this act. The viewer's need to consume images creates the haunting, and Samara's punishment can only be avoided by replicating and spreading these images. Nicholas Rombes theorises that humans are not afraid of replication, but the easy dispersal of images means we are "continually haunted by images. [...] They literally do not go away, or disintegrate upon duplication" (2009: 4). The fixed image never changes or dies, reminding us of our own mortality as another cinematic *memento mori*.

[14] The videotape becomes the digital file, inert until opened and its contents viewed, at which point the malware is transmitted.
[15] Sonia Kovacevic examines the prevalence of such material in the digital age and questions its role in relation to "American society's obsession with the commodification of pain and misfortune" (2021 online).

The deadly nature of images becomes clear when we consider the contradiction inherent in *The Ring*. The film presents Samara as a tangible presence, yet she kills her victims using telepathic prowess. If "[t]he ghost pushes at the boundaries of language and thought" (Davis 2013: 58), then Samara extends this assertion by *crossing* these boundaries, transmitting her thoughts into the mind of another, the point of transmission emphasised by the close-up of Samara's eyes. Samara acts like a television, transmitting information from the broadcaster to the audience. She is both the broadcaster and content, referencing the assertion that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 2001: 7). Unlike *Poltergeist*, in which the haunting is restricted to the first house to encroach on the cemetery, Samara's videotape becomes the site of the haunting. Arno Meteling discusses the displacement of the ghost from a single, fixed location onto a videotape, a reproduced (and reproducible) "non-place" that can be transferred between locations (2010: 189).[16] This liberates viewership from the home, and the videotape references other forms of portable telecommunications media, such as the mobile phone.[17] These allowed viewers to choose not only when to watch content, but also *where* (Lotz 2007: 59). The VCR unshackled viewers from TV schedules, granting them time freedom, while modern media untethered viewership from the domestic space. The time-space freedom granted by the videotape echoes Samara's freedom in crossing both time *and* space to punish her victims.

Her home video plays like an example of Surrealist filmmaking. Its use of vignettes, images that jump around within the frame, and seemingly unrelated scenes create the dream logic of the nightmare. While cinematographers use fades, dissolves, or wipes to obscure the cut between locations or time periods (Mascelli 1965: 136), Samara uses disorientating jump cuts. The juxtaposition between the disparate images confuses the viewer, not the images themselves, referencing both Surrealist and avant-garde cinema. The images provide clues that initially defy interpretation until Rachel's investigation makes their meaning clear. Whenever she 'solves' a clue, the film jump cuts to the fixed-frame image from the videotape. These shots 'explain' the individual images, but they also insert Samara further into the narrative by embedding her video within the film's wider cinematography.[18]

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[16] Marc Auge defines the non-place as "spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure)" (2008: 76). They stand in opposition to the domestic realm.
[17] South Korean horror film *Phone* (Byeong-ki Ahn) was also released in 2002, featuring a haunted mobile phone number.
[18] This also demonstrates the close relationship between cinematography and editing, although editing lies beyond the scope of this discussion.

Recording technology reveals the disconnect between Samara's psychic abilities and the physical world. When Rachel copies the tape, a closeup of the machine shows nonsensical time codes. The control track tells users where and how the tape was recorded; without a control track, the tape should not exist. The tape becomes doubled with Samara, whose own origins are obscured.[19] Her videotape literalises this issue through an unseen camera operator: an eerie direct shot of a mirror reveals no reflection of a camera. A woman turns to stare into the camera that is invisible to the mirror. The woman's fervent gaze at the camera denotes a presence in the off-screen space behind the camera (Fig 25). While the eye-line matching suggests an adult, Samara is the central cinematographer in *The Ring*, able to burn images onto magnetic tape through her force of psychic will. While this chapter explores the use of cinematography to represent instances of haunting, here Samara is both the haunting *and* cinematography itself, both the ghost *and* its depiction. She controls the elements that fall under the auspices of a cinematographer to narrate her story on the tape.

Figure 25: The confusing eyeline-matching of Samara's video.

The Ring's use of analogue technology, dated even by the standards of 2002, explores the replicability of the image. Image-making lies at the heart of the film, whose ghost cannot exist without recordable media. Where *Poltergeist*'s "TV people" make contact through the television before dragging the living into their realm, in *The Ring*, the living enter Samara's realm by watching her videotape. From that moment, they are 'marked' as being within Samara's power, through both colour grading and their distorted faces when they are captured as images. As with *Poltergeist*, this marks the living as being that which does not belong, and

[19] Her father denies his paternity and the film hints at both a live birth *and* adoption.

the supernatural activity becomes an attempt to punish the act of watching. Shot patterns around Samara, in which the shots move from long, to medium, to close-up, draw attention to her eyes, revealing the heavy emphasis on 'looking' within this film. Samara moves from off-screen space *through* the screen itself, making the ghost fully visible. The film upends notions around ghosts lurking in the shadows since this ghost appears through the dots of light of a television picture. Far from being merely suspected, the television screen makes the ghost fully visible. Yet the shots from her video repeated within the film also allow Samara to remain in the diegesis even when she is not shown on screen. Repeated shots of the television and videotape demonstrate the importance of audio-visual technology, and as television destabilises the family unit in suburbia in *Poltergeist*, here it destabilises the fabric of the diegetic universe.

Where the ghosts in *Poltergeist* are subjects *within* the frame, Samara advances the concept of a cinematic haunting by being both the *object* of the haunting and the being that *directs* the haunting. She controls her own appearances, elevating the ghost to the status of active agent, possessed of an identity and the ability to effect material change. Her mastery of these spaces precludes any sense of the eerie since the nature and identity of the agent are understood early in the film. The film's close alignment between Samara, cinematography, and technology positions her as the controller of audio-visual space. Characters suggest such space as a solution for loneliness, with the-living Samara given a television 'for company' in the barn, while switched-on televisions dominate the apartments opposite Rachel's. The ubiquity of this space within on screen suggests the extent of Samara's potential influence through it. These allusions to loneliness reference an anxiety about belonging, although in *The Ring*, it is less about belonging within a specific geographical location and more about belonging among other humans; the audio-visual space is no substitute for community. Samara's clear mastery of the audio-visual space positions her as its true occupant, while the living may only experience it through passive consumption of media, with images dictated by cinematography. Rachel cannot banish Samara by laying her remains to rest, considered as a traditional method for laying ghosts since Pliny the Younger's first ghost story. Rather, it is a testament to the power of the screen that a viewer cannot banish Samara; they can only avoid her wrath by *not* watching her imagery. In effect, not consuming Samara's videotape prevents her from consuming the viewer.

The nature of surveillance in *The Ring*, in which Samara's appearance references the degraded CCTV image, is picked up in the *Paranormal Activity* films, although here, the living attempt to control the audio-visual space by recording events within the domestic

space, aligning them through the techniques of cinematography with Samara. This also raises questions of affluence since economic considerations never threaten their ability to acquire audio-visual technology. Yet, as in *The Ring*, the family remain unable to banish the entity using technology, and may only passively record its activity, revealing that they, like Rachel, cannot control the audio-visual space.

"It could be a ghost...or it could be a demon!" Expanding the Frame in *Paranormal Activity 1-3*

In this section, I argue that the films place less emphasis on the weird and more on the eerie, with the family keen to understand who and what plagues them. The issue is less about the anxiety of belonging, and more an anxiety of identity: both *who* is the supernatural entity and *who are they* to have brought such events upon themselves? I argue that this shift in the focus of anxiety derives from the found footage nature of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise.[20] For Shellie McMurdo, "found footage horror hinges on the historical indexical relationship that the camera lens has enjoyed with 'the real'" (2023: 27). This references André Bazin's alignment of photography and cinema with reality through their ability to mechanically depict whatever lies in front of the lens. Found footage films strive "to position [their] narratives as within the audience's reality", using "the physicality of the camera" as one means of doing so (McMurdo 2023: 27). Found footage films often position the camera "as a technological witness" which is "framed as being more reliable than its [...] human operator", although the limits of the frame also reveal the unreliability of the camera as a witness (McMurdo 2023: 27). The films depend upon cinematography for their conceit to work, yet they also call into question the veracity of the experiences of those characters within them.

The found footage conceit also prompts a further shift, wherein the haunted subjects move from being merely passive viewers, as seen in *Poltergeist* and *The Ring*, to active agents, with control over the media they view and the technology used to capture the images. This shift mirrors the contemporary shift in available domestic technology in this period, with the original festival release of *Paranormal Activity* coinciding with the release of the Apple iPhone. Users had to wait until the release of the iPhone 3GS in 2009 to record video

[20] In his exploration of the British television-based 'mockumentary' *Ghostwatch* (Lesley Manning, 1992), Murray Leeder notes the impact of the drama upon ghost hunting television shows such as *Ghost Hunters* (Jason Hawes, 2004-ongoing) and *Most Haunted* (Karl Beattie, 2002-2019) in the UK. He also sees its influence upon *Paranormal Activity* (2013: 174).

(Rossignol 2022). It also reflects the familiarity of the iPhone generation with the ability to generate their own content for dissemination online, rather than being passive consumers of content dictated by media networks.

In *Paranormal Activity*, Katie (Katie Featherston) and her boyfriend Micah (Micah Sloat) move to a new house in the San Diego suburbs where an entity haunts them at night. Katie has been haunted since childhood, and recognises the activity as paranormal in nature, and Micah buys a camera to record the activity. A psychic confirms a demon is haunting Katie, and the activity escalates until she is dragged out of the bedroom by an invisible figure. At the film's climax, a possessed Katie hurls Micah at the camera before leaving the house, and a title card explains that police found Micah's body days later.

Paranormal Activity 2 is both a prequel and a sequel, with the first part of the film occurring before the events of the first film. In *Paranormal Activity 2*, Katie's sister Kristi (Sprague Grayden) moves house with her husband Daniel (Brian Boland), stepdaughter, and baby son, Hunter. After an apparent break-in, they install security cameras that also record paranormal activity. The nanny senses an evil presence but Daniel fires her, although he brings her back to exorcise the house after the activity escalates. The exorcism transfers the demon from Kristi to Katie, and the film becomes a sequel to the original film. Katie arrives during the night and kills Daniel and Kristi, before leaving the house with Hunter.

Paranormal Activity 3 forms a prequel to both films, in which Kristi (Jessica Brown) and Katie (Chloe Csengery) are children and experiencing a haunting in the home they share with their mother Julie (Lauren Bittner) and her partner, Dennis (Chris Smith). Wedding videographer Dennis captures the strange phenomena in their house on videotapes, and the phenomena escalate until Julie takes the girls to her mother's house for safety. The girls' grandmother is behind the activity since she made a pact with a demon who would provide wealth and security, in exchange for the family's firstborn male. This demon kills Julie and Dennis, and the grandmother takes the girls under her care.

The films' use of cameras to document supernatural activity reflects the contemporary context of 'ghost hunting', made commonplace through TV programmes such as *Ghost Hunters* (Jason Hawes, 2004-ongoing) and *Haunted Collector* (Steven James Golebiowski, 2011-13). This context relies upon technology being used to lend scientific credibility to 'evidence' collected in the investigation of a haunting of an 'ordinary' family. This use of technology depends on cinematography to create paranormal activity, further aligning the supernatural and the technological. Peli shot the first film in his own home, having been inspired by hearing strange noises around the house (Heller-Nicholas 2014: 129). While

viewers would likely be unaware of this fact, the use of Peli's house following this experience lends greater veracity to the footage. Budgetary constraints compelled Peli "to exploit the intrinsic supernatural aspect of the camera rather than the spectacular quality of what comes into its field" (Lefait 2013: 80). Yet this focus upon the camera helps to make this franchise as much about filmmaking as it is about the plot.

The section opens with an exploration of technology and its impact on the 'found footage' conceit of the films, before examining how this conceit works in relation to the eerie. It moves to a discussion of the changing points of view available to static cameras compared to handheld cameras, and the impact of lighting on the representation of the haunting—both helping to guide the gaze around the frame. The section also explores the sense of surveillance in the films, and the ways in which the supernatural disrupts scenes of mundane domesticity. The section next discusses the value of the pan to renegotiating the frame, thus altering what is on and what is offscreen, as well as the impact of changes between viewpoints and camera angles on the representation of the haunting. I also discuss the use of intertitles to manipulate temporality in the films and the pervading presence of an unseen editor to train the audience to experience the haunting in a prescribed fashion.

The television is no longer the primary screen within these films, and unlike *Poltergeist* and *The Ring*, there is no suggestion that the television is a portal. Characters review footage through computers or the screens on the devices, relegating the television to a passive light source within the frame. The camera allows characters to view spaces and times at which they were not present, or awake. Yet despite this active use of technology, which references the paranormal investigators of *Poltergeist*, the living can only view what the camera captures, and the cameras cannot record that which occurs beyond the frame. That we never *see* the ghost does not undermine the apparent veracity of the haunting captured on camera since the framing allows us to see the *effects* of the ghost: "the paranormal presence is not just made realistic by being constructed through the piecemeal traces it leaves: belief in its existence is increased by the fact the signs of an invisible presence are captured by the camera" (Lefait 2013: 81).

The found footage conceit explains the differences in supernatural activity with the earlier films. Much of this activity is caught on camera and appears on-screen through the emphasis upon cinematography, yet in keeping with the underwhelming footage of *Ghost Hunters*, it does not involve the spectacular figures of *Poltergeist* or a recognisable entity like Samara. Instead, the focus is on the effects of haunting, with the framing used to capture changes in the set that signify the presence of an invisible entity. This aligns these films

towards the eerie, where the ambiguity around the agent, and the invisibility of the figure, precludes the entity from being 'weird' until its nature becomes known. The closest the audience gets to 'seeing' the entity occurs in *Paranormal Activity 3* during an earthquake. Dennis leaves the handheld camera running when he leaves the room, and the fixed frame captures dust falling from the ceiling across an invisible figure to reveal its outline (Fig 26). The shot is angled upwards, creating an impression of its height. The dust provides the only movement within the frame, drawing attention to the figure and making this a revelation of the supernatural in on-screen space.

Figure 26: The dust describes the figure's outline in Paranormal Activity 3.

This provocation of the eerie is most obvious in the first two films where the agent responsible is unknown. Unlike Samara and the ghostly procession of *Poltergeist*, the eerie leaves space for a plausible explanation for a door swinging closed, or a child's toy springing into life, placing the early activity of these films into Todorov's fantastic. While the title suggests paranormal activity, this rational explanation denies the activity's placement into the marvellous. Yet in *Paranormal Activity 3*, this fleeting glimpse of the figure in the fixed frame shot dispels the fantastic: the agent exists, though its *identity* remains unknown. The film is unclear as to whether the figure is the weird element that does not belong, and Górka's choice of frame supports this reading, since the shot of the invisible entity removes any rational explanations for its presence, while its invisibility contradicts known understandings of presence. That said, the narrative of the films eventually identifies the agent as a demonic entity conjured by the family matriarch. The figure's sudden appearance in the family home in *Paranormal Activity 2* coincides with Hunter's birth, the male child promised to the demon, and the demon's collection of payment gives the entity a reason for being there. The

matriarch intruded into the occult through sorcery, thus dragging her family into a world of demonic pacts, and this throws its 'weird' status into question.

The films use both static cameras and handheld cameras to document the haunting, though from a cinematographic point of view, the static cameras capture more activity since they use a wider-angle frame and are not subject to the wild movements of the handheld cameras. For example, the security cameras in *Paranormal Activity 2* use the widest possible frame for the best surveillance, yet this wide-angle frame impacts the representation of the haunting. The static shot, combined with a long depth of field, allows the viewer to choose where to look within the frame. This is unusual within mainstream filmmaking, so these films rely on cinematographic techniques to direct the audience's gaze so viewers do not miss the paranormal incident. Lighting provides one solution, with fish tanks and night lights used to guide the eye (Fig 27). In the second film, the technician that installed the security cameras explains their night vision mode, so there is no narrative reason for the cameras to require light sources. This lighting is present to draw the eye towards supernatural moments within the frame.

Figure 27: The night light guides the eye towards the cot in Paranormal Activity 2.

This approach to lighting betrays the sense of 'surveillance' within the films. For Curtis, CCTV implies "low resolution monochrome, [which] is a code for authenticity and memory, always threatening to lack revelation when the information it provides is most urgently needed" (2008: 19). *Paranormal Activity 2* already uses a format noted for its lack of clarity, yet here the imagery is crystal clear. Writing about digital cinema, Nicholas Rombes notes that, "haunted by the spectre of perfection, there is a tendency in digital media [...] to

reassert imperfection" (2009: 2). The image is haunted twice, both by this 'spectre of perfection' and by its comparison to familiar low-resolution images. Yet it is not genuine CCTV footage. The cameras do not use the grainy night vision viewers recognise from *Ghost Hunters*, so Simmonds uses lighting to conceal in the shadows what the non-existent grain cannot hide. This acts as the opposite of Samara, who manifests *through* the light of television static into a world lacking shadows.[21]

This use of dispassionate wide-angle framing supports the conceit that the supernatural is an intrinsic part of the diegetic universe since most disturbances occur on-screen. In the second film, Kristi waits in the centre of the frame for the kettle to boil (Fig 28). The scene is one of mundane domesticity, 'chosen' by the security system for its point in the footage cycle, rather than its content, reinforcing the found footage concept. This scene also recalls *The Ring*, since it occurs in the daytime and sunlight floods the set. The wide-angle framing captures the point at which the cupboard doors fly open simultaneously, creating a jump scare for both Kristi and the audience. These doors offer the only movement within the frame and the wide angle of the shot reveals no visible agent behind their movement. The simultaneous movement implies paranormal activity, while the jump scare is a directorial choice that punctuates the film's 'slow burn' suspense.

This shot also deviates from footage made familiar by ghost-hunting programmes. In writing about such reality shows, Karen Williams argues the claims to document the supernatural put such shows into the lineage of the Phantasmagoria, rather than photography: "In such performances, ghosts were rendered as a deceptively real visual entertainment, but also as an illusion of lenses and light intended to fool the senses" (2010: 149). Yet here, the ghost is visually absent on screen, with only its effects appearing as real. Light floods the scene, implying a refusal to fool the senses and by diverging from nocturnal scenes familiar from reality television, *Paranormal Activity 2* uses this scene to strengthen the film's claims of authenticity by removing the shadows in which a culprit may hide.

[21] It could be argued that Samara refers more to the anxieties about the dangers television brings into the home, much like *Poltergeist*, while the movement away from televisions towards other screens such as laptops and tablets prefigures the haunting in *Paranormal Activity*.

Figure 28: The kitchen doors fly open, frightening Kristi in Paranormal Activity 2.

The cinematography in *Paranormal Activity 3* follows a similar pattern of 'documenting reality' while attempting to overcome the limitations of the fixed-point static camera. Dennis mounts a handheld camera onto an oscillating fan, creating an extended wide-angle view. This introduces temporality to the oscillating shots, echoing the use of the pan in *Poltergeist* to 'extend' the frame by moving it through time. The audience cannot see beyond the camera's frame during the pan, and the camera does not pause when something untoward occurs. This use of the pan features in two crucial moments within the narrative in the third film. The first instance is more instructive since it is the only moment of the two in which we 'see' the ghost as a tangible presence. In the scene, babysitter Lisa (Johanna Braddy) studies at the kitchen table (Figs 29-32). The camera pans to the living room and back, revealing a small figure beneath a sheet behind Lisa. When the camera reaches the edge of its pan, the sheet collapses and the figure vanishes. The on-screen movement in the briefly static frame makes this a supernatural revelation in space, while the ongoing movement of the camera also makes this a supernatural revelation in *time*, reinforcing the ability of the supernatural to cross time and space. The ghost enters off-screen space when it vanishes, yet it made its presence tangible through its interaction with the sheet.

Figure 29: The kitchen behind Lisa is empty in Paranormal Activity 3.

Figure 30: The camera pans to the living room.

Figure 31: The figure stands behind Lisa.

Figure 32: Lisa turns and the sheet crumples.

This scene is unsettling, rather than scary, and such a feeling is effected through Górka's use of the pan. It allows us to see both the appearance and disappearance of the ghost, while the time code on the screen reveals the narrow time frame of the pan, which is crucial to the supernatural effect. A cut removes a portion of time where two shots are stitched together, and the supernatural may lurk in this off-screen space created by the missing time. Yet here, the pan involves a continuous renegotiation of the frame and its contents, and this returns the supernatural to the on-screen space. The flexibility of the moving frame is also important to the metaphorical reference to the American imperial gothic, with the porous border of the frame reflecting America's likewise porous boundaries: "If [...] the frame isolates the filmed image from the surrounding space, pointing to the filmmaker's ability to control that demarcated visual field, [...] *Paranormal Activity*'s mode of displaying the appearance of evil forces in long takes and long shots presents the frame as permeable" (Sayad 2021: 67).

This scene also invites us to consider the nature of the figure since its instant disappearance proves it is neither of the girls. The adoption of the sheet mirrors Lisa's use of it while earlier pretending to be a ghost, highlighting the continual surveillance of the ghost. This doubles the ghost with the ever-present camera, as both watch the events unfold. The deviation between the ghost and camera occurs since the camera is passive, recording events without engagement, while the ghost is active, recreating what it sees. This sudden visibility of the ghost is crucial, since "[f]ilm and photography are media that uncannily represent a now absent presence, signifying what Roland Barthes called the '*That-has-been*'" (Williams 2010: 150). This ability of audio-visual media to render presence in a perceivable way is central to this thesis, though it is possible to extend Barthes' point. His concept of the 'That-

has-been' relies on the notion that the presence is now absent, since films depict people and places filmed in the past. They are no longer there while the audience watches the film. Yet this applies to these films using the eerie, where the unknown agent becomes present using the movement of the frame. The '*That-has-been*' becomes '*That-which-is-here*'.

This ever-watchful camera poses another issue, since, "[e]very time the camera is shifted, the audience is repositioned, and observes the event from a fresh viewpoint" (Mascelli 1965: 24). Yet when the footage is that of the surveillance camera, the cameras do not shift. When the system cycles between cameras, the audience is repositioned, but they observe *a different space* from the same viewpoint. The audience is moved through time and space to a new location, reflecting the *audience*'s position as spectral spectators, already referenced through the audience's location in the behind-the-camera segment of off-screen space. Yet the repetitive nature of the fixed camera angles highlights the paranormal activity. The shift to the next camera allows the audience to compare the scene with the previous time they viewed it. Where they do spot differences not addressed in diegetic dialogue, they may assign paranormal provenance to changes within the set. Despite the fixed frames otherwise being associated with a revelation of the supernatural in space, this movement *between* frames enables further activity to occur off-screen, turning these shots into a revelation of the supernatural in *time*. This compounds the time-based nature of these hauntings, emphasised by the use of title cards and time codes. Sébastien Lefait notes that on two occasions, the rhythmic cycling of the cameras is interrupted; first, a sequence is longer than those preceding it, and second, the footage follows Kristi upstairs, sending the filming order awry. For Lefait, this indicates the entity has interfered with the surveillance system (2013: 87), although I argue this could also be the work of the film's unseen editor.

By comparison, the roaming gaze of the handheld camera does not give the audience the chance to view anything specific. In *Paranormal Activity 3*, noises on the soundtrack appear to come from behind Dennis in the girls' bedroom, but the audience must wait for him to turn the camera around before seeing the cause. The handheld cameras restrict the field of view to that of the operator. The point-of-view 'scans' the scene in response to activity, making this viewpoint a reactive one. Even when the camera operator moves *towards* a sound source, they are still reacting. The static shots of the fixed cameras offer a more disorientating viewpoint since the viewer's eye can roam across the frame unless lighting and movement guide the audience to look at a specific part of the frame.

Composition is essential for this guidance to work. During the climactic night in the house in *Paranormal Activity 3*, an invisible figure hauls Katie across the bedroom (Fig 33).

She travels in a diagonal line across and down the frame towards the camera. Katie disappears into the off-screen space, though the audience knows from the camera placement that a dangerous cupboard lies in this space. The dragging of a character into a cupboard references *Poltergeist*'s closet portal, and the movement into off-screen space suggests a perilous entry into space controlled by the supernatural. The direction of travel is also crucial since the diagonals from top to bottom suggest *descending movement*. As Katie is dragged across and down the frame, the supernatural entity renders her powerless.

Figure 33: Katie is hauled diagonally across the frame in Paranormal Activity 3.

In these films, inter-titles announce what night it is. Missing nights imply a lack of activity, while the greater number of nights included towards the climax demonstrates an acceleration of activity. Time speeds up during inactivity and returns to real-time to capture events like doors opening and closing of their own accord within wide-angle frames. This manipulation of time trains the audience to expect paranormal activity whenever the film returns to real-time, yet the use of time codes also shows that activity does not happen at the same time every night, nor in the same fashion. The audience may predict when something will happen through the speeding/slowing of time, yet the characters cannot do likewise since no obvious pattern of activity emerges. It is only through the assembly of sequences that the audience may make sense of what they are watching, and this superior knowledge of the audience places them into the position of all-seeing spectral spectator.

Yet the omission of huge periods of time demonstrates an unseen presence editing these sequences. While this anonymous editor is not quite a 'something where there should be nothing', it provokes questions about *what* agent is at work within the films. No clue is

given as to who assembled these images in this order. Discarded footage remains in the space beyond the frame, and the agent responsible for assembling the images to create this narrative remains unknown. While editing has not been a major focus within this discussion, it works alongside cinematographic techniques to give form to the cuts necessary to assemble specific shot patterns. This unseen editor shapes the narrative by selecting and discarding footage, reflecting Samara's control of the audio-visual space in *The Ring*.

Another absence is perceptible throughout the films, which never feature neighbours, only visits by the babysitter or a teenaged friend, with the families only occasionally seeking external help. This reflects the wider anxiety about the ability to belong since the family appears unable or unwilling to appeal to those around them for help, suggesting they are either new to the neighbourhood or somehow alienated from it. This alienation references the urban loneliness of *The Ring*, where the television becomes a substitute for human company, and while the *Paranormal Activity* films are not set in a city, the fact they explore the same sense of alienation suggests the wider isolation of the neoliberal age that cuts across geographical locations. Such isolation also references *Poltergeist*, where Steven desires to keep Carol-Anne's disappearance 'in the family', although his decision to turn to paranormal experts suggests an openness to seeking external aid.

This section has shown that these films differ from *Poltergeist* and *The Ring* in that technology becomes an extension of cinematography, with the cinematographic techniques dependent on the capabilities of the technology in use. The *Paranormal Activity* films choose a more 'realistic' attempt at a technological investigation of a haunting, inspired by ghost-hunting television shows with their time codes and underwhelming examples of supernatural activity. The cameras enact this paranormal exploration, though we know from *The Ring* that images can be manipulated by a supernatural presence within the televisual space, thus raising questions about the veracity of what we see and undermining the apparently empirical evidence on display. In the *Paranormal Activity* films, the family uses technology to solve a problem, yet it only proves able to passively document the activity. Even Dennis, who works in the realm of the audio-visual as a videographer, can only record images; he cannot intervene in what he captures. The entity in these films remains an example of the eerie, working at the level of the primal and ancient as a summoned demonic power. Its status as weird remains ambiguous since it should not belong in our world, although its invitation by the matriarch might suggest otherwise. While it is a force that originates outside our world, its link to the matriarch implies the haunting originates *within* the family. Like the beleaguered families in these films, the demon does not directly interact with technology.

Instead, their activities are recorded by the ever-watchful camera, and this passivity of both the living and the entity reflects the development of the consumer goods market since *The Ring*. The passive acquisition of consumer goods as part of the neoliberal Digital Age, first highlighted in *Poltergeist* through the number of television sets in the house, is here expanded through the range of media devices in the *Paranormal Activity* films, none of which offer any help in the face of supernatural interference. Where the supernatural actively used technology in the earlier films, here even the demon is reduced to performance before the camera, much like the living.

The Case for Cinematography as the Conduit of Supernatural Spectacle

The focus of this chapter has been on the materiality of the ghost within the haunted house and the ways in which the cinematography allows for the perception of the ghost and the haunting. It is important to note that this materiality is still present in *Paranormal Activity*, even when the ghost is invisible since the cinematographic techniques within these films shows the effect of the ghost's presence on the diegetic world. This demonstrates the importance of reading cinematography since the movement of actors within the frame, or changes to the set during a single pan, reveal the ghost even when it does not appear as a full-figure apparition. The use of wide shots or fixed frames also allows the viewer a more democratic perspective of the scene, and this can negate the possibility of a mundane explanation for the activity shown on screen. It is the combination of cinematographic techniques that allows for the depiction of supernatural activity.

As fictional narratives, films do not subscribe to the same conceit as ghost-hunting reality television shows that their imagery shows 'real' ghosts; rather, they propose that ghosts are a *diegetic reality*. As found footage films, the *Paranormal Activity* series problematises this distinction by proposing that not only are the films genuine, they also depict ghosts that are real for *both the protagonists and audience alike*. Yet this insistence upon ghosts as a diegetic reality remains, and therefore, the haunting is constructed as a form of supernatural spectacle. This makes the 'how' of the appearance a more instructive consideration than 'if' it exists, which is why the weird and eerie become more useful critical modes than the Freudian uncanny. Reading the use of cinematography allows for a new interpretation of cinematic hauntings by reading the cinematic language first, and how it is necessary for the haunting to take shape, adding a new dimension to existing critical work.

These films are as much a comment on cinematography, and its importance to the creation of the haunting, as they are a comment about a growing reliance on technology. The cameras of the *Paranormal Activity* films act in the same way as the parapsychologist's camera trained on the screen in *Poltergeist*, acting as an intermediary between the paranormal activity and the viewer, and shots of the characters watching Samara's videotape in *The Ring*. The audience watches the characters react to activity, yet by watching 'at one remove' these films draw attention to the screen in a way that does not occur in the other films of this thesis.

Yet these films are also hauntological texts in a cinematic tradition of haunted house films. Despite the reliance on demons, the *Paranormal Activity* films are haunted more by ghost-hunting television shows than by *The Amityville Horror*, although they draw their focus on technology to document the haunting from *Poltergeist* as much as they do from contemporary paranormal investigation television programmes. Where *Poltergeist* follows *The Amityville Horror* in tying the supernatural intrinsically to a specific single-family dwelling, while following the religious overtones of the demonic nature of the supernatural entity at the heart of the haunting, *Paranormal Activity*'s focus on a demon that haunts a family, rather than a space, follows *The Ring* in the disconnection of a haunting from a specific location. This mirrors the change in audio-visual technology in this period, unmooring the need to view televisual content within the home due to the increasing portability of audio-visual devices. As a result, the borders of the home become truly porous, since family members can extend domestic boundaries through their devices. If television had the potential to act as a supernatural conduit, such material can now be viewed anywhere, aligning Sconce's "electronic elsewhere" with consumer goods in the neoliberal age. This again reflects the growth of the American imperial gothic in the years following 9/11, with the national paranoia about what lay beyond its borders transferred into a cultural anxiety about a threat which could not be contained or expelled using technology.

In these films, audio-visual technology becomes a visual sign of affluence and a way to connect with both the outside world and the other side. The reliance upon the television in *Poltergeist* and the videotape in *The Ring* reference the one-way transmission of a traditional haunting, with the living 'watching' the supernatural events unfold, while the use of video cameras to capture the haunting in *Poltergeist* prefigures the adoption of video cameras and other technology in *Paranormal Activity*. Yet media technology offers only the ability to observe, not to act—much like cinematography itself. The supernatural entities control the digital threshold, and the fact they do so using outdated technological formats reflects their anachronistic nature. Ghosts are shorn of their relevance to the time and place in which they

emerge, and they become doubled with the soon-to-be replaced media of these films, always one step out of time due to the production lag. The ghosts represent old fears around the messages brought into the home by television, and our growing lack of privacy through the speed of technological change. *Poltergeist* focuses upon the television, used to display images, while *Paranormal Activity* relies upon the video camera, used to capture images. *The Ring* sits between them, with only Samara capable of creating and displaying her own images. This aligns Samara with the cinematographers responsible for these films, but it also best represents the importance of the image as being the heart of the ghost film.

Reading cinematography and understanding what it reveals about the ghost adds to the value of existing work. The visual strength of Samara's presence within *The Ring* aligns her with "the TV people" of *Poltergeist* and both films display the ghost. While this seemingly casts these figures as the 'weird' element, the use of cinematography suggests the non-belonging characters to be the living, intruding upon spaces coded through close-ups and colour grading as belonging to the dead. The persecution of the living by the dead becomes an attempt to wrest back control of contested space. By contrast, the *Paranormal Activity* films are more concerned with the eerie, withholding visual confirmation of the identity of the agent yet using lighting, wide-angle shots, and movement within the frame to visually represent activity that confirms an agent is present. Even when the third film undercuts this assumption, granting a name and function to the unseen agent perpetuating the supernatural activity, the eerie is dispelled, although the means for dispatching the entity remain unknown.

In *Paranormal Activity* and *Poltergeist*, it is essential to read the cinematography and set design together, and this speaks to the wider argument of this thesis through the combination of cinematic technologies to create a haunting. In these two films, changes to the physical fabric of the set often become the only way to 'see' the actions of the entity in *Paranormal Activity*, while a similar approach in the earlier scenes of *Poltergeist* shows the actions of the ghosts before they appear on screen, such as the off-screen movement of the chairs onto the table. The movement of props within the frame creates the eerie, allowing the audience to 'see' an unseen agent, reinforcing the primacy of the dead within domestic spaces. Sound design also works with the cinematography to create a more rounded haunting. The almost silent shots of the security footage cycling through the cameras in *Paranormal Activity 2* opens a space in which jump scares can be achieved with sudden sounds both within and without a fixed frame, often made by an element of the set design. The kitchen table scene in *Poltergeist* derives its impact from the silence with which the chairs are

stacked in the off-screen space. The technical language of filmmaking lays bare the mechanism of 'seeing' the supernatural.

Therefore, set design works in tandem with cinematography to represent the haunting in a visual way, and it is to set design that the discussion now turns. Even more so than the films in this chapter, the films in the set design chapter explore home occupation or ownership as the route to belonging. Yet where these films explore affluence as expressed through the form of consumer goods and audio-visual technology, the next set of films examines economic concerns as expressed through the physical structure of the home and its integrity. The occupation of the home becomes the potential shield against supernatural threats, yet here, they emerge within the property, laying bare the newcomers as the weird element that does not belong in spaces already claimed by the dead.

Supernatural Set Design: Ghosts and the Built Environment

There can be no haunted house film without a dwelling in which the haunting occurs. The house holds a wider significance, as Karen E. Macfarlane explains, writing about neoliberal Gothic. For her, the house lies "[a]t the heart of the American Dream, as the outward and visible sign of upward mobility and prosperity that are its most basic principles" (2017: 145). Set design creates and defines this 'visible sign' through the set and its props to comprise the built environment of the film. Houses as a changeable setting are baked into production design since "[t]he character and story are particularly closely entwined in the domestic setting, and this is often the place that undergoes transformation to signify the changes taking place in the narrative arc" (Barnwell 2017: 175). In the films in this chapter, it is a given that the house *is* haunted. This diegetic reality provides the key to supernatural set design, which refers to sets where the design plays an active role in the visibility of the supernatural, through the movement of set dressing or doors, allowing the supernatural to communicate with the living.

Chapter Outline and Argument

This chapter opens with an overview of my argument, including a contextualisation of the importance of the house. Next, I introduce the films discussed in the chapter, before providing an economic context for the forms of home occupation depicted in these films. I include critical context for set design, and I conclude the introduction with a discussion of existing critical work on these films. Finally, I discuss each film in the order of its release.

In this chapter, I argue that the manipulation of the built environment by supernatural entities *enables* the haunting through this interaction with the set. Referring to Mark Fisher's work, this interaction often creates the eerie, since occupants do not know who (or what) caused changes within the house. The furniture used on set has a precedent within the haunted home, with household items used within séances from the early 1850s (Briefel 2017: 209). The importance of such items also translates into early trick films such as *Le Manoir du diable* (Georges Méliès, 1896), with the set critical to establishing a location and contributing to the supernatural activity. Yet in these films, both furniture left by earlier occupants and a corpse interred in the basement represent the ongoing presence of both the past and the dead within the house.

This difficulty of the present to leave behind the past has a precedent in the modern ghost story. As Simon Hay explains,

> "[modernity] has not successfully distinguished itself from its past; indeed, the whole point of the ghost story is that the present cannot wrench free of the past and so has not become fully modern. The ghost story [...] holds to a model of history as traumatically rather than nostalgically available to us" (2011: 15).

The living—who live in the present and embody modernity—are the weird element that *cannot* belong since the house is trapped by the past. This signifies the cultural 'stuckness' of the present, in which a pervading nostalgia for the past or repetition of past popular culture forms prevents innovation in the present. This is notable in these films given the influence of *The Amityville Horror* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1979) upon *The Conjuring* (James Wan, 2013). That said, *Stir of Echoes* (David Koepp, 1999) offers potential for belonging in the house following the departure of the dead, and it eschews the popular influence of *Amityville*.

The economic landscape brings the living into contact with the supernatural since these films maintain an abiding concern with financial uncertainty, with economic necessity forcing people into unsuitable houses. This is unsurprising, given the existing cultural work of the Gothic as a mode that charts economic turbulence (Duncan 2022b: 312). The financial pressures that force the Lutz family to remain in their haunted house in *The Amityville Horror* echo throughout these films, even if specific pressures vary between narratives. The practical techniques of set design make the mechanisms of hauntology literal, where the past visually haunts the present through its material existence within the set.

While my focus remains on the ontological reality of these ghosts, set design also allows these films to be haunted metaphorically by issues such as slavery and the precarity of renting. Filmmakers may not directly engage with such issues through dialogue, yet production design often references them to expand the representation of the diegesis. For example, *The Skeleton Key* (Iain Softley, 2005) does not explicitly depict the activities of slavery in the American South, yet slavery haunts the narrative; the treatment of hoodoo and the plantation house within the set design exposes the reality of enslavement and its ongoing impact upon the African American community. Reading these films through their set design *and* those concepts that haunt the film's narrative allows for a deeper investigation of the haunting, allowing for alternative readings of the films.

The argument related to the readings of film through their cinematography is reflected here; the occupants are the weird element that does not belong in these spaces since they are claimed by the dead before the living arrive. Set design supports this reading by associating the house with the dead through the built environment, particularly given the visual pun around the 'belongings' of previous owners that clutter the sets. Reading these ghosts as a diegetic 'fact' forces this examination of the superior claim to the space made by the dead.

The Films

This chapter discusses these films in chronological order since later films may be influenced by preceding titles. The first film is *Stir of Echoes*, set in Chicago and featuring tenants instead of homeowners. A city setting is less common among American haunted house films than it is in East Asia, though this film is not unique within the US since *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) is set in Philadelphia and *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002) is set in Seattle. The Chicago setting references *Candyman* (Bernard Rose, 1992), a film that likewise featured a supernatural being connected with a killing in a specific location, albeit one seeking revenge rather than justice.[1] The corpse of a murdered girl within the cellar undermines the stability of the domestic space, a motif that also appears in films from other cultures, demonstrating the global ubiquity of such phenomena.[2] This film's set design supports the ghost's ability to interact with the physical world, and the quest to find a body highlights the materiality of the corpse, while set design differentiates living areas from the basement. Nelson Coates created the production design, while David Krummel was responsible for art direction. Susie Goulder was responsible for the set decoration.

The second film is *The Skeleton Key*, set in the Louisiana bayou, allowing for an exploration of the haunted house within the social and cultural context of the Deep South. It focuses on the inheritance of property and the legality of ownership, using set design and props to explore ideas around house possession. The production design expresses the material nature of the haunting through the use of hoodoo as a magical folk practice; the haunting depends upon physical objects used by both the living and the dead. Hoodoo allows the ghosts to 'haunt' the property through their possession of the bodies of the home's owners.

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[1] Chicago also references the city's dark history of H.H. Holmes' 'Murder Castle' and the crimes of serial killer John Wayne Gacy, who asphyxiated his victims before hiding them in a crawl space beneath his home.
[2] However, it is not a timeless concept, since ancient cultures allowed for the interment of ancestors beneath the floor of the home to allow them to remain part of the family. See Mike Williams 2010 for further details.

John Beard handled production design, while Drew Boughton was responsible for art direction. Beauchamp Fontaine was responsible for the set decoration.

The final film is *The Conjuring*, chosen for its 1970s setting. *The Conjuring* most represents *The Amityville Horror*'s continued haunting of the American haunted house film. A beleaguered family can only afford a large enough house for seven people by buying it at auction, divorcing them from the house's history. They have not 'chosen' the house; circumstances forced them to take it.[3] The house is already suffused with negative energy on an economic level before supernatural events begin. Macfarlane notes that "[t]he shift to neoliberal economic policies has transformed the relationship between Americans and their houses" since the emphasis has moved from 'homeowner' to 'property owner' (2017: 150). This schism between home and property underpins the family's ambivalence towards their new investment, which partially explains the desire to personalise the house through décor. The set design of *The Conjuring* expresses the materiality of the haunting through the ghost's disruption of the set, evoking the 1970s through its design. Julie Berghoff created the production design, while Geoffrey S. Grimsman was responsible for art direction. Sophie Neudorfer handled the set decoration.

Home Occupation and Homemaking

These films utilise a key trope within haunted house narratives: homemaking. In each film, a newcomer attempts to personalise their new home and the 'moving in' scene relies upon props and set design. This reconfiguration of space is not without its hazards. Writing about the space of the home, Gaston Bachelard explains that "a house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. […] To distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house" (1994 [1958]: 17). These images can be expressed through décor, furniture and structural elements, and homemaking becomes an attempt to re-imagine the reality of the house. The new occupant familiarises each room using décor and furniture, since "an entire past comes to dwell in a new house" (1994 [1958]: 5). The haunting can occur in the space between the history of the home and the separate history of the family's furniture, and hauntings involve unauthorised changes to these introduced items. In a hauntological sense, re-imaginings that are unsympathetic to the existing space cannot

[3] A similar concept underlines the remake of *Poltergeist* (Gil Kenan, 2015), in which the family may only afford a new house since its previous owner lost the property through foreclosure.

succeed, since "[a]ny attempt to dismiss the past is doomed to failure, for the past may be over but it is never past" (Coverley 2020: 207).

Such homemaking is part of a desire to belong, and the drive to secure the home in these films is partially provoked by neoliberalism's failure to provide domestic and financial stability for homeowners and occupiers. While the films feature supernatural entities, the ghosts also manifest as reminders of the instability of these homes, something common to the Gothic: "ghostly recurrences manifest an unease and instability in the imagined unity of self, home or society, hauntings that suggest loss or guilt or threat" (Botting 2014: 3). Given the reaction to instability, it is no surprise these films treat haunting as a problem to be solved, something akin to a leaking gutter, since to understand them as otherwise would lay bare the inability of the living to belong in spaces still psychically located in the past.

The occupants of these houses come to live in them having bought or rented them, or perhaps having moved in due to employment. Exchanging money and paperwork provides a legal 'right to occupy', and the new occupants move in. These 'rights to occupy' oppose those of the dead, unable or unwilling to leave the space post-mortem—although in *The Skeleton Key*, the servants extend their 'right to occupy' through an exchange of both bodies and property deeds. Legal frameworks also allow for a consideration of the weird and the eerie. The 'rightful' occupation of the home suggests that ghostly elements present within the home do not belong there, although reading the set design suggests the dead have claimed these spaces which are thus unavailable for 'rightful' occupation by the living. The discovery of a presence within the property and subsequent efforts to displace or liberate it dictates the extent to which the living may belong in the home.

These three forms of occupation—renting, being a live-in carer, and ownership—expose the anxieties of home occupation as characters struggle to settle in their new home. The films also feature different types of house; an urban townhouse, a bayou plantation house, and an isolated Rhode Island farmhouse. This allows for an exploration of the ways in which set design differs across films, but also how the films use similar principles, even where individual aspects of set dressing differ according to each film's context. These same principles explore how the "body of images" is affected by the characters throughout the haunting: the living affect these images through the homemaking process, while the dead affect the images through their manipulation of the set.

Regardless of how the characters come to live in it, the films all focus on the house and its occupants. For Macfarlane, the house in the neoliberal era has become "a symbol of the empty burden [...] in American culture: not a 'home', not a site of remembrance [...] or

return [...] but a bizarre object of exchange in the American economy" (2017: 146-7). Under neoliberalism, the house becomes a physical signifier of capital that is not always worth its assigned value. As John David Rhodes explains, "[t]he house is that [...] little chunk of the commodity world that we can (we hope) buy, possess; its possession then (we hope) acts as the bulwark against and the apotheosis of this self-same commodity world" (2017: 19). In these films, the house is a possession, not a home, and the absence of 'homeliness' helps in part to create and sustain the haunting.

Produced in the late 1990s and early 2000s, *Stir of Echoes* and *The Skeleton Key* were both released prior to the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC). In 1999, 66.8% of American households owned their homes, setting a new record (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2000, online). It is not explained why the Witzky family in *Stir of Echoes* rent their home, though the decreasing proportion of household income spent on rent throughout the 1990s suggests financial flexibility available to renters (U.S. Census Bureau 2003: 5). The idea of home ownership in *The Skeleton Key* is unimportant to Caroline (Kate Hudson) when she takes the job in the swamps, but home ownership is crucial to the Black hoodoo practitioners. Denied access to generational wealth by the systemic impact of slavery, their appropriation of the home through occult means reflects the lack of legal access to inherited property within marginalised cultures. In 1999, there were only 6 million African American homeowners, compared to 57.7 million white homeowners (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2000, online). Despite the GFC, by 2013 and the release of *The Conjuring*, general home ownership rates had only dropped to 65% (U.S. Census Bureau 2022, online). While it can be tempting to ascribe the financial insecurity featured in *The Conjuring* to the aftermath of the GFC, the film also references the difficulty in finding a home for a family of seven. Their desire to remain in the property is as much due to practicality as it is precarity.

Where the films in the cinematography chapter were concerned with the permeable borders of the home formed by audio-visual technology, these films are more concerned with material borders. The built environment implies boundaries of walls, ceilings, and floors, where windows, doors, and access hatches provide portals through otherwise solid borders. It is interesting to note the appearance of such boundaries in relation to Johan Höglund's concept of the American imperial gothic, highlighting the 11 September 2001 attacks as a renewed onslaught of an Other against the modern United States (2014: 3). Each film sees the supernatural threat as pre-existing *within* the home. While the same is true of the films in the preceding chapter, the supernatural in those films makes its presence felt through technology.

In this chapter, the supernatural manipulates the built environment, interacting with the material world. Despite the immateriality of ghosts, these phantoms are frighteningly tangible. If the American imperial gothic is concerned with an outside threat baying at the door, these films present a threat that was *already inside*. Since *Stir of Echoes* predates 9/11, it acts as a reminder that in the wider American gothic, the land itself is haunted by the ghosts of the nation's past (see Bergland 2000).

Set Design Terminology

Set design refers to the built and decorated forms that provide a setting in which the film takes place, including interior sound stages, exterior locations and set dressing such as props and furnishings. Charles and Mirella Jona Affron devised a set design taxonomy which I draw upon to read set design in these films (1995). Their classification of sets into five categories sees sets used as denotation, punctuation, embellishment, artifice, and narrative, and each category affects the body of images in the films depending on how design is used. Denotative and punctuative sets are unobtrusive and realistic, sketching time period, location, and biographical details about the characters (Affron 1995: 37). An artificial set calls attention to itself *through* its design, supporting the narrative through the visual information provided within its body of images (Affron 1995: 39). The embellished set sits between denotative and artificial, where the design helps to organise the narrative (Affron 1995: 82). It is less stylised than the artificial set, but it draws attention to itself as a "specific necessity of the narrative" in a way the denotative and punctuative sets do not (Affron 1995: 38).

The films in this chapter, and the haunted house subgenre, qualify as the narrative set. These are films in which "décor becomes the narrative's organising image, a figure that stands for the narrative itself" (Affron 1995: 158). The narrative set also contains the other sets in the taxonomy, but the haunted house set becomes so inseparable from the narrative that even if the film features other locations, it always returns to the narrative set; the body of images of the house become so strong that the narrative cannot remain in other locations for long. Within these films, different parts of the home use different types of set, and changes wrought within the design lay bare the haunting; the supernatural becomes evident through the manipulation of the set.

The work of C.S. Tashiro on production design extends this taxonomy through a focus on specific props or furniture. He discusses "graspable objects" that "ground the viewer" among "easily understood" details within the set (1998: 19). With cinematic hauntings often reliant upon visual 'cues', such as dolls, production design focuses upon

these props to enact ghostly activity. Objects exist in the real world with their own associations and while Tashiro argues these associations can cause the objects to "work at cross-purposes" to the narrative (1998: 9), common associations with these objects (such as a fear of Ouija boards) make them ideal for use within a haunted house narrative, acting as visual shorthand within the set's "body of images".

Given the focus of this chapter upon the physical 'body' of the house, represented by its set, it is also valuable to consider Carol J. Clover's work on the 'Terrible Place' (1993: 30). Clover identifies this place as being "most often a house or tunnel, in which victims sooner or later find themselves" (1993: 30). She also notes that it is not just "their Victorian decrepitude" that makes them terrible, but also the terrible families within them. For Clover, these films go to great lengths to show the victims' "dawning understanding [...] of the human crimes and perversions that have transpired there" (1993: 31). In these haunted house films, it is this history that distorts the house and keeps it stuck in the past. Where these films differ from slasher films is the relationship of the victim to the house. Clover identifies the trope of victims attempting to lock themselves in while the killer battles their way inside (1993: 31). In these films, the victims take up residence with the supernatural entities, making the relationship with the Terrible Place one of either rehabilitation of the house through the removal of the ghosts, or total abandonment by the living. Yet the reliance of the Terrible Place trope on set design to communicate its dark past makes it a worthy consideration for these films, concerned as they are with homes heavy with violent history.

While the work of Noël Burch is more relevant to cinematography, it still impacts set design since screen space includes that which lies both within and beyond the frame. One of the six segments into which he divides off-screen space is applicable here, being the space beyond the on-screen set (1973: 19). Here, the set creates off-screen space, rather than the frame, and while Burch notes that sound design more often portrays the off-screen space (1973: 91), it is the set that creates a container for this space. This demonstrates the importance of the set for its ability to create and divide physical space, further coded as 'domestic' through the art of set dressing.

Existing Critical Discussions

These films have received critical attention since their release which covers a range of perspectives, but the focus remains on theoretical perspectives around gender, the family, race, and class. Compared with other horror films of the same period, such as *The Sixth Sense*, *Stir of Echoes* has received far less critical attention. What work there is on the film,

rather than the original Richard Matheson novel, focuses upon the family unit, with a discussion of the father as possessor of psychic powers (Jackson 2016), the positioning of the ghost film as a family melodrama (Cronin 2019), its portrayal of hypnosis (Byrne 2009), and the link between the child with unusual powers and adult trauma (Froud 2017; Balanzategui 2018). Murray Leeder explored the relationship between Gothic and detective fiction (2012), and the film's combination of the supernatural and projection of mental spaces (2017).

Much of the discussion around *The Skeleton Key* relates to its Old South setting and reliance upon African American religious practices. This includes a focus on the subversion of 'old South' tropes surrounding racialised trauma (Martin 2013), explorations of the links between racism and hoodoo (Wester 2014; Wester 2016), the misrepresentation of Vodou (Reuber 2011; Martin 2012; McGee 2012; Kamerling-Brown 2016), and the general misrepresentation of Louisiana and its Cajun inhabitants (Hebert-Leiter 2011; Crank 2011). Elsewhere, Jessica Balanzategui explores the relationship between spectrality and ageing (2019), while Lorna Piatti-Farnell discusses the film through the use of the mirror in contemporary Gothic horror (2017). While Piatti-Farnell's work focuses upon the conceptual ideas surrounding the prop rather than the prop itself, it still shows how a reading of a specific prop can exist within wider Gothic studies.

Gender Studies comprises a large part of horror scholarship, and *The Conjuring* has thus attracted discussion of its representation of motherhood (Alexopoulos and Power 2018), the disruption of the family unit (Baker and Rutherford 2020), and the changing presence of the father in horror (Berns and Fontao 2016). Other work explores the threat of financial insecurity (Murphy 2015), the medium as 'technology' and the transmission of information (Wessels 2015) and the supernatural within the context of religion (Walsh Pasulka 2016). The baroque and horror tropes within *The Conjuring* franchise (Eljaiek-Rodríguez 2021) and the creation of the *Conjuring* franchise (Mee 2021) offer other useful perspectives on the film. I have also previously discussed the use of both special and visual effects to enact instances of haunting within both *Stir of Echoes* and *The Conjuring* (2020).

While these discussions offer fruitful perspectives on these films, explorations of the specific ways in which set design impacts the representation of the supernatural are harder to find. The films in this thesis present supernatural occurrences as objective events, and the production design employed for both the set and the ghost allows for a more physical approach towards the haunted house; I offer this approach here to complement existing work. The set ceases to be a passive backdrop and becomes an active, albeit architectural, player—the set *is* the narrative. Steffan Hantke supports this point, since "[v]isualizing the spectral

presence of the ghost by registering its negative imprint on the space surrounding it [...] explains why so many horror films about ghosts are really films about the space they haunt" (2015: 184). The tendency to refer to the haunted house rather than the ghost almost removes the ghost by moving the focus to the property. This domestic space gives us a framework in which the haunting may occur, yet these films all explore the materiality of the ghost, making the supernatural figure a point of focus *within* the physical space of the film.

In this chapter, the term 'haunting' applies to supernatural instances in which the ghost is explicitly depicted or directly responsible for changes within the set. I also explore the physicality of the set to examine how the set, its props, and the figure of the ghost create the haunting. I argue the set design taxonomy also lays bare the identification of the living as being weird since the narrative set establishes the space as belonging to the dead. As the individual sets within the house progress from denotative to embellished or artifice, the advance in stylisation underlines the prior claim of the dead to the space, and the dawning realisation of this fact by the living. In *Stir of Echoes*, the living help the dead to leave, returning the home to its denotative state through the removal of the corpse, although the trauma of the experience leads them to find a new home elsewhere. *The Conjuring* sees the living forcibly eject the demonic being, though the presence of furniture owned by previous occupants keeps the set in the embellished state; the house is open for occupation, but only if the living can co-exist with the remaining ghosts. Only *The Skeleton Key* sees the dead truly triumph, with Caroline evicted from both her body and the house. While the body of a young white carer might appear to have little in common with the ageing plantation house, the implied presence of Mama Cecile indicates the house will remain caught in the past, unavailable for occupation in the present. The chapter maps the changes in these elements against the Affrons' taxonomy to determine the points at which the set design changes, and how this affects the representation of both the haunting and the ghost.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have to dig": The Cellar as Embellished Set in *Stir of Echoes*

Stir of Echoes is an adaptation of the 1958 novel *A Stir of Echoes* by Richard Matheson. The novel is set in a Los Angeles suburb, rather than Chicago. A telephone line worker, Tom Witzky (Kevin Bacon) rents a house in his old neighbourhood with his wife Maggie (Kathryn Erbe) and his psychic son Jake (Zachary David Cope). Tom undergoes hypnosis at a house party, awakening his latent psychic abilities. He sees a ghost, Samantha (Jennifer Morrison),

around his house and becomes obsessed with learning who she is. At the film's climax, having torn up parts of the house, Tom finds her body behind a wall in the cellar. The sons of his neighbours murdered her, and their fathers covered up the crime. His landlord attempts to kill Tom after he discovers the truth. Another neighbour thwarts the house and the killers are arrested, releasing Samantha from the house. The Witzkys move out.

In this section, I discuss the family's status as renters, rather than homeowners, before exploring their isolation from the community. I also examine the significance of the Chicago setting, the only urban location in this chapter. Next, I discuss the domestic spaces of the house as the denotative set, before focusing on the embellished cellar set. I then explore the movement of the set from the embellished to the artificial following the discovery of the corpse, and the contrast of the cellar with the domestic sets. I explore the destruction of the dining room set, which moves this domestic space from denotative to embellished. Finally, a focus on the cellar explains its value to the haunted house trope in design terms. The section follows this structure to trace the progress of the haunting through the set design taxonomy, from denotative to artificial, the latter of which marks the discovery of the ghost and the truth of her death. The investigation marks an exploration of the house's body of images and the truth buried within them. This progression reveals the importance of reading set design as the set amplifies the accumulation of the past within the property through the presence of the corpse in the cellar, which prevents the living from occupying the house in the present.

Many contemporary US haunted house films are set in isolated houses, such as *The Amityville Horror*, which haunts the films in this thesis, or *The Conjuring*. *Stir of Echoes* instead presents a rented house in an urban neighbourhood, establishing a different relationship between the family and the house since they only have a legal agreement with the landlord to occupy. While this temporary occupancy divorces them from the economic concerns of home ownership, the impermanence of renting introduces precarity. Wider economic pressures are not shown to affect the family, with their only monetary concern being the additional financial outlay for a second child. Tom's drive to find the truth outweighs his commitment to his job, with the haunting *creating* financial pressure, rather than resulting from it. Unlike protagonists in other films that involve demonologists or parapsychologists, Tom engages with the house's history using his psychic abilities. Like the psychic children featured in these films, he *becomes* the technology required to communicate with the supernatural. The set design mirrors his mental disintegration, and reading the set design reveals the extent to which Samantha interacts with characters through the set. An

exploration of the set design reveals the relationship between the renter, their home, and supernatural inhabitants.

The production team shot external scenes on location in Chicago's nineteenth-century Belmont Gardens neighbourhood (Rpwrhs.org, 2015). Development of the area began in 1889 ahead of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Located beside the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, the neighbourhood became associated with industry, an association it maintains (Rpwrhs.org, 2015). Chicago was a site of mass migration throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most notably for the Great Migration between 1916 and 1970, during which over 500,000 African Americans moved from the American South to Chicago (Encyclopedia of Chicago, 2004). While African Americans had been migrating to the North since the 1840s, racial discrimination made it difficult to find employment. Only the lack of European immigrants and a need for manufactured goods during the First World War changed employers' attitudes towards African American workers (Encyclopedia of Chicago, 2004). *Stir of Echoes* overlooks those racial tensions amid deprived neighbourhoods explored by *Candyman*, instead situating murder and violence within a white 'respectable' neighbourhood. The history of industrial migration contributes to the link between the Witzky family and the city's working class. This Chicago setting presents an opportunity to examine set design in an urban environment.

The house's living spaces comprise the denotative set, establishing the ordinary world required by the weird to create a juxtaposition with the supernatural, which, while part of the diegetic world, is still considered out of the ordinary by the living. Earthy tones dominate the walls, floors, and furnishings, and no internal architectural features stand out, providing a neutral backdrop (Fig 34). The incoming family attempts to re-imagine the 'body of images' of the house by introducing their furniture, bringing their past into the rented house, where it collides with the past of the house embodied by Samantha. Samantha's body rests within the fabric of the house, yet aside from a lightbulb and bath water, she only interacts with the Witzkys' possessions; like them, she is a temporary occupant. Samantha cannot be evicted, being beyond commerce, although she can be released once the 'bill' of the house's owner is paid by revealing the truth about her death.

Figure 34: The outdated dining room décor.

Such an approach, combined with the use of nineteenth-century properties, references earlier renters' insecurities that rented homes were not quite their own (Vidler 1992: 3). Landlords possess the space, and occupants can remain only for as long as they can afford rental payments (Vidler 1992: 6). Therefore, the décor scheme imposed by the landlord reinforces *his* ownership and sets *him* in opposition to the supernatural inhabitants, rather than the tenants. This reflects the narrative, since the landlord concealed Samantha's murder; that it is the landlord and his son attempting to silence Tom for discovering the truth refers to Clover's Terrible Place and its terrible families. The bullet intended for Tom tears through the set, stopped by a pillow in Jake's bedroom, and the set's role in 'containing' this attempted murder ensures Samantha receives justice and is no longer held by the house.

The haunting rests upon this murder, committed six months before the film begins. Modern Gothic sees the house as "generally much more than a house: rather, it can be taken to have a direct connection with the psychological landscape of the persons who inhabit it" (Murphy 2009: 107). The lack of habitation at the time of the murder, and the subsequent creation of the ghost, demonstrates that the house has its own psychological landscape, irrespective of its inhabitants. It is the negotiation of *this* domestic landscape by new inhabitants that informs how successfully they settle in the house. The family's arrival creates tension between the psychological landscape of the house and their own psychological terrain, amplified by the psychic activity of both Tom and Jake. Yet this is a tension that can

be successfully resolved through Tom's attempts to help Samantha, rather than treating her like a maintenance problem to be fixed.[4]

While this house is physically detached from its neighbour, mere feet separate the properties (Fig 35). They share the same external architectural features, and only the styling differs, with the Witzky house reflecting the red brick and cream trim of the neighbouring St. Hyacinth Basilica. This continuity between the physical features, if not the specifics, provides a visual coherence to the street, underlining the sense of community. Tom's occupation as a line worker places him in the working class, and thus a prime candidate for renting property, though Maggie's green scrubs mark her as a medical professional, removing a degree of financial precarity as they are a dual-income household. Their landlord lives across the street, demonstrating the mix of occupations and financial situations within the neighbourhood.

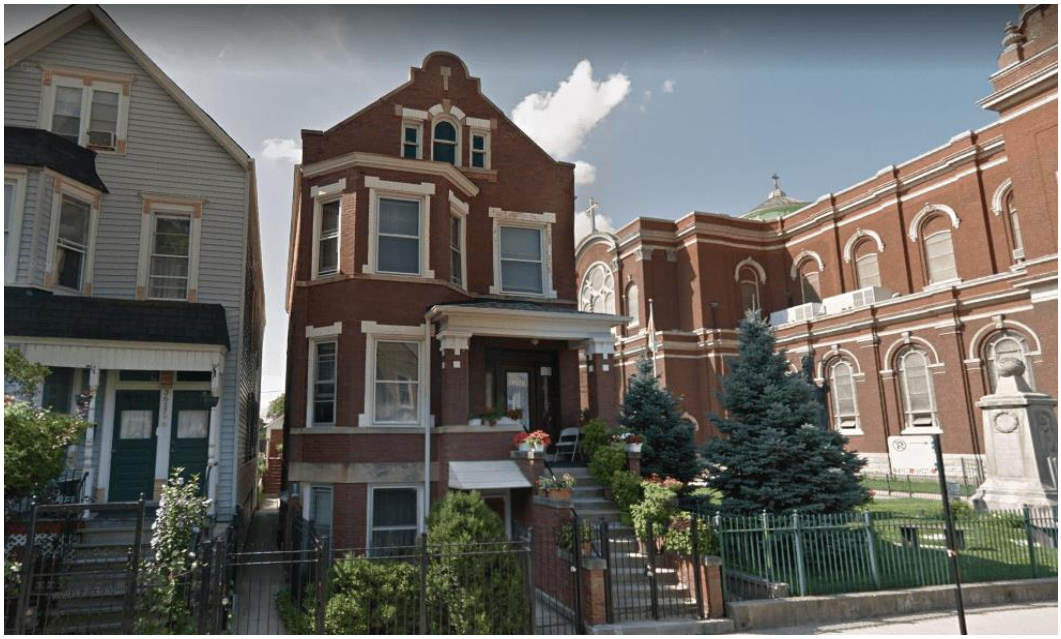

Figure 35: The house's exterior.

The denotative set turns the rented house into a space of familiarity, both for the characters and the audience, since "[t]he sets represent ideas designed to visually support the profile and journey of the human characters" (Barnwell 2017: 83). An open plan living room is a good example of denotative domesticity, where the front door opens into the room and the stairs allow for immediate upward movement (Fig 36). The lack of internal walls to separate these transit spaces enables the flow of domestic life. Such accessibility also reflects

[4] It is perhaps no surprise that a scene near the beginning of *The Conjuring* shows the Warrens demonstrating to a terrified couple how the sounds in their attic are created by floorboards and pipes, rather than a ghost.

the easy movement of the ghost and cuts between different parts of the house show Samantha moving between rooms instantaneously, underlining the preternatural abilities of the ghost. The 'narrow-ness' of the property gives the rooms a spacious feel in the vertical axis, but this comes at the expense of space on the horizontal. Such dimensions force a closer placement of the furniture, creating unease and claustrophobia, provoking connotations of a deep yet narrow grave, foreshadowing the discovery of the corpse in the cellar.

Figure 36: The front door opens immediately into the living space.

Since the film establishes the house as an unremarkable space using the denotative set, this opens the possibility for the perception of the eerie since Samantha's appearances introduce a presence into the house where there should not be one. That said, it is Tom's sudden *ability* to perceive the ghost, and not her actual appearance, that generates the eerie since Maggie remains oblivious to Samantha's presence. Learning Samantha's identity and finding her dispels the eerie. Samantha seeks justice, a common motif in popular ghost narratives during the nineteenth century.[5] Helping Samantha to obtain justice 'resets' the design of the house, removing supernatural claims to the space and liberating the house from the past. This gives it a potential future and enables the house to be available for occupation by the living. Samantha's final scene sees her ghost regain her pre-death appearance,

[5] See Davies (2009) and Owens (2017) for examples of such narratives.

returning her to a colour palette sympathetic to the set, while she walks up the street. The change in costume design confirms the ghost has left the space.

The cellar only appears once before Tom's search for Samantha, and the film draws attention to this set when Maggie enters the cellar to relight the boiler. The basement becomes the embellished set as "the viewer cannot fail to read the design as a specific necessity of the narrative" (Affron 1995: 38) (Fig 37). A hatch in the kitchen floor provides access, where its narrowness emphasises the division between the kitchen and cellar, and a rug covers the hatch. The cellar's bare brick walls and concrete floor reinforce its status as "not domestic". It houses the furnace but lacks the typical detritus of other cinematic cellars, such as the junk-filled basement in *The Conjuring*. This lack of belongings in the Witzky cellar underscores the tenant's transience and their tendency towards rented items, foreshadowing Tom's decision to hire power tools in his search for Samantha.

Figure 37: Maggie descends into the basement.

With its single naked bulb, bare brick walls and lack of natural daylight, the basement looks unfinished compared to the rest of the house, fulfilling its need to be "intentionally striking" (Affron 1995: 38) (Fig 38). The cellar *needs* to look this way to underline its physical separation from the kitchen, while the cellar's rough appearance aligns the space with Clover's Terrible Place. While the Terrible Place is usually a house, which is made clear in both *The Conjuring* and *The Skeleton Key*, here it is confined to the cellar. While the murder occurred somewhat ironically in the living room, a place of light and life, the cellar is appropriated as a makeshift tomb. This unwelcoming space draws attention to itself, making

it the embellished set, while also foreshadowing its revelation as the location of the body; the evidence of the crime committed by the terrible families.

Figure 38: The cellar, devoid of interior décor.

Samantha is corporeal enough to interact with the set. She controls the television, turns off the light bulb by touching it, and cools the bath water with her hand (Figure 39). This level of tactility elevates Samantha from the ethereal to the material, a move enabled by the use of an actress rather than CGI, a tactic repeated in *The Conjuring*. The design choice to present her remains as mummified allows for visual identification of the body, which would be harder to discern from partially decomposed remains.[6] It also underlines her more 'corporeal' status as a ghost, since the lack of bodily disintegration has enabled her ghost to retain more substance and ability to interact with the set. Nelson Coates' inclusion of mummified remains within the production design elevates the embellished set to the artificial set, in which the set is now "[p]rominently featured [... and] consciously foregrounded" (Affron 1995: 39). The set acts as a nexus between binaries, both material and emotional, physical and psychological (Affron 1995: 115). In this revelatory scene, the set literalises this nexus by enabling Tom to access Samantha's last moments by touching her corpse. This

[6] The use of costume and props, such as the thick black-framed spectacles and broken fingernails, allow Tom to identify the mummified corpse as Samantha, linking the desiccated remains with both the ghost and the 'living' Samantha seen through a flashback as Tom replays her final moments in a burst of psychic connection.

physical contact between the pair resolves the eerie but also literalises the meeting of past and present in the house as Tom psychically accesses Samantha's past.

Figure 39: Samantha turns off the light.

Tom's only two encounters with Samantha's ghost before he discovers her corpse occur in the *living* room. The soft furnishings and warm colour palette support the room's associations with comfort, contrasted with Samantha's funereal colour palette of white and grey (Fig 40). As discussed above, the location of the front door within the living room visually underscores the open border between the living and dead. There is no spatial buffer between inside and outside, showing the ease with which the dead may contact the living.

Figure 40: Samantha's colour palette contrasts with the domestic space.

Tom struggles with his psychic abilities, and the house becomes more dilapidated during Tom's quest to locate Samantha's body. In production design, "[t]he home is a setting in which a character's psychology can be mirrored and explored" (Barnwell 2017: 175). Tom's destruction of the house in pursuit of Samantha reflects his unravelling mental state. Yet read to prioritise the psychology of the *house* rather than Tom, the torn-up floorboards in the dining room, traditionally a communal space of discussion, represent the lack of communication between the house and its occupants, reinforcing the disconnection between a tenant and their property.[7] This disconnection is made literal through the physical destruction within the dining room, elevating the denotative set to the embellished set as it reflects the traditionally decrepit state of the Terrible Place. Yet here, the embellished set draws attention to itself through its destruction to represent *the search for the ghost*, rather than peril.

The gaping hole in the floor becomes an invitation into the space below (Fig 41). In architectural terms, "two rooms that open onto one another are said to communicate" (Rhodes 2017: 11). The dining room and the cellar thus communicate, and that they do so through a broken-up set reflects the fragmented conversations between Tom and Samantha. The reconfiguration of the set also highlights the tension between tenants and their temporary home. Renters can rarely make minor alterations, let alone tear up a floor, and Tom's attack on the property shows that his drive to find Samantha outweighs his legal obligations as a tenant. While Maggie worries about the impact of his absenteeism at work, threatening the future of his job, Tom aligns himself with Samantha and becomes absorbed by the past.

[7] This destruction exposes the means of construction by revealing structural elements such as floor joists, and this Gothic revelation lays bare the hidden parts of the house.

Figure 41: The hole in the dining room floor.

Tom accepts the house's invitation and moves his search to the cellar. His thwarted attempt to break through the floor with a jackhammer causes him to lash out with a sledgehammer, breaking through a false wall (Fig 42). This places Samantha's corpse in the sixth segment of off-screen space, in the space behind the set (Burch 1973: 17). Such a space suggests liminality, being between walls, introducing liminality into the set itself. This links set design with the haunted space, while also placing the source of the supernatural disturbances into the off-screen space, something previously discussed in the cinematography chapter. Locating the supernatural in the off-screen space grants it power over the living since ghosts can dictate events from this space while remaining unseen. It is notable that it is the psychic character that penetrates this off-screen zone, although Tom only opens the grave having been 'nudged' by the restrictions imposed by the space.

The visual of the corpse marks the elevation of the embellished set to that of artifice, though the smashing of the false wall reveals the artificial quality of the cellar. While discussing the exploratory nature of haunted house narratives, Barry Curtis explains that "it is necessary to excavate in order to discover the source of the disturbance, but excavation always carries with it the danger of releasing repressed meanings and bringing unexpected entities back to life" (2008: 110). In *Stir of Echoes*, the excavation discovers the source, yet it frees Samantha and allows her to leave, rather than resurrecting additional entities (Fig 43).

The discovery also heralds the cessation of the weird since Samantha's departure opens the space for the living to belong.

Figure 42: Tom breaks through the wall.

Figure 43: Samantha's remains.

The existence of the corpse turns the cellar into the Terrible Place, reflecting the ubiquity of the basement within haunted house texts. While we go up *or* down stairs within the house to reach different spaces, people only go *down* to the cellar, here captured by the camera positioned below Maggie to capture her descent *into* the cellar (Fig 44). This

downward movement marks the cellar as the boundary between the home and the ground, while the buried walls hold back the earth (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 20).

Figure 44: The descent into the cellar.

The focus on living characters passing through doorways or using the stairs visually references "the notion of *the between* [that] is crucial to the weird" (Fisher 2016: 28). This reflects the family's arrival as being the invasion of that which does not belong, although the 'moving in' sequence occurs before the film begins. Yet *Stir of Echoes* offers a positive perspective on belonging, presenting it as a *temporary* state of un-belonging, and not a permanent rootlessness, since the past can be returned to the past and the house returned to the present. Bachelard describes the basement as a "stone plant" holding the building in place (1994 [1958]: 24), representing the foundation, or heart, of the family. The location of the furnace (a displaced hearth) in the Witzky's basement makes sense, although its association with Samantha by proximity symbolises the fragmentation within the family, prompted by Tom's newfound abilities. These abilities allow him to free Samantha through his interaction with the set, disgorging its occupant and making their home available for belonging. That the family choose to move elsewhere is a testament to the trauma caused by this process, but it demonstrates that belonging *was* available once Samantha released her claim on the house.

Where *The Amityville Horror* (1979) created the link between haunted houses and economics through the burden of home ownership, *Stir of Echoes* escapes its hauntological grasp by focusing on the anxiety of *occupation*. Samantha's presence complicates the precarious ability to feel at home in a house one does not own. Even the family's furniture, a physical link to previous homes, provides little comfort since the ghost makes her presence

felt *through* these items; an interaction that draws attention to set design. Yet if this furniture represents the 'body of images' of their earlier houses, Samantha's ability to use it associates the props with the supernatural, suggesting the family has always been haunted. Nothing is 'theirs', referencing the transience of the tenant. Releasing Samantha is less about 'exorcising an evil spirit' and more about collaborating *with* the ghost to free her from the confines of the haunted set. Since the set provides a container in which the haunting occurs, the concept of haunting expands to include the living helping the dead to *leave* that container. Tom destroys the physical container that conceals Samantha, and such is the strength of his drive to find her that Tom overlooks the inevitable repair bill for the damage. This helps to explain the movement of the film along the taxonomy, with each stage a visual representation of the haunting, and its progress towards a conclusion.

This focus upon temporary occupation recurs in *The Skeleton Key*. Where Tom's tenancy depends on paying the rent, Caroline's tenancy at the mansion depends on providing the services for which she is paid. Her only space within the mansion is her bedroom, and she cannot expect privacy even there. This prompts questions about an individual's ability to belong in a space predicated on their employment status. In design terms, *Stir of Echoes* features a single-family house, which allows them to express their personality through furniture and soft furnishings. Only the basement bears the visual hallmarks of the Terrible Place through its set design, making this space central to solving the crimes of the past, moving the house into the present. Yet in *The Skeleton Key*, the entire house shows the Victorian decrepitude of the Terrible Place, while the house's role in the antebellum period marks the terrible crimes that occurred there. This use of set design keeps the house rooted in the past, something that Caroline, a product of the present, struggles to negotiate.

"She's not going to understand the house": Antebellum Set Design in *The Skeleton Key*

Where *Stir of Echoes* explored the impermanence of the tenant, *The Skeleton Key* explores the difficulties faced by a live-in carer, since the carer only occupies the property due to their employment. Caroline cares for an elderly man, Ben (John Hurt), living in a former plantation house in the bayou, despite the reservations of Ben's wife, Violet (Gena Rowlands). Violet fears Caroline is "not going to understand the house", underscoring the importance of the domestic space to the narrative. It also personifies the house as having quirks that Caroline cannot grasp, while such personification of the house provokes the eerie.

Here, an inert space is given agency, reaffirming its status as the narrative set. Caroline discovers a locked hoodoo room in the attic and investigates the extent to which Violet practices hoodoo. She attempts a ritual to restore Ben's speech before trying to remove him from the house. Mama Cecile, the hoodoo practitioner that lived in the house in the 1920s, inhabits Violet's body, and performs a ritual to move into Caroline's body. With the ritual complete, Mama Cecile reveals Violet left the house to Caroline, continuing the legal chain of ownership.

I argue that set design amplifies the difficulties of belonging in a space, since *The Skeleton Key* exposes the precarity of occupancy and the illusion of security provided by legal frameworks of ownership. The hoodoo practitioners live inside stolen bodies to own the house, and Caroline may live in the house only as long as she discharges her duties. Only the Creole family in the bayou gas station seem rooted in their environment, offering the possibility for integration with the region through an engagement with its practices, represented by the set design. *The Skeleton Key* is unlike *Stir of Echoes* and *The Conjuring* in that the 'ghosts' are the hoodoo practitioners within stolen bodies, and the haunting takes on a corporeal form. It is the presence of the practitioners that provides a link back to the terrible crimes of the house's history. The house remains anchored in the past, and Caroline's association with the present creates the juxtaposition between herself and the house required by the weird. Yet the film positions itself as a haunted house film until the climax, in which Caroline realises the 'ghosts' possess the supernatural power to harm her. Due to the importance of individual items within both hoodoo and the film, the discussion of set design will include readings of specific props to explore how the film deals with the weird and the eerie through production design.

The section first explores the design of the house and its relationship to slavery since racial politics lie at the film's heart. Next, the section contrasts the punctuative set of Caroline's bedroom with the embellished set of the house to explore the dynamics between the Black hoodoo practitioners and the white carer. The section focuses on readings of the attic's set design, the hoodoo paraphernalia, and the elevation of the attic to the artificial set during the film's climax to build upon these racial dynamics and explore the issues of belonging as they are reflected by the set design. The section ends with a focus on the mirror as a prop to express the eerie.

The set design engages in a form of Orientalism, focused upon Africa rather than Asia, that relies on an *idea* of traditional African religions rather than depicting them accurately. Edward Said notes that Orientalism tells us more about those who perpetuate

Orientalism than it does about the Orient (2003: 5). This process is one of othering, and while Said's discussion involves specific regions, similar othering applies in *The Skeleton Key*. The film uses existing visual codes that establish iconography related to Southern folk practices as primitive to discredit them and maintain Western cultural hegemony. While Said focuses upon race and culture, Robin Wood brings a class element to the concept of the other, since "[o]therness represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with [...] either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it" (2018: 77). Viewing these two positions from an intersectional perspective reveals the inherent classism involved in othering these Southern folk practices, represented as primitive *because* they are associated with the African American working class. Given the use of hoodoo to return power to the disenfranchised (Hughes 2005: 2), this creates a tension between the hoodoo practitioners and the antebellum mansion they seek to own. While the set design initially presents hoodoo paraphernalia in such a Western fashion, offered to horrify Caroline's rational sensibilities, the revelation that such items belong in the house through their proximity to their owners turns Caroline into the weird element that does not belong.

The Skeleton Key is also the only one of these films to engage with race as part of the social and economic landscape, though its set design attempts to other the hoodoo practitioners. That said, Edwin Thumboo notes an elasticity to the Self/Other binary, since everyone can be Self or Other depending on who is inspecting and who is inspected (2008: 15). This change in perspective becomes important when considering the weird, since identifying the weird element depends upon the context into which the weird emerges. While Fisher gives the novels of HP Lovecraft as examples of a world into which the weird erupts, the films in this thesis often establish their world with spaces *already* claimed by the dead, making the living arrivals the weird element. This tension between this depiction and the conviction of the living that the dead do not belong contributes to their inability to belong.

The film stresses the house's isolation, sitting at the end of a long driveway. The white exterior contrasts with the extensive gardens, drawing attention to the house (Fig 45). This underscores the house as an anachronism, both an attempt at civilisation within a primal bayou and a plantation house that no longer serves its purpose. Its historical architectural details highlight it as the narrative set and the film was shot on location at the Felicity Plantation in St James Parish in Louisiana, built in 1850 (Scott 2019). The house symbolises slavery in the region, and its design reminds the viewer of the house's history, even when the film tries to distance itself from this period. Following Jameson's nostalgia mode (1998: 8), it

also reflects the Ocean Drive house of *The Amityville Horror*, itself associated with a brutal past, albeit one involving the Indigenous population.

Figure 45: The plantation house.

For Matthew Wynn Sivils, such scenes "render a well-known brand of Southern sublime, a lushness flecked with decay" (2016: 83). This phrase characterises the design of *The Skeleton Key*; pockets of decay within lush surroundings. The narrative skirts slavery and pinpoints the 1929 Wall Street Crash as the pivotal moment in the house's history, ignoring anything prior to its acquisition by an early twentieth-century banker. Violet tells Caroline a version of the house's history: shortly after the lynching of the family's servants and local hoodoo practitioners, Papa Justify (Ronald McCall) and Mama Cecile (Jeryl Prescott Sales), the Wall Street Crash destabilised the banking system and the banker shot himself. Ownership of the house passed to his children, although Violet omits that the servants swapped bodies with the children before the lynching, allowing their legal acquisition of the house *as* the 'rightful' heirs. The desire to own the house centres the property in the film and the question of who 'belongs' there drives the narrative.

Yet the set design and film's location highlight slavery and its continuing impact on the community. In a hauntological sense, "the swamps are haunted not by ghosts but by slavery's horrors" (Wester 2016: 254). Teresa A. Goddu notes that "American gothic literature criticizes America's national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation's claim to purity and equality" (1997: 10). The film's focus upon the world of hoodoo and conjure, themselves born of slavery, provides

visual and contextual confirmation of racial issues, made visible through set design. The house remains a remnant of a violent past, isolated from the progress of modernity in nearby New Orleans, and such isolation is key to the hoodoo practitioners' ability to do their work.

Maisha Wester discusses the racial undertones of the film, noting the physical degradation of the house following its passage into Black hands; "The mansion, portrayed as beautiful and grand and cast in golden light during its rightful ownership, has fallen into shadows and disrepair by the time Caroline encounters it and its wrongful heirs" (2014: 67) (Fig 46). Wester notes the illegitimacy of the servants' acquisition of the house, though this highlights the ongoing difficulty faced by African Americans to buy property as an effect of slavery and segregation. In visual terms, the dilapidated state of the house also reflects the ageing bodies of its current inhabitants (Fig 47). As Caroline is there to care for her ailing patient, this suggests she should also care for the property as an extension of the occupants.

Figure 46: The décor in the 1920s.

Figure 47: The dilapidated attic staircase.

The homemaking process is short since Violet assigns Caroline a ground-floor bedroom, placing her 'below' the couple, whose bedrooms are on the first floor. The layout reflects the class dynamic of paid workers and property owners. Caroline's bedroom is beside the front door, underscoring her temporary occupation. This room is the punctuative set, establishing location while punctuating visuals of the embellished house with the visuals of an ordinary space (Fig 48). The wardrobe in her bedroom reflects the antiques scattered throughout the house to create visual coherence across the spaces. The embellished set of the rest of the house is brash in its contradictions and collections of items: a religious statue looms from the shadows and Victorian paintings reference the house's age. Little natural light penetrates the house, and the darkened interior contrasts with the sunshine outside (Fig 49). By comparison, Caroline's room is the only bedroom shown during daylight hours, enhancing the light in the room with its pale walls and lack of clutter, punctuating the visuals of the dark house. Since sets help to describe a character's nature (Barnwell 2017: 175), this set's bright appearance reflects both Caroline's rational approach to life and her link with the present, compared to the Terrible Place's association with the past.

Figure 48: The light and airy bedroom space.

Figure 49: The dark inner corridor.

The attic space is the third main set, reached by a steep attic staircase. Used only by servants, these stairs are not designed to display wealth to visitors. The poorly maintained staircase introduces the attic when Violet sends Caroline to fetch seeds (Fig 50). This is a disused space on the margins of the house, yet its dilapidation is significant; Adam W. Sweeting notes that in the Southern Gothic, "psychological distress often accompanies architectural decay" (1999: 224). The distress partly refers to Caroline, guilt-stricken by her father's death, and she brings her own trauma to the house, yet it also refers to the psychic turmoil of the conjure couple in their quest to retain the house.

Figure 50: The peeling walls on the attic staircase.

It is notable that the "architectural decay" occurs most prominently in the couple's room and a staircase. Within the post-production process, directors use editing to cut between locations. Choosing to depict the staircase draws attention to its inclusion, building suspense as Caroline approaches the attic, but a staircase may visualise a character's ascent or descent from one social class, mental state, or emotional state to another (Barnwell 2017: 116). The narrow staircase crooks around a corner to fit the space, while holes in the plasterwork reveal the slats, exposing the internal structure of the house. The decrepit walls are a testament to

the house's advanced age, and for Joe Moran, writing on houses and memory, "[h]ouses convey [the inevitability of ageing and death] for precisely the same reason that they represent continuity and permanence: they often outlive us, and will probably have already housed people who are now dead" (2006: 33).

As much as this house conveys the inevitability of ageing through its architectural decay, it also houses people who *should be* dead. In maintaining the public spaces downstairs, the couple prolong the life of the house, in the same way they have 'borrowed' life from other people. They also 'borrow' time from the furniture in the attic, apparently overflow stock from an antiques business. The house acts as a repository for the psychic imprints of strangers through their discarded antiques. Yet unlike the belongings of unknown provenance in the basement of *The Conjuring*, these belongings are not "junk"; they hold value (Fig 51).

Figure 51: The mirrors hidden in the attic.

Caroline discovers these antiques, along with the locked hoodoo room. Many confuse hoodoo with voodoo, but Louisiana Voodoo derives from the religion of Haitian Vodou, brought to America by enslaved people, yet specific to Louisiana. Hoodoo is not a religion; this folk practice combines voodoo, Christianity, Islam, and Indigenous American traditions. Practices such as hoodoo, Santería, and Obeah, "serve as a way of preserving, reconceptualizing and reinforcing a sense of identity and community through a belief system originating in an African past, but shaped by the encounters and experiences in the New World" (Schroder 2016: 422). Hoodoo offers a positive opportunity to combine experiences from the Old and New Worlds to synthesise a new magical approach.

Unlike many of the films in this thesis, *The Skeleton Key* directly acknowledges the colonial past of the United States, yet it skips the racism of enslavement and focuses on the

economic conditions of the 1920s under the Jim Crow laws enforcing segregation in the South. The film references racism and the historical reality of slavery through Fontaine's set dressing and Beard's production design. Unfortunately, the set design does not explore the positive potential of these combined Old and New World experiences. By gathering hoodoo items in a haphazard way and othering them as 'primitive', the design reinforces Western stereotypes of African traditional religions that communicate Western values rather than those of hoodoo culture. By separating the hoodoo room from the European-inspired décor of the domestic spaces, Beard's production design ignores the opportunity to integrate these two perspectives and reinforces the cultural hegemony of the West as 'superior'.[8] The film avoids commenting on the European role in slavery that first created hoodoo. Hoodoo spaces are embellished sets, in which the design aligns them with the dark past of the South and draws attention to the magical paraphernalia required by the narrative. Caroline's exploration of the attic hoodoo room reinforces this superstitious stereotype, as the camera lingers upon occult paraphernalia while offering no context for its purpose or intended use.

The hoodoo room is preserved as it was when Papa Justify and Mama Cecile lived in it (Fig 52). While other parts of the house conceal their age behind wall hangings or carpets, the rough walls and lack of electricity in the attic preserves the era and method of the house's construction, aligning the hoodoo couple with the genesis of the house, and thus visually supporting their appropriation of it. This runs counter to the narrative, which seeks to portray the couple as villains, making a reading of set design worthwhile for the alternative perspectives it can provide. This more positive reading in favour of the couple is supported since elements of the design appear beyond the house anywhere Caroline encounters hoodoo ephemera, such as hanging bones, bottles containing preserved animals, and vinyl records. The influence of the hoodoo couple extends beyond the house through these items, reflecting their ability to belong in the bayou while the banker could not.

Their belongings create a presence in the attic where there should be an absence, especially behind a locked door, and while Caroline knows the identity of the agents, she does not yet realise her proximity to them. This scene could have interrogated the colonising gaze, but it stops short, painting African American culture as the source of the haunting. In doing so, the set design supports a white Western perspective of hoodoo as superstitious.

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[8] Beard, Boughton and Fontaine are all white, and it would have been interesting to see a set designed by African Americans.

Caroline's later use of these objects is cultural appropriation, since at no point does she express any appreciation for the items she uses. That said, this scene creates tension between the intruding white protagonist and the Black environment of the attic. Caroline's forced entry into the locked room reflects the dangers of white entitlement to access Black spaces.

Figure 52: The hoodoo room.

It could be tempting to describe the hoodoo room as the artificial set in which "[d]esign is rendered specific and legible through the invention of the patently unreal" (Affron 1995: 39). Yet while Caroline stresses her disbelief in hoodoo, the film depicts the existence and efficacy of hoodoo, disqualifying it from "the patently unreal". The room also lacks the greater stylisation required by the artificial set. The individual props are real, yet they are only unfamiliar to Caroline and, it is presumed, much of the audience. Their existence within an already anachronistic house, full of antiques, is not unexpected. The contrast between the punctuative set in Caroline's bedroom and the embellished set in the attic highlights *Caroline* as being the weird element. Caroline does not know what these things are for since she does not belong in this environment (Fig 53). While pawing through the objects, she discovers an LP in a paper sleeve, which becomes the graspable object to which she gravitates. Its familiarity from the world beyond the house allows Caroline to ground herself in the space by grasping something she recognises. The embellished set requires a degree of realism to carry its weight and setting the LP against the hoodoo objects, which are recognisable as occult items as a collection, creates the illusion that the hoodoo

paraphernalia is weird due to its difference from the 'modern' LP. Yet the record preserves Papa Justify's conjurations, making it *part* of the occult collection, not separate from it. That Caroline does not recognise the contents of the LP, reinforces her status as the weird element. The LP also references the existence of the African American community within the entertainment industry, and by extension, their impact on American culture during the 1920s period stressed by the film.

Figure 53: Unfamiliar props in the hoodoo room.

The attic room only becomes the artificial set once during the ritual at the film's climax. Caroline's investigation prompts her to adopt hoodoo practices, such as blocking doorways with brick dust, aligning the 'hired help' with the servants. Having been inducted into this belief in hoodoo, Caroline tries to cast a protective spell in the attic. She draws a circle and sigils on the floor in chalk, elevating the attic to the artificial set (Fig 54). The artificial set is highly stylised, and the décor becomes the primary force of the narrative (Affron 1995: 39). It differs from the embellished set since it "releases the art director from the need to replicate the true-to-life" (Affron 1995: 157); while people engage in ritual practices in reality, there is no standardised way to practise hoodoo, freeing the ritual set to imagine what the spell might look like, unencumbered by a need to adhere to reality. That said, the film others hoodoo through the treatment of its set design, which complicates an understanding of "the true-to-life". Who decides what is true? As Said notes, the Orient is a man-made construct that comes with "a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary" (2003: 5). Given we can apply this same approach to Africa, this demonstrates a limit of this taxonomy when the set involves exoticised material. In these cases, it is more instructive to focus on the degree of stylisation in the artificial design, rather than how true to life it is. In *The Skeleton Key*, the alteration of the attic from a quiet storage room to a candlelit ritual space is the key to its status as artifice, not the specifics of the props.

Further, the artificial set is often used for scenes of performances since it provides a stage (Affron 1995: 114). Here, it is more obvious as an artificial set since Caroline's ritual becomes a performance, underlining her use of hoodoo, with required items becoming ritual

props. Caroline's status as 'weird' is underlined when Violet arrives and tells her she has misunderstood the spell's purpose, leaving her vulnerable to Violet's counter-spell.

Figure 54: Caroline's protective circle.

Hoodoo paraphernalia provides the graspable objects used to carry narrative weight. Yet the set design also uses photographs as graspable objects to 'humanise' the space and transmit backstory. Violet keeps photographs of the house's previous occupants in the living room and a close-up highlights a silver frame, which reflects the 1920s setting of the house's 'golden era'. The frame contains a photograph of earlier occupants and a hidden snapshot of the hoodoo couple (Fig 55). Even within this prop, Papa Justify and Mama Cecile are concealed within a space occupied by other bodies, preceding the revelation that the pair transfer their identities into other bodies. Curtis notes that "[t]he photograph functions as a communication between the two points in time that are the temporal coordinates of the haunting" (2008: 127). The photograph of the servants acts as a reminder of their original corporeal forms and the servants in their new bodies connect the two points in time.

Figure 55: The photograph hidden inside the frame.

Curtis refers to a haunting as a "conjuring", foreshadowing the title of the James Wan franchise. 'Conjure' is also common hoodoo parlance, and *The Skeleton Key* makes this link explicit, describing Papa Justify as a "conjure man". Schroder notes that practitioners use conjure for both good and nefarious purposes, making conjure a neutral practice charged by the intent of the practitioner, and not dictated by dogma (2016: 424). The props aligned with Papa Justify express his power as a practitioner, such as his ring, which reveals his possession of the white lawyer during the film's climax. Within Southern Gothic literature, conjure's common theme is "that it constitutes a transaction between individuals" (Schroder 2016: 424). This theme emerges within *The Skeleton Key* through the commerce surrounding the two practitioners, impacting the set design through the accumulation of antiques. This idea of 'transaction' grounds both conjure and the narrative within concepts of ownership and belonging, which constitute the goal of the couple. The servants trade places with victims, yet their quest for acquisition is more sophisticated since they swap bodies with legal owners in a chain of succession, allowing them to use supernatural means to possess bodies while remaining within legal parameters to possess the physical property. This narrative links the figure of the house, expressed through set design, to the character motivations within the plot.

One antique missing from the domestic set is the mirror: no mirrors hang in the rooms, although pale patches on the walls betray their original location. This creates an absence where there should be a presence until Violet claims she needs no reminders of her advancing age. She also claims people see ghosts in the mirrors, and Ben appears to see something that frightens him in a hand mirror (Fig 56). This reflection inverts the previous mirror-based sense of the eerie, showing a presence where there should not be one, while apparently confirming Violet's reasoning for removing the mirrors. Yet Caroline finds the

missing mirrors in the attic; Mama Cecile does not wish for reminders that her body, that of an ageing white woman, does not correlate with her identity as a Black woman. Given the mirror's ability to reflect 'what is', Caroline's hanging of the mirrors becomes an attempt to bring the house into the present, rather than being caught in a nostalgic past.

Figure 56: Ben's distress at seeing his reflection.

If the attic represents a storehouse of memories, and the mirror reflects the soul, then these mirrors highlight the souls displaced by the hoodoo practitioners. The mirror is the vehicle for this displacement, since the climax of Caroline's spell sees Mama Cecile push a mirror at her in order to take her place (Fig 57). For Michel Foucault, the mirror is both a utopia and a heterotopia, since it represents a "placeless place", but also "an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface" (1984 [1967]: 4). The mirror reflects an image of the individual in a space they do not and cannot physically occupy, a distorted form of the eerie since there is a presence where there *cannot* be a presence. The storage of the mirrors, themselves an expression of illusory space and the creation of identity, in the attic coincides with the room's use for magical circles, defined spaces for the transmission of identity from one body to another via a mirror.

Figure 57: The mirror-based showdown.

Like *Stir of Echoes*, *The Skeleton Key* uses Caroline's temporary occupation of the house to liberate her to explore its secrets. This occupation provokes anxiety, that of trying to belong in someone else's house, which manifests through Caroline's status as the weird element. The set design others Southern folk practices, yet it is familiar to the homeowners. This allows Fontaine's set dressing to normalise hoodoo *within the context of this household*, and while Caroline is the weird element when she arrives, her appropriation of hoodoo paraphernalia suggests a *potential* for her integration into the environment. *Stir of Echoes* also suggests a route to belonging for the weird element, although in *The Skeleton Key*, Caroline's integration would see her caught in the same repetition that keeps the house 'stuck' in the past.[9] While the haunting takes a different form to the other films in this thesis, the film is hauntologically affected by the spectre of slavery, even as it explores the ruin of the 1929 Wall Street Crash. The focus of the set design upon the hoodoo paraphernalia can be read as both a use of Western stereotypes and as a reminder that hoodoo comes from the South *because* of slavery. While Caroline's ethnicity grants her the perceived entitlement to roam the house and appropriate hoodoo practices, it leaves her vulnerable to the power of the conjure couple. The practitioners haunt stolen bodies while legally owning the house, and their ability to move into other bodies exposes the impermanence of home occupation.

I previously noted the use of 'conjure' to refer to both Papa Justify and James Wan's 2013 film, *The Conjuring*. Given the lack of any sorcery by the Perron family, Wan may have

[9] The white appropriation of hoodoo and voodoo through *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932) and *I Walked With a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943) before *The Skeleton Key* is symptomatic of a wider weirdness on the part of white filmmakers, intruding into cultural spaces in which they do not belong.

been influenced by such narratives when titling his film. Unlike *Stir of Echoes* and *The Skeleton Key*, with their focus on temporary occupants, *The Conjuring* explores the anxiety provoked by the purchase of a new house; especially a home that appears to resist the attempts of the new owners to personalise the space. The revolt of the house against the family offers a more familiar form of haunting than that of *The Skeleton Key*, yet it is still one driven by the economic landscape. It also relies upon similar design tropes as *Stir of Echoes* to turn the basement into the Terrible Place.

"Something awful happened here": The Past Dictates the Present in *The Conjuring*

This section examines set design within *The Conjuring*, the film most overtly haunted by *The Amityville Horror*. It features the Perron family, forced to buy a Rhode Island farmhouse at auction as their only means of affording a property large enough for their family of seven. After they move in, supernatural activity escalates until mother Carolyn (Lili Taylor) seeks the help of noted demonologists Ed (Patrick Wilson) and Lorraine (Vera Farmiga) Warren. Clairvoyant Lorraine senses a hostile presence in the Perron house, which research reveals is a Satanic witch, Bathsheba (Joseph Bishara), who cursed the land before completing suicide. Bathsheba possesses Carolyn and attempts to murder two of her daughters, yet Ed and Lorraine exorcise Bathsheba and reunite the Perron family.

The section begins by examining the process of homemaking in the haunted house film and its importance to establishing the Perron family as the weird element. It proceeds to contrast the design of the basement with that of the domestic spaces, since the basement is aligned with the dead occupying the space. The section then discusses how set design is used to enact an attack on the family through the built environment, before examining the sense of contested ownership within the house through the accumulation of belongings. Finally, the section examines the difference between the house in the film and the house in the 'true' events behind the film, and the impact of the 1970s setting upon the design choices, since *The Conjuring* is the only one of these films based on 'true' events. Reading set design offers an understanding of the efforts made by the family to personalise the home, particularly once the home tries to reject them through the haunting. *The Conjuring* offers an extra layer of information to process through its period setting in the 1970s since the set design must both feel familiar and accurately denote the period.

Where *The Skeleton Key* focuses on the legal succession of ownership, *The Conjuring* focuses on the financial acquisition of property. Yet even here, the instability of ownership is made clear since mortgage repayments make ownership a nebulous concept until financial obligations are settled. I argue that, as in *Stir of Echoes* and *The Skeleton Key*, the living do not belong because the house is held in the past by its supernatural occupants, and therefore unavailable for occupancy in the present. This is foregrounded through set design using the furniture and décor from previous owners, suggesting the presence of an existing household. The Perron family do not redecorate, maintaining the décor on the walls and floors, and attempt to fold the furniture into their own design scheme. The tension between the furniture moved in by the family and the furniture already in the house demonstrates the continuing unease around home ownership through the contested "body of images" of the house.

The homemaking process forms a central part of the haunted house subgenre, occurring between the empty house and the furnished home full of activity. It is notable that the film first introduces the Perron family as they arrive at the Rhode Island house. The shot of the family comes from *inside* the house, as a roaming camera moves towards the window, and along to the next window, to capture their arrival (Fig 58). This creates the impression of an active presence already within the house, yet the shots reveal the family *outside* the house. Curtains hang at the windows, creating a sense of habitation in the 'empty' house. Combining set design and camera movements produces the eerie through the unknown identity of the presence, particularly since the audience is placed in the point-of-view perspective of this presence. The framing prioritises the importance of the set over the family inhabiting it since visuals of the house precede the human occupants. The family is positioned as the weird element attempting to displace this presence already within the house.[10]

[10] I discuss the ways in which *Poltergeist* uses cinematography to position the living as the weird element that does not belong in the previous chapter.

Figure 58: The family car approaches the house.

Bedrooms and living rooms receive fleeting shots within the following scenes capturing the family's attempts to settle in, acting as the denotative set to establish both the 1970s setting and the new body of images that the family seek to create. The Perron daughters discover the boarded-up cellar during a game, and it becomes the first room to be properly explored (Fig 59). Roger (Ron Livingston) descends into the darkness to investigate, and its set design relies on tropes such as cobwebs and a single lightbulb to illustrate neglect (Fig 60). Dust sheets cover "junk" in the basement, while the tiny window admits little natural light. Other rooms feature clocks in the mise-en-scène, which always stop at 3:07 am, the time of Bathsheba's death. The absence of a clock in the basement highlights the lack of time, where it is always 'night'. This highlights how the house is 'stuck' in the past, particularly as the cellar contains the belongings of earlier occupants. The screen time devoted to exploring the cellar punctuates the narrative, making the basement the punctuative set. This foreshadows its later importance, but it also creates tension in the body of images; while the Perrons take charge of the upper domestic spaces, they do not yet interfere with the cellar and its contents.

Figure 59: Roger peers into the space.

Figure 60: Roger explores the cellar.

Shadows flicker, cast by a match flame and then a swinging bulb (Fig 61). This use of lighting plays with the "loss of distinctness brought on by night and darkness" (Curtis 2008: 179), expanding and contracting the dimensions of the room with the movements of the shadows.[11] The animation of these shadows prefigures the activation of ghosts within the cellar and creates disorientation by concealing parts of the set (Fig 62). While shadows would be expected in a cellar at night, here they suggest a different meaning. The cellar entrance was boarded up; thus these shadows ask questions about what lies in the basement that would require access being removed, especially given the location of the furnace in the basement.

[11] These distorted and expressive shadows recall the twisted shadows of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) and Charles and Mirella Affron note that "[n]early all horror films are heavily indebted to German Expressionism for their design motifs" (1995: 117).

This provokes the eerie as the blocking of the door implies a presence that *should not* be there, but which *cannot be ejected*.

Figure 61: Shadows cast by a match.

Figure 62: The basement set.

The shadows in the basement also suggest the reliance on time within *The Conjuring*. Shadows cast by daylight allow time to be measured through their length and position, but shadows cast by man-made light suspend time, since their position only changes according to the position of the object casting the shadow, or the position of the observer (Stoichita 1997: 20). This stoppage of time and its flow preserves the spirits of previous occupants. The set design reinforces this stoppage of time through the clocks around the house, discussed above, and the design of the clocks features a range of materials and styles (Fig 63). Many of the clocks are antiques or indicative of pre-modernist design, and visually reinforce the 'stuckness' of the house in the past by the dead. The dead did not furnish the house with these clocks, and the fact the living brought them into the house shows an alignment between the

living and the dead, and the relative lack of contemporary furniture brought by the family reflects their own difficulty in engaging with the present. Here, the presence of the dead becomes a symptom of sluggish culture, something modernism attempted to banish, both through its reinvention of design and removal of history from homes (Vidler 1992: 64).

Figure 63: The importance of clocks in the mise-en-scene.

This eclectic aesthetic characterises the rest of the house. The design of the basement contrasts with that of the floors above ground, which are flooded with light and decorated with signs of domesticity, such as family photos and ornaments (Fig 64). The camera does not dwell on individual items since they comprise a sense of the family's personality when viewed as a whole. These items show a move towards comfort and preserving memories through graspable objects. This form of decoration occurs in the 'lived' portions of the home and reflects the personality the family imposes upon the house through their choice of décor.

Figure 64: The Perrons favour photographs in their interior décor.

The rooms and corridors are wide, with large windows, and a sense of movement pervades throughout the building. All the doors, except the basement door, stand open

throughout the film. As an example, Roger's 'office' lies beside the living room, though there is no door between the rooms, with the change in 'room' denoted by glass-panelled screens and a truncated wall (Fig 65). This includes Roger within the family even when he is working, and it reflects the close-knit nature of the family. This design contrast between the upper floors and the neglected basement reflects the Gothic binaries of the diurnal and the nocturnal world–contrasting a space of light and cultural norms with one of darkness and primitive fears (Bunnell 1984: 81). It is notable that the floors above ground are filled with items the Perron family brought with them, while the basement is filled with items left by others. This represents how the family tries to domesticate the 'lived' parts of the house, compared with their inability to belong in the cellar, claimed by the dead.

Figure 65: Roger's office opens into the living space.

The homemaking process becomes an attempt to claim the domestic space by personalising it according to the tastes of the incoming family. In the horror film, the process fails, with ghosts continuing to populate the house until either the dead leave, freeing the house for occupation by the living, or the living leave, abandoning the house to the dead.[12] Yet homemaking serves another purpose, familiarising the audience with the set design. While *The Conjuring* is set in 1971, the furnishings are familiar enough to allow the set design of the living areas to become Tashiro's invisible set. Much like the denotative set, these invisible sets of the domestic space do not call attention to themselves, supporting the narrative and immersing the audience in the body of images. As with the *Stir of Echoes*

[12] *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001) made this binary literal, with the dead finally left in peace when the incoming family leave.

house, the earth tones, wooden floorboards, and knick-knacks reflect familiar domestic settings, rendering the main rooms as unobtrusive within the narrative (Fig 66).

Figure 66: The homely domestic set design.

The cluttered set design of the Perron house mirrors that of the occult room in the Warren house, in which they store haunted objects removed from previous cases, visually linking the two houses. The difference lies in *who belongs* in the house. In the Perron house, the haunted objects were there first, highlighting the claim of the dead to the house, and these forces interact with the domestic space. By comparison, the Warrens brought their haunted objects *into* the home, and the entities attached to them do not belong there. The Warrens exert their claim over the house by storing the objects under strict protective procedures. Since the Warrens derive their income from interacting with the supernatural, it is unsurprising that they exercise control over these objects and their home ownership is secure.

That said, Ed and Lorraine's museum room more resembles a prop department with its eclectic mix of items, such as a suit of Samurai armour, a toy monkey, and an ornate fan (Figs 67-8). This elevates the room to the embellished set, emphasising not only the importance of the Warrens within the haunting, but also the significance of individual items. Ed explains to a journalist that each object relates to a case and was removed due to its occult links, making it surprising to see ordinary items like desk lamps within the collection. This raises the prospect that *any* props may be linked with a haunting, thus making explicit the link between the supernatural and set design. A sign instructs visitors not to touch anything, which is the antithesis of Tashiro's "graspable objects" (1998: 19). These objects are designed to be picked up so refraining from touching them denies them their purpose. Yet the supernatural has tainted them and they are no longer 'safe' for human use.

Figure 67: The museum room.

Figure 68: The Annabelle doll.

Due to these protective measures, we only see evidence of a haunting at the Warren house once. Bathsheba sits in a rocking chair with the infamous Annabelle doll before launching the chair at the Warrens's daughter, displaying the strength of the set design to make the haunting literal. Bathsheba's mobility between houses is unusual in haunted house films and follows the example of Samara in *The Ring* (2002). That said, while Bathsheba leaves the Perron house, she seems only able to haunt those who either live on her land or

have been inside the farmhouse.[13] This narrows her sphere of influence but highlights the importance of the house, both to Bathsheba's motivation and the longevity of the haunting. While Bathsheba does not belong in the Warren house and thus becomes weird, the Warrens do not belong in 'her' house, making them the weird interlopers, referencing Thumboo's assertion that anyone can be Other, depending on the perspective. This tension highlights the flexibility of belonging, and the associated precarity since belonging depends upon personal circumstances.

Other parts of the Warren house are the denotative set, decorated with 1970s floral wallpaper and unobtrusive furniture to better contrast with the embellished set of the museum room. Externally, the Warren house reflects the postwar architectural style used in the suburbs, and it does little to draw attention to itself. By comparison, the older Perron house is an example of what architectural historian Vincent Scully dubbed the 'shingle style', and Rhodes explains that "Scully understood stick and shingle style architecture as intrinsically nostalgic" (2017: 158). This style places nostalgia at the heart of design in *The Conjuring*, particularly since the house in the film resembles the earlier Amityville house (Fig 69). The design also carries financial signifiers, since "[s]uch houses might […] display some combination of verticality and expansive horizontality. They signify a kind of middle-class American prosperity" (Rhodes 2017: 157). It is likely the house would be described by a contemporary realtor as having "character" thanks to its nostalgic period features, making it a desirable middle-class property. Yet the house's availability at auction implies a failure of either the middle class, reduced to selling the home for less than its value, or the house, its value questioned by the difficulty in selling it. Within the haunted house narrative, the violent past of the house lowers its value, highlighting the prior claim of the dead to the space.

[13] This references the abilities of Kayako, the vengeful spirit in *Ju-On: The Grudge* (Takashi Shimizu, 2002) and its 2004 US remake.

Figure 69: The Perron house, which resembles the plantation house of The Skeleton Key.

Nostalgia becomes an important consideration, particularly since the Perron house reflects the colonial period, and thus the period of the nation's foundation myths that Goddu and Bergland question, pointing to the haunted nature of American land. The process of nostalgia requires a looking back to the past, although in *The Conjuring*, the house becomes stuck there. Previous inhabitants 'haunt' the house both as ghosts and through their décor tastes, leaving traces of the past in the present. The fireplaces provide a good example since every room seems to have one, but no one uses them. The occupants instead use the heat from the furnace, displacing the source of warmth that represents the family into the inaccessible basement. This disuse of the fireplaces, central to the house at the time of its 1863 construction, is highlighted by the placement of a bookcase in front of a fireplace in a bedroom (Fig 70).[14] The cost of removing fireplaces is prohibitive, making it easier to use them for other purposes. Yet in hauntological terms, the house is haunted by its earlier self, represented by those period structural fixtures that are no longer required.

[14] In folklore, the fireplace was often marked with apotropaic symbols or objects to prevent evil spirits from accessing the home through the chimney.

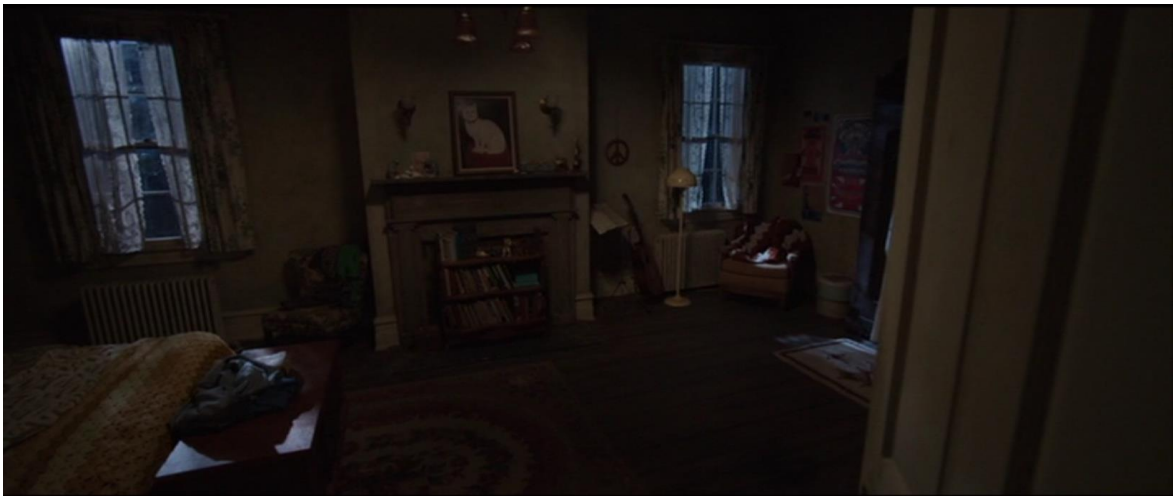

Figure 70: The bookcase in front of a fireplace.

Fireplaces are also thresholds, acting as the contested boundaries of American imperial gothic along with windows, doors, and ducts. Breaching these boundaries announces the arrival of something weird that does not belong, and it is notable that we only see the Perron family first through the window and then entering through the front door, thus aligning them with the weird. Boundaries connote ideas of containment and spirits use doors to divide the family or trap characters within spaces, such as locking Carolyn in the cellar. By being able to 'lock' doors against the living, the ghosts exert greater control over the built environment, reinforcing their superior claim to the house (Fig 71). These locked doors elevate the set to the punctuative set, since the moments in which they are locked punctuate the narrative, and thus they give rise to the eerie, since they are locked by an unseen force which makes its presence felt through its mastery over the set. Even when the doors open, the agent responsible is concealed, retaining the sense of the eerie.

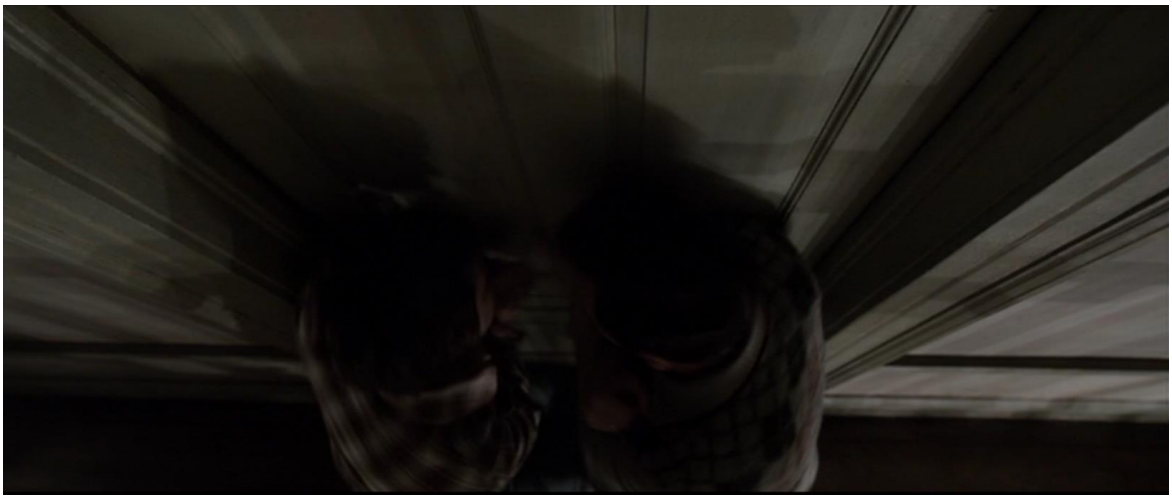

Figure 71: The door that will not open.

Doors are binary dividers, either open or closed, and "[d]oorways […] suggest transition and change as thresholds between the interior and exterior that can symbolize contrast between the two worlds" (Barnwell 2017: 108). In *The Conjuring*, the cellar door best represents this threshold as it opens and closes by itself. The set design and the movement *within* the set characterise Bathsheba. Having killed herself on the property, Bathsheba retained the ability to interact with the built environment. As well as manipulating the cellar door, she is also associated with the wardrobe in Andrea's bedroom. The wardrobe dominates the bedroom set, and Bathsheba crouches on it for her first on-screen appearance (Fig 72). This wardrobe is made of dark wood that contrasts with the bright colours of Andrea's posters and soft furnishings (Fig 73). While the antique does not belong among these imposed decorations, it matches the antiques in the cellar, reinforcing the idea that the Perrons' decor is unwelcome in the house that is stuck in the past.

Figure 72: The antique wardrobe.

Figure 73: The colourful posters.

Changes within the set represent the haunting. Bathsheba pulls bedclothes from a bed, controls the clocks, and keeps the house feeling cold, despite the furnace's efforts to heat the house. Framed family photographs hang on the staircase and the young ghost, Rory, knocks them to the floor, assaulting the family through their images. Hanging these pictures has been part of the family's efforts to personalise the space, so destroying them rejects this attempt at personalisation. The haunting involves the ghosts attacking or manipulating props that act as signs of domesticity. That the photographs hang on a staircase is also important, since the staircase in set design terms implies transition, linking above and below (Fig 74). During the haunting, the house remains in-between: it legally belongs to the Perron family, but it psychically belongs to Bathsheba. Bathsheba's claim proves to be greater, given the proclamation of her curse that no one would take her land. The inability of legal frameworks to provide security reflects the precarity of Western financial markets, in which a homeowner may find themselves unable to pay their mortgage, thus unable to fulfil the legal requirements of their property ownership. Bathsheba's curse is also the point at which the house is frozen in time, and subsequent owners have proven unable to bring the house into the present.

The Gothic is preoccupied with the difficulty in stabilising the domestic space, often attempted through creating a line of succession or legitimising who belongs there. *The Conjuring* is therefore another instalment in this tradition that explores this instability, this time through the ineffectiveness of the legalities of home ownership to deal with the supernatural. I return to Bachelard's assertion that a "body of images" constitutes the house, required to give the house a sense of stability, and changes to these images lead to domestic instability. The moving-in of a new family changes the existing body of images within the house and these changes, part of attempts to settle in the house, destabilise the home.

Figure 74: The photograph gallery on the staircase.

The furniture in the basement comprises the strongest images of the pre-Perron house. The family dismiss the abandoned items as "junk" and they cannot track down earlier occupants to return items, since buying the house at auction obscures the identity of the previous owners. Yet the belongings represent the spirits of those that remain, particularly where they are associated with specific ghosts, such as Rory and his music box. These belongings comprise the 'body of images' of the house, again referencing the claim to the property held by the dead. Set design supports this reading since the design provides visual clues as to the personality of the inhabitants, which in this case includes the dead. When a set is filled with furniture from previous owners, the personalities of these earlier occupants clash with the personalities of the incoming family. The previous owners retain their claim over the home through the physical presence of their belongings, keeping the house stuck in the past and unavailable for occupation in the present.

Within haunted house films, the rooms filled with psychically charged belongings act as a storehouse for memories that must be negotiated for the haunting to be explored, explained, and contained. The objects belonging to earlier inhabitants stand apart from the family's items and such props become the punctuation in the punctuative set. They may stand out through their physical design, incongruity within the setting, juxtaposition with other items, or by their discovery in parts of the house not associated with them, such as Rory's music box hidden between the walls (Fig 75). These props also function within the embellished set since the narrative cannot proceed without them; they are so loaded with meaning as to provide the momentum necessary to begin and maintain the haunting.

Figure 75: The ghost's music box.

The conclusion of the haunting sees Bathsheba possess Carolyn and the team attempt an exorcism in the basement. It is one instance where one of the film's producers, Rob

Cowan, notes the intervention of director James Wan in the film's production design since "doorways had to be in an exact spot to make the scare work and hallways needed to be a certain length" (quoted in *Behind the Scenes*, 2013). This reveals the intentions of the production design to create specific 'scares', based on the framing Wan wished to use, and relying upon the physicality of the set for scares to work. A shot into the house shows this length of the hallway, underscoring the narrow nature of the corridor as it bisects the house (Fig 76). Corridors are regarded "as *infrastructure*" rather than architecture through their functional use within the built environment (Luckhurst 2018: 296, emphasis in original). The corridor is a transitory space dividing the home, which represents the divided nature of Carolyn's identity during Bathsheba's possession. During the exorcism, Bathsheba telekinetically manipulates objects in the basement. She causes the furniture to fall over, the chair to which Carolyn is tied to levitate, and a shotgun to fire. The removal of the furniture to the perimeter of the basement highlights the extra square footage promised by Roger, yet it becomes a threatening enclosure, its dark wood and oversized proportions adding to the cramped feeling of the space and reflecting the fear that the house might turn on its owners.

Figure 76: The corridor that divides the house.

The possessed Carolyn escapes from the basement and crawls across bare earth through the sub-basement to reach April beneath the kitchen (Fig 77). This display of the physical ground on which the house is built lays bare the lack of a solid foundation beneath the home. This use of set design feeds into a theological point within the narrative, since while the family is depicted enjoying a strong bond, the Perrons did not have their children baptised. A Catholic undertone implies this lack of religious focus creates a weak point for Bathsheba to exploit. Ed places crucifixes throughout the property to goad Bathsheba into a reaction, and the witch knocks over these graspable objects. This interaction with the props

allows the unseen presence to be seen through her movement of the crosses, her whereabouts pinpointed through the toppling of the props. A wide shot shows the cross, dwarfed by the mantelpiece on which it sits, vibrating before falling forward (Fig 78). It does not skitter along the surface or drop to the floor: its definitive movement from upright to facedown demonstrates Bathsheba's rejection of the beliefs implied by the crosses. The choice of dark wood used in the crucifix allows it to blend with the other antiques in the house. Given the lack of Catholic iconography within the house prior to this scene, it is not a domestic prop, instead representing the Warrens' excess of Catholicism rather than representing the power of Catholicism, as it does in other horror films such as *The Amityville Horror* and *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973).[15]

Figure 77: The crawl space beneath the house.

[15] The crucifix as a religious symbol capable of defeating evil appears in horror films as varied as *Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958) and *The Exorcist*, yet in these other films, the crucifix appears to hold actual power to ward off evil. In *The Conjuring*, it becomes only another aspect of the set dressing.

Figure 78: The cross on the mantelpiece.

The reputation of the Warrens as paranormal investigators is a reminder that unlike *Stir of Echoes* and *The Skeleton Key*, *The Conjuring* is based on a case from their files. This situates the cinematic haunting in relation to an alleged 'true' haunting, and the set design deviates from the design of the real Perron home. The former Rhode Island farmhouse dates to the late nineteenth century, while the film's farmhouse was built on a soundstage in North Carolina (HistoryvsHollywood.com, 2018). The real house is a long single-storey dwelling with a larger footprint than that of the soundstage house and has featured in televised ghost hunts. Rebuilding the house as a set allowed the production team to create a house that more closely resembles *Amityville*'s Long Island house and *The Skeleton Key*'s plantation house, and thus manipulate the set to support the haunting while referencing earlier films.

The evocation of the 1970s setting is clear through the use of wind chimes, crocheted blankets, Andrea's music posters, and costume design.[16] Yet aside from such set dressing, little furniture is from the 1970s. Instead, older items surround the Perrons, echoes of the haunted objects collected and stored in Ed's museum. This suggests the material objects ground the diegetic space in earlier eras more compatible with the resident ghosts. The hauntological spectre of *Poltergeist* also makes an appearance through the tape recorders, UV lights, microphones and other paranormal investigation equipment used by the Warrens and their team as they collect evidence of the haunting. The technology expands the existing 1970s set dressing to bring the house's body of images into the 'present' of the film, which allows for the exorcism of the demonic spirit.

[16] Elsewhere, the musical soundtrack and dialogue choices (the use of words such as "groovy" and "far out") help to further anchor the film in its setting, but these lie beyond the scope of this discussion.

The 1970s setting impacts the décor since "[o]ften work set in another historical period draws more attention as it is more visible than contemporary design" (Barnwell 2017: 31). Such films require a greater emphasis on production design to make the setting feel 'concrete', particularly if this setting is within 'living memory'. In *The Conjuring*, this complicates the set design since the denotative set is elevated to the embellished set. The design is rendered visible to evoke the 1970s, so while the sets of the domestic spaces need to establish setting and then recede, to better contrast with the basement, there is still a degree to which the design *remains* visible. While *The Conjuring* is set in 1971, and thus four years earlier than the events depicted in *The Amityville Horror*, Rosenberg's film haunts the set through the aesthetic choices, particularly regarding the exterior shots of the two houses.

The Conjuring uses set design to draw distinctions between the living and the dead, with the living associated with the denotative and punctuative sets of relative 'normality', and the dead associated with embellished sets that draw attention to themselves, since the dead make their presence felt *through* the set. At no point does the film use the artificial set, since its presentation of a 'real' haunting precludes it from relying upon images of the "patently unreal". The foregrounding of furniture owned by previous inhabitants is a visual reminder of the presence of the dead in the house before the Perrons move in, highlighting the family as the weird element. That said, their integration of existing furniture with their own possessions hints at a future in which the haunting may continue in a more harmonious fashion, with the family and the ghosts that remain following the exorcism able to share the house. While the film does not address the fate of the ghosts in the house, such as Rory and his mother, in reality, the Perrons occupied their farmhouse for nine years, suggesting possible co-existence (Alexander 2013). The tension between the "body of images" represented by both the incoming and existing furniture also reflects the anxiety faced by the Perrons over the stability of their home ownership, in which they struggle to settle in a house they have bought, rather than merely occupy, as seen in *The Skeleton Key* and *Stir of Echoes*.

The Case for Supernatural Set Design

These films use set design to both stage the narrative and provide a vehicle through which to visualise the haunting. The interaction between the dead and the set, whether that be the props or the physical fabric of the set and its dressing, lays bare the haunting, creating what I term supernatural set design. Given the centrality of the built environment to this concept, I return to Clover's assertion that the Terrible Place is characterised by both its design and the

past actions of the terrible families that have lived there. The sets physically preserve the space in which these actions occurred, keeping the house stuck in the past while informing Bachelard's "body of images", visualised on screen through set design.

The architectural styles of Chicago, Louisiana, and Rhode Island, and their period settings, create an understandable difference in set design aesthetics, and this reveals the value of the denotative set to film production. It is the progression of the set from denotative to either embellished or artificial that renders the haunting 'visible', and it is the spaces most associated with the ghost that mark the use of more elaborate sets. The films are also concerned with financial precarity, with occupants positioned as temporary, depending on tenancy or legal obligations. This sets the films in the wider context of 'economic horror' begun in the 1970s, a period coinciding with the adoption of neoliberal policies. The momentum of such policies also led to the cultural inertia identified by Mark Fisher that sees these films haunted by earlier narratives, with the homes likewise stuck in the past. *The Conjuring* is the film that most typifies the cultural nostalgia for an earlier decade, with its 1970s setting recalling *The Amityville Horror*, and its reliance on economics seeing the Lutz and Perron families financially unable to leave their beleaguered home. Yet *Stir of Echoes* reflects an unconscious nostalgia for much older ghost narratives, and its focus upon justice for the dead through the detection of a crime demonstrates that the past can be laid to rest.

This legitimises a focus on past and present in these films, since it is the freezing of the past that keeps the houses under the control of the dead, and unavailable for occupation by the living in the present. Changes to houses should not provoke such backlash against their occupants, and as Bachelard points out, "[w]e are constantly re-imagining [the home's] reality" (1994 [1958]: 17). The problem occurs in the haunted house film, where the images of the past remain fixed by their proximity to the supernatural, and they are incompatible with the images introduced by the living in the present. This disruption in the house's body of images is expressed through the set design taxonomy, in which the denotative set becomes embellished or even extends into artificial design. By drawing attention to the set, the films engage with this failure of reimagining. Set design provides a body of images that evolves *through* the film's running time, rather than being a fixed backdrop, since this physical container is a dynamic space reflecting the characters within it—both living and dead. These films demonstrate the clash between the living and the dead as a renegotiation over the right to occupy the house, and the set design records this clash through the visual renegotiation of the body of images.

The reimagining of the house's reality creates a building in which the living jostle for space with previous occupants and the psychology of the house, where the house is "imagined as a concentrated being" (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 17); the haunting becomes a negotiation between these parties. Set design expresses the personality of this "concentrated being" on-screen. This focus on the failure of the living to alter the body of images raises the question of what belongs in the space as *part* of that body of images, provoking considerations of the weird and the eerie. The incoming occupants add décor to the house that destabilises the existing body of images; in effect, the past and present cannot co-exist. That the Perrons attempt to use some of the furniture left in their property speaks to their desire to fold the past of the house into its present under their ownership. Caroline brings personal items into the bedroom set aside for her use in the Louisiana mansion, bringing modernity into a house firmly aligned with antiques.

Stir of Echoes provides a counterpoint to this difficulty for the living to bring the house into the present. It does not include homemaking scenes, and we only see the Chicago house before the Witzkys' arrival in flashbacks, during periods of renovation, in which the house's body of images was already undergoing revision. That the murder occurred at this point of turbulence for the house suggests the opposition in this house is between the ghost and the house's owner, not its tenant; the murder sees the ghost become *part* of the house's body of images. Freed from the constraints of ownership, Tom is free to excavate the past of the house. Despite this, the living in all three films are characterised as weird because they are new arrivals in a space firmly stuck in the past and claimed by the dead.

The locales of these films also support different perspectives of how the living may bring the house into the present, if that is possible. *Stir of Echoes* shows the living helping the dead to leave the property. The ghost is trapped in the Terrible Place by the historical crime, and seeking justice frees her. This collaboration between the living and the dead hints at a possible 'working relationship', rather than a conflict over rights of occupation, something also depicted in *The Sixth Sense*, likewise set in a city. By comparison, in those narratives set in rural or suburban settings, the living either leave, or forcibly evict the dead or demonic. In *The Skeleton Key*, Caroline's body remains in the house while her soul leaves in another body. This binary of abandonment or eviction reflects the wider critique of the failed project of the suburbs (Murphy 2015: 243). Such critique is based on economic difficulty, made more overt following the sub-prime lending crisis, although it also references the "gnawing awareness that America as a nation has been built on stolen ground", reflecting the contested ownership of the land on which suburbia sits (Murphy 2009: 104).

These are films that explore the experience of haunting. Tom Witzky describes his newfound ability and quest to find Samantha as the most important thing to happen to him, and his alignment with the supernatural offers a possibility for integration. The sense of un-belonging is also positioned as temporary in *The Conjuring*, with the family offered the possibility to belong after evicting Bathsheba from the property, suggesting the inability to belong is one that can be resolved by removing the house from the past and relocating it in the present. Only *The Skeleton Key* denies this resolution, where Caroline is inducted into the belief system that structures the haunting, yet her thoughtless appropriation of hoodoo, expressed through its rich body of occult images, refuses the possibility for integration. The house remains as a Terrible Place caught firmly in its past, only available for occupation by those connected with the historical crimes committed there.

Finally, these films treat haunting as a problem to be solved. This approach mirrors the non-supernatural difficulties encountered through the characters' efforts to occupy a space. The methods chosen to solve the haunting 'problem' vary, and the level of help required mirrors the degree to which they are economically tied to the house. As a tradesman, Tom chooses a 'DIY' approach, yet he is the only one to directly 'attack' the body of images. By tearing apart the set, he resets the 'glitch' in the body of images by releasing Samantha. As a paid carer, Caroline attempts to solve the problem herself yet seeks outside help in the hoodoo store and then from Luke. The Perrons as homeowners bring in professionals to 'clean' the house in the form of the Warrens. I argue the degree of investment in the property dictates the extent of the help sought, reflecting the financial impetus to 'solve' the problem of haunting. That both Tom and the Perrons succeed in the renegotiation for the space opens the possibility that the haunting need not be 'solved', rather folded into the experience of living in the house. This suggests that with the ghost's departure, the house can be brought into the present and its body of images successfully re-imagined, offering the living the opportunity to belong in their home.

Hearing is Believing: Hauntings in Sound Cinema

The films discussed so far in terms of set design and cinematography share a preoccupation with *seeing* the supernatural. Yet cinema is replete with ghostly experiences that involve *hearing*, something supported by countless examples from the history of the ghost as experienced in the West. The Tedworth Drummer of 1661 and the Cock Lane Ghost of 1762 both featured solely auditory phenomena; the former involved scratching noises and ghostly drumming, while the latter featured communication through an established code of knocks. At the most basic level, in the world of parapsychology, knocks, raps, sighs, or electronic voice phenomena (EVP) are considered indicators of *potential* supernatural activity.[1] Cinematic narratives place an emphasis on the sonic landscape, where filmmakers use sound to demarcate space, generate suspense, and present the actions or behaviour of the supernatural without using computer-generated imagery or other visual trickery. I refer to this use of film sound, where supernatural activity is experienced through sound design rather than visual elements, as 'sonic spectrality'. This allows for an aural experience of the haunting, which enriches the visual experience offered by cinema.

Chapter Outline and Argument

This chapter opens with an overview of my argument, including an exploration of the importance of the soundscape to the wider conception of the haunting. I next introduce the films discussed in the chapter, followed by a discussion of the consumer technology depicted in the films. I include terminology necessary to discuss sound design, followed by a discussion of existing critical work on these films. I then discuss each film (or pair of films) in the order of their cinematic release based on the earliest release in the pair.

In this chapter, I argue that by examining the use of sound design, we can see that acousmatic space, or off-screen space from which sound emanates, is central to the creation of the haunting in these films. This demonstrates the control the supernatural has over the living by allowing it to impact the existence of the living from a space beyond the cinematic frame, underlining the superior claim of the supernatural to the home. In this chapter, the

[1] Any, or all, of these can also be debunked in favour of a 'realistic' explanation. See Wiseman (2011) and Robins (2023) for further details.

term ‘haunting’ depends upon the ability of the ghost to cause changes in the film’s soundscape. Where the films in previous chapters focused upon the weird, these films rely more on the creation of the eerie through their use of off-screen sound. The issue of agency within the eerie also complicates the ability of the living to belong since the agency granted to the supernatural beings already present in these properties highlights their prior claim to the house. Such haunted house films suggest that occupying land in America will always disturb the dead, recalling past atrocities (Gaines 2020: 185).

I also explore the materiality implied by sound, requiring as it does the interaction of physical elements to generate soundwaves. The acousmatic space is inherently haunted, yet the frequent situation of the supernatural in this space also gives rise to the eerie, withholding the identity of the agent responsible for the sounds. This ongoing presence where the living feel there should not be one undermines their ability to belong within the home since the existing supernatural being keeps the house caught in the past. This reveals deeper anxieties about the ability to belong in *any* space, already seen in the films previously discussed but particularly seen in *The Sixth Sense*, which includes hauntings in non–domestic spaces. The living contest the claim of the dead to their homes and the resulting conflict can emerge through the soundscape. This chapter explores the films from an acoustemological perspective, providing an additional interpretation of the films, based upon the impact of the technologies of cinema on both the haunting and the ghost.

Exploring sound in this way expands the possibilities for the representation of ghosts. As composer and film theorist Michel Chion notes, the borders of the frame constrain a film’s visuals. By contrast, the “aural field” has fewer limits, “its contours uncertain and changing” (1994: 33). Sound does not belong to the frame and extends *beyond* the screen to fill the space of the viewer, a quality that sound designers maximise through the use of sound systems such as Dolby. Barry Curtis also notes that early suspicions that the house is haunted might be confirmed by the movement of props or, crucially for this chapter, differences in sound levels. Here, “[t]he heightened sensitivity produced by change is rendered in film by the soundtrack [...] and by an acute anxiety regarding what can be seen and what is concealed from view” (2008: 35). This reference to anxiety in response to what is seen and hidden also dovetails with considerations of sound through the combination of cinematographic framing and sound design to produce moments of sonic spectrality. This chapter will discuss readings of sound design that represent these moments, particularly around the use of off-screen space.

Following the introduction of sound in 1927, film sound traditionally refers to the musical soundtrack, dialogue, and sound effects. The phrase ‘soundtrack’ within this chapter

does not refer to the non-diegetic musical soundtrack, since this comprises a separate part of the filmmaking process. In this chapter, 'sound design' will refer primarily to sound effects within the filmic universe, including (but not limited to): ghostly voices, animal sounds, footsteps, or a use of reverb on such sound effects to denote the spatial characteristics of a space. While the voice is important to the soundscape, I discuss the supernatural voice within the soundscape where it relates to the haunting through its sound-based qualities, rather than specific instances of dialogue. The discussion centres the techniques involved with the creation of sound effects, whether that is off-screen or the interaction of a prop and the set that creates sound within the frame. This relates to the wider concerns of this thesis with the ways in which the technologies of cinema create instances of the supernatural within the haunted house sub-genre.

The Films

The first film to be discussed is *The Amityville Horror* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1979) and its remake (Andrew Douglas, 2005). The original version is the earliest example of a Hollywood haunted house film within the period covered by this thesis, and though it holds cultural significance to the genre for its use of economics as a means of driving a family to buy an unsuitable house, its use of sound is largely ignored in existing work. One of its most famous scenes is characterised by sound design, including the buzzing of flies and a guttural disembodied voice that issues orders to a priest. I include the remake since it expands the sonic remit of the original, adding sound effects to grant the house a continual presence throughout the film. This explicit engagement with the properties of sound makes it ideal for a discussion of sound design within horror, particularly through this use of sound effects to create doubt as to whether the house is sentient or manipulated by the supernatural entities within. IMDB does not list a specific sound designer for either of the *Amityville* films. I have chosen to name the sound effects editors for each film, since they shape the effects and the soundscape. Stephen Hunter Flick was the sound effects editor on the 1979 film. Harry Cohen, Ken Johnson, Michael Kamper, Jon Title, Karen Vassar and Kerry Carmean-Williams were the sound effects editors for the 2005 remake.

The second film is *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999). While the film tells the story of a child who sees ghosts, and much of the existing work deals with the famous 'twist' ending, the actual thrust of the narrative involves *listening* to ghosts. The soundscape privileges the voice, with supernatural presences implied through off-screen voices and sound effects. Technology is also important since Malcolm (Bruce Willis) discovers the existence of

ghosts through a return to an old recording, making the disembodied voice the vehicle of revelation. The existence of the voice is more important than the dialogue's content. *The Sixth Sense* also uses differences within ambient sound to delineate the 'ordinary' world of the film and emphasise moments of sonic spectrality whenever they intrude. *The Sixth Sense* is the only one of these films to offer a potential co-existence between the living and the dead through the creation of a community involving the dead and those psychic humans who perceive them. Michael Kirchberger was the film's sound designer.

The final films to be discussed are the first two films in the *Insidious* cycle: *Insidious* (James Wan, 2010) and *Insidious: Chapter 2* (James Wan, 2013); the sequel is referred to as *Chapter 2* hereafter.[2] These two films focus upon the Lambert family, with many supernatural appearances dependent upon sound. The ghosts are often heard before they are seen, and they interact with consumer technology within the home to continue the haunting. The insistent whispering of the medium during the séance characterises the way contact is made with the 'other side'. Distortions made to sound during scenes set within the ghostly realm, called the Further, characterise the setting as being outside of the physical realm of the living. These films also parallel the popular interest in paranormal investigation, and they use sound as part of the drive towards exploring ghost hunting on screen, both by investigators and amateurs. This explicit focus on sound makes these two films a valuable addition to this chapter. Robert Cross was the sound designer for *Insidious*, while Joe Dzuban was the sound designer for *Chapter 2*.

The *Insidious* films also offer an interesting counterpoint to my argument that the living are the weird element. The dead belong in the Further, and rather than competing over domestic space, they compete over anatomical space, in the form of Dalton (Ty Simpkins). When they appear in our world, they do not belong there, yet the haunting is provoked by the incursions *by the living* into the Further, a space in which the living do not belong. Therefore, the living become the weird element in these films through the presence of Dalton and Josh (Patrick Wilson) in the Further. The films also display a different relationship with economics through the ease with which the family moves house in *Insidious*, suggesting a flexible form of home occupation, and their ability to feel 'settled' depends instead upon their son's psychic integrity.

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[2] The third and fourth films are prequels and deal with the backstory of the medium, Elise (Lin Shaye), making the films more about her and less about the hauntings. The final instalment of the series, *Insidious: The Red Door* (Patrick Wilson, 2023) repeats many of the sound-based techniques of these first two films.

Consumer Technology in these Films

The films in this chapter often privilege the voice within the soundscape, both physical and disembodied, and where the films in the cinematography chapter explored the use of consumer technology to connect with supernatural realms, the films in this chapter are more concerned with contacting the dead through the act of listening. In the West, communication technology such as Morse code and the telegraph emerged during the Victorian era, and rapid changes in telecommunication technology over the past forty years reflect concerns over who or what we may contact using current devices. The *Amityville Horror* films lack such technology given their setting in the late 1970s, since mobile telephones only launched in 1984. They became smaller and lighter throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and by the end of 2013, 1 in 5 people worldwide owned a smartphone (Science Museum 2018). Such devices became a signifier of class, with landlines associated with the working class and mobile telecommunications beyond their financial reach.

Communication devices used for video and voice calls, or text-based messaging collapse the space between individuals, allowing users to connect to unseen networks. The technology makes present absent people, revealing the inherent eeriness of such devices, reliant upon the 'there, but not there' liminality associated with mobile communication.[3] Sound design becomes the ideal format through which to explore the eerie and its relationship with telecommunications and such devices are integrated into the set design. *The Amityville Horror* sees a landline physically pulled from the wall while disembodied voices emerge from wall vents in the sub-basement, associating the house's form of communication with the technology within its fabric. Moments of revelation come through supernatural voices captured by audio-visual technology and a grief-stricken father learning the truth about his daughter's death through a videotape in *The Sixth Sense*. In *Insidious*, other forms of technology become a site of communication with the dead, including a baby monitor and a gas mask designed to amplify the incoherent whisperings of a medium in trance. The reliance upon such technology increases across the films to reflect the contemporary reliance on technology. While the type of technology within the films differs from those used by society,

[3] The idea of 'voices from the ether' has been a preoccupation of those connected with telecommunications since the early days of wireless technology, including concerns about *who* has been contacted, and indeed what lies within the space that has opened up. See Sconce 2000 for further discussion.

the level of use remains consistent. Only the 2005 remake of *The Amityville Horror* bucks this trend due to its 1970s period setting.

This focus on communication devices within consumer technology has wider ramifications for the Gothic films of this period. It references the pervading metaphor of the 'ghost in the machine' as symptomatic of the relationship between haunting and technology, as evidenced by the boom of interest in spiritualism within the visual arts in the early twenty-first century (Mays and Matheson 2013: 2). Such interest was not new, with the relationship between technology and hauntings dating to earlier art forms, such as the Phantasmagoria (Mays and Matheson 2013: 4). Meanwhile, spiritualism heavily drew upon both technology and science from its inception (Mays and Matheson 2013: 6). The role of technology in creating and enabling haunting precisely through the particulars of its functionality is reflected in these films. Such a haunting often involves a crossing of boundaries, particularly into the home, which is enabled by such communications-based technology. The fixation within the American imperial gothic upon the security of the nation's borders is almost justified by the ease with which the supernatural penetrates these boundaries through sound, made literal in the voices from the wall vents in *The Amityville Horror*. Yet only the *Insidious* films truly post-date 9/11. While Johan Höglund argues it is 9/11 that turns the American gothic towards the American *imperial* gothic, eternally preoccupied by the struggle between 'modern' America and the gothic wolf at its door (2014: 3), that these films straddle 9/11 demonstrates the prevalence of such ideas within the haunted house film before 2001.

Sound Design Terminology

To examine the use of sound, I draw from the vocabulary of auditory terms that primarily come from Chion's work on film sound, and the work of sound designer David Sonnenschein. Neither writer exclusively discusses horror cinema; both discuss the terms within general cinema, and I apply them to haunted house films where appropriate. Chion explains an unusual facet of the soundtrack, since having one "does not necessarily mean that the sounds of the film constitute a coherent entity" (1994: 39). The soundtrack comprises several layers of sounds recorded independently and mixed together, referencing the bringing together of ghosts from different time periods in a single location. Where the haunted house becomes a palimpsest of previous events, with each ghost overlaid upon the next, the same can be said of the layered approach to film soundtracks.

Sonnenschein notes the fundamental differences between sight and hearing since viewers can close their eyes to avoid seeing something unpleasant, but the ear perceives

sound in an omnidirectional fashion so they cannot close their ears (2001: 152). In these films, characters hear sounds that cause them to turn and look towards the ghost; sound prompts their reaction, yet the scopophilic nature of Western modes of experience continues to privilege sight over hearing. In discussing the field of acoustemology as it relates to literature, Justin D. Edwards notes that shifting the focus from the visual to the auditory can open up "other forms of experience that might not be accessible within the limits of vision" (2015: 48). Acoustemology relocates epistemology within the acoustic realm, a position it does not usually occupy in the West. The default visual mode prioritises what humans see, an approach that "leads to a scopophilic conception of what it means to be human based on physical signs" (Edwards 2015: 50). The ephemeral and often disembodied nature of sound complicates the physical signs, though the tangibility of a sound's origin makes this a rich area of investigation by also applying it to cinema.

That said, there is a perceptual disconnect at the heart of sound design that lends weight to its role within sonic spectrality. Humans recognise sounds *after* perceiving them, meaning hearing and perception are not simultaneous (Chion 1994: 13). This momentary gap between recognition and perception opens a space for both the misidentification of sounds and the awareness there should not have been a sound at all. This provokes considerations of the eerie and musicologist Isabella Van Elferen notes that "[s]ound challenges the relations between visibility and presence, invisibility and absence that are generally perceived as natural" (2012: 25). Yet, since these films reveal that the relations are not natural, "[s]ound suggests presence even when this presence is invisible or intangible, and is thus closely related to the ghostly" (2012: 4). This belies a fundamental point about sound. Witnesses to supernatural activity may wonder if they are hearing things, but the key element is not the act of hearing, but the *nature* of what is heard. Since sound is the wave effect created by the interaction of physical objects, the witness heard *something*. Whether they can identify the sound is a different matter, and ghosts exist in the gap between the sound's source and what the witness thinks caused the sound. In these films, ghosts can create sounds that do not always have material sources; such ambiguity about the materiality of the source leads the listener to assume a ghostly origin, having projected "their own repressed anxieties" onto the sound (Van Elferen 2012: 25). Filmmakers can also create a misidentification of sound to misdirect the viewer using the Law of Proximity. Here, the brain links adjacent sound elements into "a single sound object" (1994: 81). Chion gives the example of a squeak, followed by a bang, and then a rattle, which the viewer may perceive as the closing of a rusty screen door (1994: 81). The individual sounds may be unrelated or even created by different

sources, but their proximity to one another creates the understanding that the sounds should be taken as a whole to represent an action. This law becomes valuable in discussing the use of animal sounds to direct the representation of the ghost in *Insidious.*

For Chion, the audio and visual elements of a film cannot be read separately (1994: xxvi). Sound supports cinematography, creating an aural container for visual cues, and this relationship is called 'added value' since sound adds extra information to the image (Chion 1994: 5). In return, the image makes us perceive the sound in a specific way (1994: 21). Empathetic sounds support the scene, while anempathetic sounds juxtapose the sound with the image (1994: 8). In relation to ghosts, this sense of mutual influence allows for a creation of supernatural effects when either the image or the sound is withheld or distorted beyond expectation. Sounds with no visual source force a witness to imagine the source "may be closer to her than she would like to admit" (Van Elferen 2012: 42). The lack of a visual can collapse the gap between the listener and the perceived source, demonstrating the flexibility of space but also the control exercised by the supernatural over this space. Van Elferen points out that "[s]pectrality is often conceived in terms of vision and disembodiment. [...] In Gothic, in/audibility is at least as important for the representation and perception of ghosts as in/visibility" (2012: 24).

Sound can emerge on-screen, off-screen, in a non-diegetic sense, or far outside the frame as a voiceover. This relationship to space allows sound designers to combine sound with set design to describe the extent of a room, or where characters and objects are within a setting, something that impacts an instance of haunting in *The Sixth Sense*, where the unchanging quality of the sound allows the viewer to place the ghost within a specific room. A sound expresses the space in which it occurs, since a heel hitting a floor has a specific source, while the resultant sound will depend on different factors, including the surface or the size of the room (Chion 1994: 79). Sonnenschein refers to these as concrete sounds which are "associated directly with the image" (2001: 27). Such sounds emanate from qualities within the frame "like movement, weight, size, solidity, resistance, contact, texture, temperature, impact, release, etc." (2001: 27). These are useful for discussions of hauntings since while ghosts may be able to move objects, we do not expect them to have a sense of weight or solidity. Yet including these sounds orients the viewer within the diegetic space and provides clues as to the location of the ghost and the extent of their control over the material world.

While on- and off-screen space refers to the contents of the frame, it is the soundtrack that portrays the off-screen space (Burch 1973: 91). Noël Burch divides cinematic space into "that included within the frame and that outside the frame" (1973: 17). The off-screen space

is further divided into six segments, with four aligned to the frame's borders. The fifth lies behind the camera, while the sixth lies behind the set, extending the cinematic space into three dimensions (1973: 17). Off-screen sound lies within this off-screen space and can be further divided into active and passive sound. Active sounds introduce an element before showing it, such as the voice of an off-screen character, while passive sounds provide context, creating stability in the background ambience (Chion 1994: 85). A sound designer may include distant sounds, such as the background noise of a city, to extend the diegetic space (Chion 1994: 87). Intermittent yet specific ambient sound effects, such as dogs barking, define the diegetic space as "elements of auditory setting" (Chion 1994: 55). Such elements punctuate the setting, unlike more permanent sounds that *are* the space such as ocean waves crashing on a shore or city traffic. These passive sounds identify locations through their continual presence (1994: 75).

Sounds are further divided into acousmatic sounds and visualised sounds. Acousmatic sounds are those we can hear, even if we cannot see their origin, such as the voices transmitted through the air vents in *The Amityville Horror* (1994: 71). With visualised sounds, viewers see both the sound and its origin within the frame (1994: 72).[4] Concerning acousmatic sound effects, neither the viewer nor the protagonist knows the identity of the agent responsible for the sound and the supernatural exists in the liminal space between 'not-knowing' and 'knowing'. By contrast, visualised sounds that are supernatural in origin do not provoke the eerie since we know the identity of the responsible agent. Offscreen sound is considered acousmatic since its source lies off-screen, and I argue that the acousmatic space is haunted space, given many of the supernatural emanations in these films begin in off-screen space.

Withholding sound produces effects around silence, and the point in the sound film where a natural sound becomes suppressed is called suspension (Chion 1994: 132). Sudden silence can cause sensations of emptiness, provoking the eerie through the absence of an expected presence. Yet silence can also be suggested through other sounds, since adding reverb to footsteps within a haunted house film illustrates the emptiness of a house, reinforcing its lack of habitation, something which is emphasised during the house viewing scene in *The Amityville Horror* remake. The absence of normal household sounds is

[4] Sounds may begin as acousmatic and be visualised later, or vice versa.

reinforced by the over-exaggeration of sounds associated with emptiness. This meeting of the visual and sound is called the point of synchronisation, or synch point (Chion 1994: 58).

Finally, the use of sound raises issues around the point of audition (Chion 1994: 90). Cinema's visual language uses an established series of cuts and framing to show what a character is looking at. Yet sound is omnidirectional and it is harder to pinpoint the source of a sound and show *which* character hears the sound. Aural perception, hearing several things from different directions simultaneously, makes it difficult to ascertain (Chion 1994: 90). The most common method is to include the sound and a close-up of the character to signal that they hear what we hear (1994: 91). Yet beyond this, sounds imply the character hears what the audience hears, making sounds a less subjective part of a haunting.

Existing Critical Discussions

Before applying this terminology to the chosen films, it is worth examining existing critical work about these films. It explores a range of topics but rarely the ghost as a literal figure, and there is little consideration of sound design's contribution to the conjuration of the supernatural. Critics writing about different versions of *The Amityville Horror* have discussed the films in familial terms, examining the child as a monster (Balmain 2007) and the representation of the father (Berns and Fontao 2016: Platts 2015). Larrie Dudenhoeffer discusses the film as a metaphor both for menstruation and Marxism (2014). Other work explores the film as an economic drama (Gaines 2020: Maddrey 2004: Sobchack 1987: Williams 2014) and through its relation to the 'cursed Indian burial ground' trope to examine white Christian sovereignty (Caterine 2014). Drew Beard discusses the 1979 film within the context of the 'Satanic Panic' of the 1980s and the arrival of cable television and home video (2015). The original film also appears as part of an exploration of haunting house film patterns, contrasting American films with Malaysian productions (Yusof et. al 2017).

The Sixth Sense has garnered much critical attention since its release in 1999. Yet despite the film's treatment of the supernatural, few discussions engage with the ghostly elements of the narrative as evidence of supernatural beings. Désirée Kriesch focuses on ghost story conventions and the links with trauma in one of the few explicit explorations of the supernatural (2016). The most common exploration of the film is in relation to its narrative structure, particularly the ending (Rickels 2002: Armendariz 2003: Friedman 2006: Lavik 2006: Barratt 2009: Briefel 2009: Whitesell 2009; Littschwager 2019). Other critics examine the narrative as a retelling of Arthurian legends and ancient myths (Harty 2000: Shaham 2009: Scheuer 2014). Elsewhere, critics explore the film's relationship to identity

and the self (Ringstrom 2001: Curran 2003: Foust and Soukup 2006), family dynamics (Fowkes 2004: Jackson 2016: Williams 2014), the psychic child (Balanzategui 2018), religion and spirituality (Beck 2000), the author's gendered body and its relation to the film (Houtman 2010), mourning and a Derridean sense of justice (Mules 2013), and sexual problems that take the form of an impotent ghost (Mott 2005).

The *Insidious* films attract the most critical interest in relation to their treatment of gender, including anxiety around technology and gender roles (Wessels 2015), the link between female characters and monstrosity (Pandzic 2016), the female characters as representative of the 'negligent parent' trope (Christopher 2015) or the family dynamics around the role of the father and son (Jackson 2016). Other critical work focuses on the body, including the threat of financial insecurity (Murphy 2015), the possibilities of a phenomenological approach to the body (Musante 2016), the child's body as a site of abjection (Balanzategui 2014), and death viewed through the lens of astral projection (Rauf 2018). Only Marko Lukić and Tijana Parezanović directly address the notion of space, using the prism of the heterotopia to explore the supernatural realm of the Further.

This existing critical work provides an array of valuable ways to encounter these films, though an analysis of sound design is missing from these perspectives. I intend to supplement this body of work by focusing upon how the use of sound design both creates and supports moments of the supernatural within the films. Since horror relies upon emotional responses, sound can be a useful lens through which to appreciate a film. Given the visual nature of cinema compared with other forms of cultural media, it is unwise to jettison the value of the image, and therefore this chapter will prioritise the use of sound design while including elements of cinematography and set design where necessary. This allows for textual reading based on experiences that lie beyond a vision-focused understanding of the films. Matt Foley (2018) has shown this approach is possible for literary texts, and I argue that the same is true for cinematic texts.

"Get OUT!" Supernatural Sound Design in *The Amityville Horror*

In both versions of *The Amityville Horror*, the Lutz family buy a large property on Ocean Drive in Long Island, its price discounted following the DeFeo family murders the year before. The Lutz family attempt to settle in their new home, where their daughter's invisible friend turns out to be a ghost. Meanwhile, stepfather George (James Brolin [1979] and Ryan Reynolds [2005]) becomes withdrawn and irritable. His wife Kathy (Margot Kidder [1979]

and Melissa George [2005]) researches the house's history and discovers it was built on First Nation land; in the original film, it is a portal to hell (in a somewhat mixed metaphor between First Nation culture and Christianity), and in the remake, it was cursed by the preacher who lived on the site and tortured First Nation people. During the climactic night in the house, the family fight to escape, abandoning both the property and their possessions.

In this section, I argue that the issue of belonging is present within both versions of *The Amityville Horror* from the opening scenes, with the ongoing presence of the dead in the house initially ascribed to the murdered DeFeo family: their presence impacts the desirability of the property by lowering its value. *The Amityville Horror* exposes the difficulties of home ownership since even the reduced price is a financial burden for the Lutz family. This financial investment reflects the extent to which Kathy invests emotionally into the American Dream, coming as she does from a family of renters. The film's sound design supports the existing presence of supernatural beings within the property, confirming the Lutz family as the weird element. In the remake, this soundscape also suggests that the house has its own animating principle, giving it a sense of agency, which denies attempts to possess it. In both the original and the remake, violent crimes keep the house caught in the past and unavailable for occupancy by the living, although this is less on the part of ghosts, and more perpetrated by the evil force that caused the original crimes. My focus on sound design also allows for a fuller exploration of the eerie than was possible through the previous reading of the set design since acousmatic sound draws attention to both off-screen entities *and* those we cannot see within the frame. I read specific examples of sound design to explore how the film deals with the weird and the eerie through its acoustic design.

The section first explores two specific sequences in the 1979 film that use the sound of flies to underpin the visceral nature of the haunting, although the second also demonstrates the construction of the film as the narrative set. It next examines the use of sound to demarcate space during the house viewing sequence in the 2005 remake. The section then focuses on readings of specific sounds used with the remake's soundscape, such as the use of the disembodied voice and creaking sounds that allow the house to 'speak', thus exploring issues around the potential agency of the house, compared with the animation of the house by a possessive supernatural presence. This leads to a discussion of the issues of the point of audition in the 2005 film, and the dynamics created through the silence ascribed to the Indigenous ghosts, and the ways in which they complicate the desire to own the property and land. The section ends with an examination of the house blessing sequence in the 2005 film,

and how it differs from the 1979 film, with a focus on the perceived agency of the house, rather than individual ghosts.

In a discussion of the modern American horror movie, horror author Stephen King notes that *The Amityville Horror*, "beneath its ghost-story exterior, is really a financial demolition derby" (2010: 153). The desire to acquire property leads the Lutz family to buy the Amityville house since its low price outweighs any unease felt regarding the murders within the house. In an approach typical of a Western scopophilic perspective, the film privileges what is seen, such as noxious black goo in the toilet, a child's hand trapped in a window, visions of what lies in the basement, and flies massing on one window. Yet an exploration of the film's use of sound allows for a new experience of the supernatural activity present within the house, granting a method of communication to both the house and its ghosts. The discussion will explore first the 1979 original film, followed by the 2005 remake.

The first explicit moment of supernatural activity in the 1979 film is also one of the most famous sequences, involving Father Delaney (Rod Steiger), and its effects are mostly achieved through sound. The priest arrives to bless the house and the sound of muffled giggling comes from upstairs, with Father Delaney's look up the stairs implying an origin to the sound (Fig 79). This places the sound in the sixth segment of off-screen space, the space behind the set (Burch 1973: 17). Denied a direct visual due to walls and doors, this ghostly activity can *only* be encountered through sound. This raises questions about the identity of the giggling agent, yet it is only when Father Delaney reaches the room that the framing reveals the children are outside. This explains the different quality of indoor giggling compared to the exuberant children's laughter outside, although the sonic difference is not solely explained by the sound emanating from within the house. The discordant nature of the laughter's *tone* is the first sign that something is amiss.

Figure 79: Father Delaney looks in the direction of the giggling (1979).

A cut moves the audience outside the house, looking into the room through the window. This focus on framing and editing within a discussion about sound is important because from this new position, we see the door swing closed behind Father Delaney before he hears it slam closed (Fig 80). Seeing the door's movement before hearing the noise makes the bang a visualised sound, preventing this from being a jump scare for the audience—it only offers a scare for Father Delaney. Yet the static shot also reveals no *reason* for the door to swing closed, much less for it to lock itself. The visualised sound does not provide a sonic jump scare but combining it with the framing reveals an absence where there should be a presence. The identity of the agent responsible for closing the door remains a mystery, to both Father Delaney and the audience, but it confirms that Father Delaney is not alone.

Figure 80: These frames show the door slamming shut (1979).

A shot of the window shows two silent flies and the door swings shut while Father Delaney is looking at them. The look of concern on the priest's face underscores the Biblical association of flies with evil, through their link with Beelzebub, also known as Lord of the

Flies.[5] Another shot of the window 36 seconds later shows many more flies, this time accompanied by the sound effect of flies buzzing. Their regular buzzing contrasts with the slow, creaking sounds heard so far, yet it also derives from physical insects. This gives a tangibility to the sound, underscoring the materiality of the supernatural activity. The sheer number of flies, and the suddenness of their appearance, also introduces the abject since flies in this quantity suggest the presence of decay. For Julia Kristeva, in her treatise on abjection, wounds or the scent of decay do not carry the same abject impulse as the corpse, which "*show[s] me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. [...] the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (1982: 3, emphasis in original). Yet here, the sight of the corpse is withheld, with the buzzing used to suggest its presence. The sound foreshadows the later revelation as to the use of the land as a burial ground, revealing the presence of corpses even if visual confirmation is withheld. Tight close-ups on the priest show his growing distress, matched by the increase in the volume of the buzzing (Fig 81). The framing supports the sound design to generate tension.

Figure 81: The flies mass on Father Delaney (1979).

The attack reaches its crescendo and the door silently swings open, mirroring its silent movement at the start of the sequence (Fig 82). All sound stops abruptly and the silence is jarring following the vicious sonic assault. This total cessation of sound is just as eerie as

[5] Beelzebub is also both a synonym for Satan and also one of Hell's seven princes, representing envy and gluttony, depending on the theological source.

unfamiliar sounds in a space, until a disembodied voice whispers its instruction to leave. The voice is clearer when contrasted with silence, and the film's soundtrack only resumes when the voice repeats its order. The momentary silence feels as though the house is taking a deep breath before it speaks, personifying the house, rather than referring to individual spirits within it. Such a move reflects Kathy's earlier concerns about the house and its past, although George decries the possibility that houses have a memory. This sequence suggests that houses not only have memories, but they also have the capacity to exert their will, offering a possible identity for the owner of the disembodied voice: the house. This complicates the concept of belonging; if a house possesses its own personhood, then it is unavailable for possession by a third party and the Lutz family *cannot* own it, despite their legal claim to do so.

Figure 82: The door stands open as an invitation (1979).

To demonstrate this apparent personhood of the property, one sequence of supernatural activity occurs beyond the boundaries of the house in the 1979 film. Father Delaney drives towards the house when something forces the car from the road. The buzzing of flies fills the soundtrack, contradicting the single fly shown inside the car (Fig 83). The sound creates an aural link back to the house, providing a good example of the narrative set from the set design taxonomy developed by Charles and Mirella Affron. Films considered part of the Set as Narrative employ a set that is continually presented to the audience in which the "décor becomes the narrative's organising image, a figure that stands for the narrative itself" (Affron 1995: 158). In this scene, this specific sound effect replaces the décor and organises the narrative using an unmistakable, insectoid sound, associated with death, the

demonic, and decay. This demonstrates the power of the house—or the unseen agent within the house—since it can extend its reach into the on-screen space through sound, while showing how set and sound design do not work in isolation. More generally, sound can work through the use of empathetic sounds to describe the size or physical materials of a space, such as footsteps on a wooden floor. Yet here, the production design of the house is condensed into a sound effect, and since it travels beyond the physical location of the house, this underscores the power of the supernatural to work from the off-screen space.

Figure 83: Left: The out-of-control car. Right: The solitary fly.

This bridging of spaces using sonic elements also provokes eeriness because the flies should not mass around the car in the numbers that they do. The volume of the buzzing creates an *excess* of presence that is not supported by the visuals, leading to the implication there are more flies present than we see on-screen. This demonstrates both the aural manipulation available to sound designers and the ferocity of the house in its murderous intent. Later, the buzzing of flies wakes George at 3:15 am and leads him into the room where Father Delaney attempted the blessing. This links George to the sonic organising principle of the narrative and the flies to the presence that prompted Ronald DeFeo to commit the murders. These moments of sonic synchronicity underscore the tangibility of the supernatural moments, borne out as they are through material means. This proved to be the organising principle for the film's sound design, and as Paul Costello indicated in a review of the 1979 film, "in this world, tension is signified by the sound of a live cable left unplugged, so a less than subtle hummmmm rests under, or rather over, moments when we're meant to be scared" (2013). While his comment relates to the efficacy of the sound in terms of the film's quality, it also demonstrates the use of off-screen cinematic technology to effect moments of sonic spectrality. The pervasive hum, with its tangible origins, refers to the materiality of this haunting and the omnipresence of the existing entities in the house.

The 2005 remake combines the set with sound design to create a supernatural soundscape, although it does so in a more traditional fashion. During the initial house viewing, George and Kathy's voices echo, denoting the house as being empty. The reflective

nature of the walls and floors evokes the wooden building fabric, providing clues about the era of its construction, while the extent of the echo confirms the vastness of the rooms. This sound quality supports the long shots or shots angled down towards the couple to show them dwarfed by the house. This combination of sound and shot reinforces the predatory nature of the house, or at least the malevolent entity animating its physical fabric to enact moments of supernatural activity. What sounds like a human sigh accompanies a close-up of a wall vent. This is a fleeting moment, but the audience has been primed since the opening montage of the DeFeo murders to think of disembodied voices within the house. The montage allows for a new interpretation of sounds within the house as having a human origin.

This sequence also offers the first explicit intimation that supernatural forces occupy the house and it is thus unavailable for human occupation. While upstairs, George and Kathy look out of the window. A sound behind them, like someone putting their weight on the floorboards, makes the real estate agent turn around. A shot from her point of view reveals a shadow passing the door (Fig 84). The shadow moves too quickly compared to the slow creak, creating dissonance between what is seen and heard. The shadow implies a tangible presence since a figure must block light to create a shadow, but it reinforces the conceit that there is already an entity in the house, which is unlikely to cohabit with the incoming family.

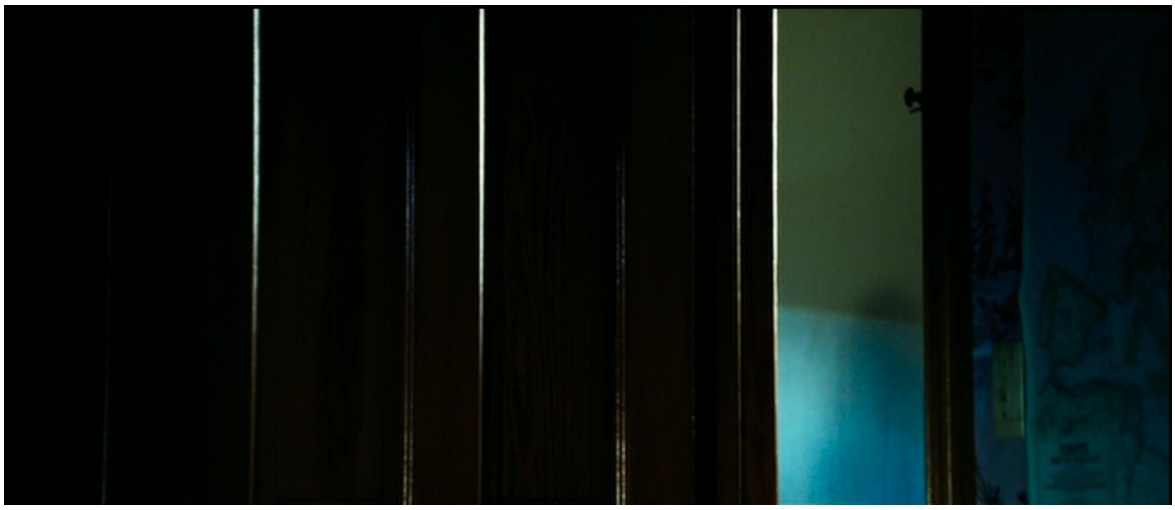

Figure 84: The mysterious shadow passes the open door (2005).

This creaking sound occurs throughout the remake as part of the elements of auditory setting, embedding sonic spectrality into the domestic soundscape. Unlike the flies in the 1979 version, the creaking is not heard in scenes away from the house, therefore linking the creaking with the property. The creaking reflects the set design, and by extension the house, since the sound design emphasises its wooden construction. When Kathy asks George if they can move out, the creaking sound is the only ambient sound, suggesting the house is

interjecting its own opinion into the discussion. George draws attention to the persistent creaking, supporting the point of audition shots that link the whispering in the air vents with George, and George alone. The whispers create a persistent disembodied presence, with the voice too incoherent to understand, yet the whisper is more important than the content, since "[w]hen disembodied entities speak, the world of the supernatural communicates directly with the human world" (Van Elferen 2012: 21). The lack of a visual to confirm the presence draws attention to its visible absence, a point contradicted by the audible voice. This contradiction creates a sonic space in which the supernatural can emerge, here taking the form of the apparently animated house.

As an example of this use of point of audition, early in the 2005 remake, George goes to the basement to add more fuel to the furnace. This is another example of the original hearth being displaced to the fringes of the home, also seen in *Stir of Echoes* (David Koepp, 1999) and *The Conjuring* (James Wan, 2013). Here, such displacement of the hearth represents the terror at the heart of the family, given the basement's associations with death. When George reaches the basement, incoherent whispering fills the soundtrack, and a close-up of the alarm clock radio implies it to be the source through the principle of synchresis (Chion 1994: 5). Upon picking up the radio, George realises it is unplugged, discounting it as the whispering's source. The whispering increases during a tracking shot through the air vents, implying the sound comes from them (Fig 85). Later, a medium shot of George gazing into the middle distance while whispers gather on the soundtrack confirms the assumption that only George can hear them, leaving him vulnerable to the presence inhabiting the house. The whispers only end when the Lutz family flee at the film's climax, indicating the house has lost its influence over George. Mikal J. Gaines notes that "[i]t is only by abandoning the space and place completely, essentially submitting to foreclosure, that the Lutzes are allowed to survive" (2020: 194). I argue we can also read the whispers as doubts about the wisdom of their desire to own a home. With the dream gone, the whispers no longer serve a purpose.

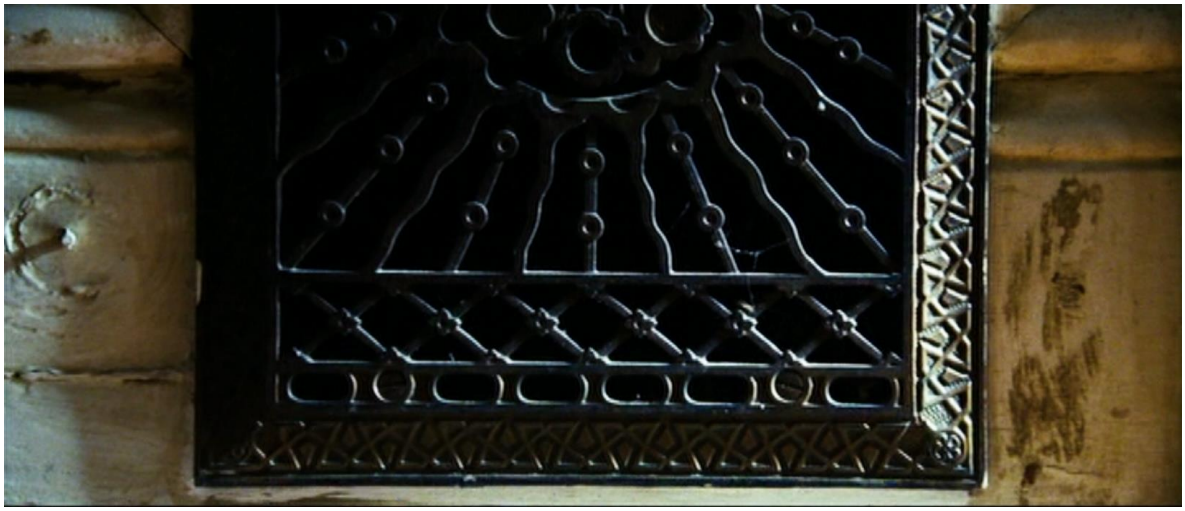

Figure 85: A close-up of the vent implies this is the source of the whispering (2005).

By contrast, individual ghosts are silent when they *do* appear. George sees Jodie (Isabel Conner) hanging from a noose in his bedroom, yet this creepy visual is made more so by its absence of sound; Jodie is silent, and we hear no sounds of a creaking rope. The silence is louder than any accompanying sounds could be since the absence of sound confirms the vision has a supernatural origin. This is the first identifiable ghost, yet the lack of sound contradicts the whispering from the walls or the creaking of the floor. This implies other ghosts, and the image also makes no narrative sense since Jodie was shot, not hung.

The house creaking also appears in a sequence with one of the Lutz sons. Michael (Jimmy Bennett) wakes up to use the bathroom, and the sounds of creaking fill the soundtrack, sounds more akin to those of a ship at sea than a house in Long Island. These regular sounds create a sense of movement, granting animation to the house through sound. A shot of the wall vent implies the groaning comes from within the walls, though the source remains acousmatic since we cannot see the specific origin. A medium shot of the mirror shows a ghost in the reflection alongside Michael, yet he appears not to see it, and it is unclear if he hears the creaking (Fig 86). This places the audience in a privileged position of sonic spectrality since we can both see the ghosts and hear the sounds generated by the physical fabric of the house, yet this is not a position shared by all the characters. It is through this approach that we can see a greater emphasis on acoustemology than in the 1979 film, which relied on a bombastic musical score to prompt moments of fright. The sonic experience of the house in the remake adds depth to the representation of the supernatural since the ghosts remain present through sound, even when they are off-screen, and removing their sound when they are on-screen underlines their supernatural quality.

Figure 86: A ghost watches Michael at the sink (2005).

Although Chelsea (Chloë Grace Moretz) talks to Jodie, the point of audition reveals George appears to be the only character who hears the sounds of the house, here recast as the 'voice' of Reverend Ketcham. When George encounters visions of tortured Indigenous Americans in the basement, one of them has their lips sewn together (Fig 87), both underscoring their silence as a ghost and provoking anxieties around their erasure from the historical record—a written form of communication between the past and the present. As Van Elferen notes, "[t]he spaces of Gothic can be read as personal and cultural mindscapes, in which undead presences signify unprocessed traumas or unconscious obsessions of persons, historical periods or cultures" (2012: 11). The absence of Indigenous vocalisations within the house's soundscape reflects their removal from both the land and the house's history, with the DeFeo murders dominating the public imagination. Kathy problematically refers to the land as "my land", erasing Indigenous inhabitants through her acquisition of the property.

Figure 87: The Indigenous American has their lips sewn shut (2005).

This encounter with the house's history also provokes a confrontation with the land's history. The film suggests "that to occupy any and all space in America is an inherently guilty act; it cannot be done without disturbing the dead or conjuring up past injustices" (Gaines 2020: 185). Stories featuring the 'cursed Indian land' trope only emerged from the work of HP Lovecraft during the interwar years (Caterine 2014: 46).[6] Yet it is important to note that in the book on which the films were based, the land was used "as an enclosure for the sick, mad and dying", not as a burial ground (Caterine 2014: 50). This associates the space with the processes of death, not a space in which to inter the dead. The 1979 film omits this enclosure, focusing instead on a 'gateway to hell' in the basement, yet the 2005 film makes more of an effort to engage with the haunted nature of land in the United States. By emphasising Ketcham as a white preacher who tortured Indigenous Americans on the site, it acknowledges the brutal treatment of the Indigenous population, while turning Ketcham into the evil presence that animates the house. This is also problematic since it relocates the barbaric treatment as the actions of a single individual, allowing white Americans to distance themselves from land theft of earlier centuries without any need for reparations to the descendants of the victims. Ketcham's victims become mute witnesses to his actions, and their silence reinforces their powerlessness.

Set against this silence, disembodied voices become a key part of the soundscape within the film. While George puts up drywall in the basement, Billy's (Jesse James) voice echoes through the wall vent from a room upstairs. It is understandable that the house would seek to possess George due to his position as a building contractor. While Kathy desired homeownership, it is George who provided the finances to do so, and it is his occupation to reshape the building fabric. Having the skills to undertake necessary repairs also removes the need for additional expenses, which the family can ill afford. As the figure most aligned with the reconfiguration of domestic space, George becomes most susceptible to the house's influence. This is made clearer in the 2005 remake, in which George plans to turn the basement into an office, before turning it into sleeping quarters. This is also the space in which he first hears the whispers from the air vents.

This moment of a familiar disembodied voice through the wall vents is followed by a distinct disembodied voice on the soundtrack instructing the listener to catch and kill them.

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[6] Darryl V. Caterine traces the similarities between Lovecraft's work and the Jay Anson book, *The Amityville Horror*, that formed the basis for the 1979 film.

The voice is an example of the acousmêtre, or the "acousmatic character whose relationship to the screen involves a specific kind of ambiguity and oscillation" (Chion 1994: 129). This is the acousmêtre, rather than the acousmatic voice; an acousmatic voice would be an off-screen voice, such as a known character speaking while off-screen, while for the acousmêtre, the source of the voice remains off-screen while appearing close to crossing into the on-screen space. We have not seen the source of this voice, leaving its owner a relative mystery. Even when Reverend Ketcham appears in George's vision, he does not speak, disallowing an identification of the voice in the house as that of the preacher. This keeps the voice disembodied, and keen to possess another body to enact harm within the physical realm. The film demonstrates this sonic possession with a sequence in which George encounters a double of himself that issues instructions in the same disembodied voice heard throughout the film (Fig 88). George becomes doubled with the house and its animating force through the sonic qualities of this disembodied voice. It is George who nails shut the doors and windows to prevent his wife and stepchildren from leaving the house, which recasts the familiar sound effects of hammering, previously associated with his trade, in a more sinister light. The family *cannot* leave the space in which they do not belong.

Figure 88: George's double in the basement (2005).

In the 2005 film, the disembodied voice is the organising sonic principle behind the supernatural occurrences in the house, rather than the buzzing of flies. The house blessing sequence is much shorter and happens far later than in the 1979 film. As Father Calloway (Philip Baker Hall) sprinkles holy water, it hisses like water on a hot surface when it hits the wooden fabric of the room (Fig 89). Tortured cries accompany the hissing, linking the two sounds through the Law of Proximity to imply the house is wounded by holy water, and it vocalises this pain in a moment of sonic spectrality. Yet the key difference between the 1979

and 2005 versions of this scene is the remake includes strange whispering in the wall vent preceding the cloud of flies that attacks Calloway (Fig 90). They do not slowly amass before attacking, as in the 1979 version, but appear in response to a perceived attack *by* Calloway. In the 1979 film, the flies appear from nowhere, yet in the 2005 version, the revelation of their source within the room hints at the existence of the dead bodies in the cellar, carried through the house in the wall vents. The concealment of the corpse within the foundational space of a dwelling introduces the abject to the confines of the home. As in the original film, the buzzing of flies stands in for the abject, linking the house with its bloodstained origins, though the diabolical association also remains.

Figure 89: The holy water sizzles when it hits the wood. (2005).

Figure 90: Father Calloway peers into the vent (2005).

When the disembodied voice instructs the priest to leave, it is at its most coherent, concerned as it is with removing the religious threat, which highlights the disembodied voice as being the primary site of sonic spectrality. The 1979 film places more of an emphasis on

visual horror, with sound used to support the events on screen. This leads to a more formulaic depiction of the supernatural, with a focus on the tangible effects of haunting, rather than the materiality of the ghosts. The tangibility is wrought through the fabric of the house, not the ghosts, with instances of horror involving windows slamming shut or toilets backing up, although sound effects underscore each incident. In the case of the toilet, the bubbling of the goo in the toilet helps to support the disgusting visual, since the bubbles imply movement within the substance.

This preoccupation with the body of the house as a source of sonic spectrality is taken to a stronger conclusion in the 2005 film where the visuals often support the soundscape, and the sound produced by the movement of the fabric of the house provides Ketcham's 'voice'. The sounds within the house reference the presence of an unseen entity, and the silence of the visualised ghosts reinforces our conviction that they are not the source of these sounds. The entity in the house introduces the eerie to the film, as a presence where there should not be one, and since it pre-dates the Lutz's purchase of the home, the entity frustrates the family's attempts to own the house and belong there. The silencing of the Indigenous spirits trapped on the property is a visceral reminder of the atrocities of America's past but also underscores the impossibility of belonging on this land since it will always belong to these Indigenous ancestors. This undercuts the financial aspect of the film since even a family who could afford the house could not overcome this historical truth; perhaps there is some truth to the idea that Ketcham also 'spoke' to Ronald DeFeo.

Yet the spirits' inability to effect change within the built environment both reinforces the historical narrative and elides its reality, since no reckoning is faced for this return of the buried past. As noted earlier, the 2005 film suggests that occupying space in America is a guilty act that is bound to disturb the dead and recall past crimes (Gaines 2020: 185). I argue the family's desire to own a home, to legally occupy space, conjures these past injustices, and they are denied their desire through the explicit presence of the dead rather than financial burdens. The sound effects ascribed to the house, through its creaking and moaning, suggest that the house is unavailable for occupancy due to Ketcham's ongoing presence there. That the ghosts are unable to speak is telling, yet it highlights the sound (or silence) of the supernatural, despite the privilege afforded to the visuals of the film through both set design and cinematography.

By contrast, *The Sixth Sense*, released between the original version of *The Amityville Horror* and its remake, offers a world in which the dead continue to exist, something made explicit through the ambient use of a supernatural soundscape. Yet it also demonstrates there

is a way in which to occupy space in America *while* coexisting with the disturbed dead, and while *settling* past injustices. This suggests that there is a possibility for the living to find a way to belong within spaces previously claimed by the dead, and it does so by focusing on the communication between the living and the dead, expressed here through the soundscape. Sound continues to support the visuals to describe the extent of the physical set, with disembodied voices the call sign of the supernatural, yet these voices are not incoherent; they carry truth for anyone who is prepared to listen.

"They don't know they're dead" - Listening to Ghosts in *The Sixth Sense*

The Sixth Sense focuses on child psychologist Malcom Crowe, who is shot by former patient, Vincent (Donnie Wahlberg). A year later, Malcolm visits a young boy, Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment), who presents with the same symptoms as Vincent. After Malcolm gains his trust, Cole confesses he sees dead people, who do not realise they are dead. Malcolm initially disbelieves him, until he reviews a recording of a session with Vincent, which reveals the voice of a ghost. Malcolm persuades Cole to listen to the dead, thus humanising the ghosts and allowing Cole to help them, so they cease persecuting him. At the film's climax, Malcolm realises he died in the shooting. By helping Cole, and thus atoning for his inability to help Vincent, Malcolm leaves the world of the living.

Where *The Amityville Horror* locates the supernatural within the context of home ownership and the dual meaning of possession, both in terms of the house and the body, *The Sixth Sense* locates the supernatural as something that can be encountered both inside and outside the home. In the latter film, ghosts are discrete entities with their own desires, yet the ghosts reach out to those who can perceive them, irrespective of whether that individual lives in their former home. The supernatural realm is broadened to encompass all spaces, unlike the *Amityville* films in which the dead are constrained to the home. The ghosts of *The Sixth Sense* keep their chosen spaces caught in the past, *their* past; some ghosts replay their moments of trauma, while others seem capable of agency and interaction with the living. For those with the ability to see and hear the dead, the only respite from the dead's attempts to garner attention is to engage with them. This focus on listening is ironic in a film marketed around the idea of 'seeing' ghosts, yet it also relies on sound design for its impact. As the film's producer, Frank Marshall, explained, "[t]he sound effects are also characters" (*Music and Sound Design of 'The Sixth Sense'.* 2000).

I argue that *The Sixth Sense* is preoccupied less with the perils of home ownership and more with the wider concerns around sharing space with the dead, as experienced through the perspective of a character able to perceive them. This film, more than the others in this thesis, alters the question other protagonists ask, of "How can I belong here?" to "How can I belong here *with them*?" The film's focus on sound reinforces the continually haunted nature of space, and the need to find a way to co-exist with the dead, or to help the dead to vacate the space. In the set design chapter, *Stir of Echoes* offered an example of the latter, while *The Sixth Sense* chooses the former, with Cole able to renegotiate his existence in the space through his communication with the dead. In examining sound in *The Sixth Sense*, I have chosen examples of hauntings within the home since the home is important as a sanctuary, making domestic supernatural incursions more impactful. While director M. Night Shyamalan includes ghosts in other locations, such as in the street or at school, he places a heavier emphasis on those in the home.

The first section explores the link between physical trauma and ghosts, through the hideous circumstances surrounding the deaths of those ghosts shown on screen. Next, I expand this nature of physical trauma by exploring how the violence of ghosts is depicted solely using sound during a birthday party. This leads to a discussion of the use of sound in off-screen space, before exploring the use of sound to locate the ghost in space, necessitating an interaction of the sound and set design. The section next explores sound as a signifier of ghost's materiality, which supports the supposition in all these films that ghosts are a physical reality. The penultimate section explores the use of technology to preserve and transmit the voices of the dead, and the use of recording as key to providing understanding, which leads to a final discussion of the use of sound within video recordings as a vehicle for enunciating truth. The value of listening to ghosts throughout this discussion of *The Sixth Sense* demonstrates the importance of an acoustemological approach in revealing additional information to that which is provided visually.

There is also a strong degree of physical trauma involved with the ghosts in this film since they died in tragic or violent circumstances, with the figures playing out as "a catalogue of the ills of our society" (Bell-Metereau 2004: 298). We are not shown ghosts who died peacefully in their sleep, and their trauma manifests in the world of the living through sound,

including their interaction with the material world of the set.[7] Shyamalan and Kirchberger saturated the film's soundscape with vocals, using the sound of people of various ages and genders breathing into a microphone (*Music and Sound Design of 'The Sixth Sense'* 2000). While the volume of these sounds is low, they create a "moving ambience" that hints at the extent of the hordes of the dead (*Music and Sound Design of 'The Sixth Sense'* 2000). As Shyamalan explained in a making-of feature on the DVD release, the intention behind this was "so in empty rooms you feel that there's a presence [... you] feel uneasy" (*Music and Sound Design of 'The Sixth Sense'* 2000). This use of sound also turns the ghosts into a pervading presence, underlining their prior claim to the space, which reinforces the difficulty faced by the living in finding a place to belong. The entire film is technically an instance of haunting, albeit on the part of a traumatised ghost who is unaware of his supernatural status. The examples chosen relate to instances in which it is clear that ghosts are present.

A harrowing example of this violence associated with ghosts occurs when Cole attends a birthday party. He is already a social outcast, although it is more likely that his lower social class is the reason for this than his psychic abilities, and he leaves the 'safety' of the group to ascend a spiral staircase. He appears to follow a balloon that drifts upstairs when he hears a voice at the top of the stairs (Fig 91). The diegetic music played at the party grows faint as Cole moves further up the stairs, emphasising his growing isolation from the others. A change in volume allows the viewer to orient themselves within the domestic space, placing Cole in the house in relation to the party.

[7] This does raise questions about the circumstances surrounding the death of Cole's grandmother, who he talks about, but we never see.

Figure 91: Cole looks up the stairs.

A disembodied voice emanating from the cupboard replaces the diegetic music on the soundtrack. In a moment of sonic spectrality, a medium shot of the cupboard's interior reveals it to be empty, yet the voice grows more insistent and threatening in tone and emphasis as Cole approaches (Fig 92-3). This point demonstrates the synchronicity between sound and screen, with the voice appearing as an anempathetic sound, juxtaposed with the image.

Figure 92: The empty cupboard, accompanied by insistent whispering.

Figure 93: Cole looks into the apparently empty cupboard.

Two of the boys from the party cruelly deposit Cole inside the cupboard, re-enacting the trauma experienced by the unseen presence within. As Barry Curtis notes, "[t]he haunted house brings its occupants into confrontation with older and usually crueller times as the latent signs of life that are coded into its structure manifest themselves" (2008: 32). This connects with Gaines' assertion that occupying space in America disturbs the dead and provokes the return of past atrocities (2020: 185). Here, the boys disturb a past moment of terror by locking Cole in the cupboard, and the entity bound to the house returns. The cruelty manifests as loud thumps, bangs, and Cole's fevered cries on the soundtrack, all acousmatic sounds since we can hear them, but we cannot see their source. Yet this provides us with a sonic conundrum. If Cole produces the thumps, then we have seen their source, and they make sense in the context of a frightened child locked in a wooden cupboard. If Cole *is not* producing the thumps, then this creates the moment of sonic spectrality, in that we can *hear* the effects of a ghost we cannot see.

Two sounds punctuate the ongoing melee of thumps: the popping of the balloon and Cole's scream. The scream alerts Lynn to the situation and she is placed in the same perspective as the audience; she can hear the violent sounds but not see their source (Fig 94). A loud clunk punctuates the continuing sonic assault on the soundtrack, at which point Lynn opens the door and retrieves Cole from a now silent cupboard. This instance of haunting is enacted entirely using sound, which dovetails with the on-screen/off-screen division of the frame as discussed above. To reiterate its value in terms of sound, "[t]he longer the screen

remains empty, the greater the resulting tension between screen space and off-screen space and the greater the attention concentrated on off-screen space as against screen space" (Burch 1973: 25). The sound design concentrates our attention upon the off-screen space since it contains supernatural activity, further aligning the acousmatic space with ghosts. It does so twice, first in keeping the activity behind the cupboard door, and so hidden *within* the on-screen space, but also by continuing on the soundtrack when the camera cuts to other images, such as Lynn or the boys. The persistence of the sounds dominates the sequence.

Figure 94: Lynn attempts to reach Cole inside the cupboard.

Later scenes do not withhold the visuals during these supernatural moments. In one sequence, Cole gets up during the night to use the toilet.[8] A series of static shots show different parts of the apartment, accompanied by silence on the soundtrack. This silence is not eerie since we would expect an apartment at night to be quiet. The lack of background ambient sounds like traffic noise mirrors the lack of city noise from daytime sequences within the apartment, showing the Sears family do not live in a busy neighbourhood. This reinforces their isolation from the local community, reflecting the urban isolation depicted in *The Ring*. These silent shots also reveal that only Cole is awake and active. Having used the toilet and been aware of someone walking past the bathroom, a forward tracking shot advances towards

[8] It is notable that both *The Sixth Sense* and *The Amityville Horror* remake feature sequences in which young children run to the bathroom at night, clearly uncomfortable in their home in the dark. The placement of these sequences during a nocturnal setting removes the elements of auditory setting that might otherwise obscure sound clues laid for the audience.

the kitchen, accompanied by the sound of creaky floorboards (Fig 95). This sound effect adds tangibility to the camera movement since there must be a physical interaction between feet and the floor to make the sound, allowing the audience to make sense of the image. At no point prior has the viewer heard footsteps or sounds of movement associated with ghosts, therefore we understand this shot to place us within Cole's perspective, granting us access to his ability to see ghosts. The creaking floorboards also testify to the age of the apartment, playing on familiar tropes around older haunted houses previously seen on screen. The sound effect supports the sounds expected from a haunted house.

Figure 95: The tracking shot advances towards the kitchen.

No sounds emanate from the kitchen, creating a moment of cognitive dissonance when Cole enters and finds the cupboard doors and drawers standing open (Fig 96). This shot mirrors an earlier shot which depicted this scene from Lynn's point of view, albeit with Cole sitting at the kitchen table. In both sequences, no sound accompanies the opening of the doors. Cynthia Freeland describes this moment as provoking a sense of dread, the "gut response to things that are deeply unnerving for no clear reason" (2004: 193). It also provokes the eerie through the absence of sound where there should be one, although the revelation that the ghost caused this action dispels the eerie by uncovering the agent behind it. Only her motivation remains unknown.

Figure 96: The ghost stands in the kitchen with the drawers and cupboards open.

Cole encounters a previous occupant in a state of distress in the kitchen and he flees the room. Her admonishment follows him along the corridor and into the makeshift den in his bedroom (Fig 97). In this sequence, Kirchberger uses the voice to describe the spatial dimensions of the off-screen space. The ghost's voice does not grow louder, remaining constant in volume while Cole is in his den, revealing that she remains in the kitchen. This demonstrates that her goal is not a threatening one, foreshadowing the revelation that the ghosts want to engage with Cole. This figure confuses Cole with her husband, suggesting she continues to occupy the space as she did when she was alive, underlining the way the ghost holds the space in the past. The sound design also reflects the disjointedness between her presence and the space, since the lack of reverb on her voice stands at odds with the physical materials comprising the set, such as the wooden floorboards and the kitchen linoleum. While the ghost *looks* corporeal, she does not possess enough physical substance to have a tangible effect on the material environment, unlike the angry spirit in the cupboard.

Figure 97: Cole takes shelter in his den.

The Sixth Sense also uses acousmatic sounds to provide 'proof' of supernatural presences. This evidence comes from a recording of Malcolm's session with Vincent, the former patient who shoots him. His tape player provides an example of the use of sound technology, although this should not be confused with the technology of cinema used to create on- and off-screen sound. The *content* is the relevant part of the sound design here. The tape preserves a supernatural voice, transmitting it across time through the act of playback. This dislocation between time, space, and presence reveals anxiety about the ability of audio-visual technology to record the past. Replaying the recording brings these disembodied voices into a different time and space, which also reflects debates about the nature of hauntings that have plagued media since the late nineteenth century.[9]

During playback, Malcolm turns up the volume and hears another voice where he previously heard silence (Fig 98). The voice belongs to someone who is audibly distressed, speaking in Spanish. This provides an example of acoustemology, where a focus on sound reveals an experience that is denied to a visual approach. Amplification reveals the truth, something only possible using audio technology, and the recording allows Malcolm to artificially extend his aural range to gain understanding.[10] Crucially, it also makes it possible

[9] See Sconce (2000) for further exploration of the ways in which different media have been perceived as accessing the spectral realm since the invention of wireless technology during the Victorian period.
[10] See Edwards (2015) for a fuller exploration of the Gothic possibilities afforded by audio technology.

for the audience to hear this voice where there did not appear to be one, with the on-screen audio technology becoming the proxy for the cinematic technology that creates the off-screen sound as an instance of sonic spectrality.

Figure 98: Malcolm turns the volume up to its highest setting.

This revelation is important since haunted house films involve a reactivation of the past, in which the living resolve a past conflict within the present using documentary evidence (Curtis 2008: 84). Doing so enables the living to un-weird themselves, bringing the house into the present and thus available for occupation. By replaying the tape, Malcolm delves into clues from the past to understand the present. The 'turning up' of the volume on the player reflects the changed perspective offered by Cole's disclosure. Malcolm had no reason to perform this action at the time of recording, yet his wider perception allows him to do so now. This sequence, devoted to the power of sound to carry information, becomes part of his efforts to process his trauma. Malcolm's ability to do so and realise that he too is a ghost demonstrates the extent to which he wants to belong in his own home, yet cannot understand the apparent distance between himself and his wife. Through his work with Cole, and the sound-based disclosures made possible through recordings, Malcolm learns the truth and can find his way out of the past in which he is stuck.

Similarly, audio-visual technology reveals the truth regarding Kyra (Mischa Barton), the first ghost that Cole actively helps, through a combination of silence and sound effects. Having met Kyra in his bedroom, Cole travels to her wake. The indistinct dialogue, muted sounds and shuffling of people act as elements of auditory setting to code this sequence as

funereal. The intentional hush contrasts with the abject silence of Kyra's room, and the absence of sound is almost deafening. Kyra communicates through haptic means, using touch and gestures, rather than speaking, as if abiding by the respectful quiet of the setting (Fig 99).

Figure 99: Kyra passes on the videotape.

Kyra gives Cole a videotape, which Cole passes on to Kyra's father (Greg Wood). He watches one of her home videos in which Kyra filmed a skit with her puppets. The tape captures her voice, yet Kyra remains off-screen since the puppet theatre fills the frame (Fig 100). This disembodied voice from the past foreshadows her ghostly existence in the present, through its severance of the body and the voice, keeping Kyra in the acousmatic space ruled by the supernatural. When her mother arrives, Kyra feigns sleep.

Figure 100: The TV shows one of Kyra's puppet shows.

The silence in the room is only broken by the sound of a spoon hitting a dish. This is a normal household sound, and should not be out of context, yet the sound effect becomes dissonant as the video reveals weedkiller being stirred into the soup. The silence in the room makes the stirring appear louder, and its dominance in the soundscape draws attention to the physical action causing the sound effect (Fig 101). It is unsurprising that the revelation comes through audio-visual technology, and Kyra bridges the space between her life and death using the videotape. While her purpose is very different from that of Samara in *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002), it underlines the supernatural dominance of the audio-visual space, with ghosts able to replay moments of the past, thus destabilising the present.

Figure 101: Kyra's camera captures the weedkiller being added to the soup.

The irony of *The Sixth Sense* is that the film sold itself on the 'reveal' moment, that Cole can "see dead people". The emphasis is placed upon the physical sense of sight, privileged in the West as the dominant mode of experience. Yet Malcolm recommends that Cole focuses on his hearing to rid himself of the ghosts by listening to them. This is unsurprising since Curtis notes that "[h]aunting stimulates other senses; it revalidates touch and hearing and plays on anxieties that result from the sense being in conflict" (2008: 24). While Cole sees and hears spirits, those without this ability experience the haunting in a tactile way, with characters shivering, or adding more clothing, their breath visible in the cooling air. In all cases, the moment of supernatural contact occurs through a perceivable experience, such as a drop in temperature or a sudden sound. These moments involve the interaction between the body and its environment, either through the reception of sound waves, or sensations against the skin. It is apt that the supernatural in *The Sixth Sense* can be represented in such a material way and is legible through the use of sound.

This legibility through sound is supported by the fact the audience has been subconsciously listening to ghosts throughout the film through the use of distorted samples of dialogue within the soundscape (Van Elferen 2012: 61). These samples are played backwards, with added reverb, and some of them are played before the dialogue they sample to create "a barely perceptible sonic premonition of the future" (2012: 61). As discussed earlier, the soundscape also contains "hundreds of human sighs" that allow for an aural perception of the ghosts, even if they are not on-screen (2012: 61). This use of the

disembodied voice encompasses the spirit of the acousmêtre. These are discordant voices, disembodied from the speaker through the process of sampling, and reveal the domination of the audio-visual space by the dead. They lack a direct on-screen source, again through sampling, yet they also are not clearly positioned off-screen, and this liminality demonstrates the equation between the acousmatic space and the supernatural. As Van Elferen explains, technology emphasises "the temporal and spatial dislocation generated by sound recording" to underline the disembodiment of the spectral, though the use of vocals in the samples reminds us these ghosts were once human (2012: 61). It is this humanity that prompts Malcolm's advice.

These whispers are also part of the prior claim of the dead to the space, yet sound design also reveals this claim is not always a permanent one. The disembodied whispers are absent from the scene in which Malcolm finally understands the truth about his death and can move on. The crackling of the fire in the hearth provides the background ambience, replacing the breathy voices of the dead with warm sounds associated with the central gathering space of the home, here located in the living room, rather than the basement. This subtly reinforces the idea of community within *The Sixth Sense*, and that community may include both the living and the dead. It also reveals the dead have the agency to move on, releasing their grip on their chosen spaces, which allows the space to be brought into the present. Once the dead vacate these spaces, the living within them are no longer the weird element as these spaces can now exist within the present and into the future.

Previously, Cole has gotten stuck on what he *sees*, often leaving the ghosts before he hears what they have to say. Having followed Malcolm's advice, he adopts an acoustemological approach, in which he prioritises what he *hears*. Many of the instances of sonic spectrality rely on the use of sound—even when that involves silence. During Cole's revelation to Lynn that he speaks to the dead, the background sounds drop away to emphasise the conversation. This is unsettling since it removes the ambient soundscape that places the audience within a daytime city traffic jam. The absence of sound effects juxtaposes with the visual content of the frame, highlighting the dislocation between sight and sound that lies at the heart of sonic spectrality. In a film so concerned with communication between the living and the dead, it is unsurprising that it emphasises sound as the main method of engaging with the supernatural. This conversation marks Lynn's acceptance of Cole's abilities, and the disclosure of his secret marks a newfound ability to belong both within the family unit and wider society, which is followed by a scene in which a ghost coaches him on his lines for a school play. Here, *listening* has become the route to belonging, allowing Cole to co-exist with

both the living and the dead, and it is this that makes *The Sixth Sense* the most hopeful of the supernatural films in this thesis.

It is instructive to compare *The Sixth Sense* and *Stir of Echoes* since both films were released in 1999 and explore both the wider perception required to see or hear ghosts, and the greater acceptance of the presence of the dead within the urban space. Both films feature a psychic child, although Jake (Zachary David Cope) readily accepts his abilities and welcomes Tom (Kevin Bacon) into *his* psychic world. The ghost does not speak, although she bridges the gap with Tom through a musical motif, the song 'Paint it Black' by The Rolling Stones, playing on a radio during her murder. Meanwhile, Cole seeks acceptance from his mother, and the faint nature of ambient traffic sounds during his confession underlines his sense of isolation; these sounds reach a more natural volume once Cole reconciles with Lynn. In both films, the psychic child finds acceptance, although it is Cole who finds a space to belong in wider society through the additional community he finds by communicating with the dead. In both films, the psychic's abilities lead to collaboration *with* the dead, rather than competing with them for space.

The situation of both films within cities reflects the greater opportunity for community-building in an urban area, given the higher population density. *The Sixth Sense* references this population density among the dead with the subtle use of supernatural voices throughout the soundscape. This also highlights their prior existence in the space, which suggests a stronger claim to belonging within it than the living. The film promotes the importance of listening to the dead as a means of helping them and thus encouraging them to vacate their spaces, yet this use of the voice reflects how prevalent this supernatural community is. Elsewhere, the film is much more explicit in its use of sound to support the ongoing haunting of Cole, with the disembodied voice used to place the ghost in the off-screen space. This use of the voice allows the ghost to continue to harangue Cole, even when he cannot see them, underscoring the inherent difficulty presented by sound; as Van Elferen notes, a person can close their eyes in the face of a terrifying creature, yet they cannot close their ears (2012: 26). This places the dead in a superior position to Cole, again suggesting their greater claim to the space. Yet by listening to them, Cole is still able to help them to find a way to either co-exist with the living or to leave. This proactive approach to the dead is a very different attitude than that of the *Insidious* films. These films see the dead consigned to their own realm, named the Further, and its distorted use of sound demonstrates its refusal to obey the rules of time and space. The haunting is provoked by incursions into their space by characters capable of astral projection, who become examples of the living intruding upon

spaces in which they do not belong. The desire of the living to explore, and the desire of the dead to belong once more within the world of the living removes any possibility for community or collaboration.

"It's not your house that's haunted": Hearing Ghosts in *Insidious* and *Insidious: Chapter 2*

The Lambert family move to a new house in the suburbs. Son Dalton has an accident while exploring in the attic. The following day, he falls into a coma. Strange things happen around the house and Renai (Rose Byrne) sees intimidating figures. After finding an inhuman bloodied handprint on Dalton's bedsheet, Renai insists they move house, where she again sees mysterious figures. She and her mother-in-law, Lorraine (Barbara Hershey), bring a medium, Elise, into the house. Elise explains that Dalton can astrally travel, an ability inherited from his father, Josh. Dalton's spirit body is now trapped in the Further, so named because it is beyond the reaches of this world, and Josh must access his long-repressed ability to retrieve Dalton. In doing so, a supernatural figure known as the Bride in Black steals Josh's body. The Bride kills Elise and, in *Chapter 2*, the Lambert family move in with Lorraine. The real Josh communicates with Renai from the Further by playing the piano. In a reversal of the first film, Dalton enters the Further to recover Josh, who destroys the Bride to protect his family.

As in *The Sixth Sense* and *The Amityville Horror* remake, the *Insidious* ghosts are corporeal, played by actors within the same physical space as the protagonists. This lends them a more tangible aspect than CGI ghosts, but it also impacts the sound design, since the 'ghosts' interact with the set design much as the human characters do. The two films are rich in their use of sound, but I prioritise examples in which sound is an intrinsic part of supernatural activity. I argue that the issue of belonging is complicated in these films since the desire to 'possess' centres upon Dalton; rather than the house being held in the past by the dead, Dalton is held in a timeless realm, preventing him from participating in the present. The film's marketing focused on this deviation from haunted house narratives, with the tagline proclaiming, "It's not the house that's haunted". In these films, sound design belies the existence of ghosts within the house even before Dalton's extended disappearance into the Further. As seen in *Paranormal Activity*, in which the matriarch's experiments with the occult invited a demonic entity into this world, Dalton's incursions into the Further invite its inhabitants into the world of the living. This shift in focus shows that the living were

originally the weird element that did not belong in the occult or supernatural space they entered, prompting the subsequent haunting. Elise even describes the Further as a place "not meant for the living". I argue this positioning of the living as weird supports the anxiety about the ability to belong within haunted house films, but this anxiety encroaches into audio-visual space, as evidenced by the ghosts' domination of technology, thus drawing the *Insidious* films into alignment with *Poltergeist* and *The Ring* in their expression of unconscious fears about the reach of consumer technology. Rather than being haunted by *The Amityville Horror*, the *Insidious* films are haunted by *Poltergeist* and its use of alternate dimensions and technology as a communication aid between them.

Technology in these films is used to both detect and amplify supernatural transmissions, and it becomes a method of communication, although the sounds are frequently caused by the interaction between the supernatural and technology. This supports the greater access to consumer technology in this period, characterised in these films through burglar alarms, children's toys, baby monitors, and record players. There is a degree of financial fantasy in these two films, exhibited by the ability of a single mother to afford Josh's childhood home on a nursing salary, and the ease with which the Lambert family move house, though this superficial financial security becomes irrelevant in the fight to rescue first Dalton and then Josh from the Further. The desire to belong is altered in these films to become a quest to preserve identity in the face of the supernatural onslaught, although the eviction of the living from their body by the dead becomes an alternative perspective of the domestic desire to belong present in the films in this thesis.

The section first explores how the films deal with the point of audition, before examining the sound effect that announces the demon's arrival. It next discusses the inherently reactive nature of acousmatic sounds, before examining the representation of a ghost that moves in and out of the acousmatic space. Next, the section explores how the Law of Proximity helps viewers to interpret sound effects, guiding the creation of the haunting for the audience. The section then discusses the use of distorted sound in the Further to highlight its unusual use of time and space, which differs from the world of the living, before focusing upon how sound is used to characterise the communications from and with the dead. Finally, the section discusses the proposition that acousmatic space *is* supernatural space, with haunting intrinsically linked to filmmaking.

One issue with supernatural films is communicating *who* experiences the phenomena, as discussed regarding George in *The Amityville Horror*. Characters hearing the same auditory disturbances as the audience allows for a shared experience of sonic spectrality.

Insidious uses two methods of showing the point of audition. The first involves recognisable reactions to sound, such as calling out or physically moving, which generates the eerie by withholding visual confirmation of the sound's origin. Determining the source of the sound may dispel the eerie, particularly if the source is understandable within a home, such as Renai hearing piano music coming from an empty music room, before realising the radio is the source. The second use of the point of audition combines a tight close-up with an off-screen sound. In *Insidious*, Dalton is in the attic. A strange clicking sound begins off-screen and Dalton turns towards the camera. A close-up of his face shows his eyes widening in fear, though Wan withholds the reverse shot so the audience never sees the sound's origin (Fig 102). This is also a moment of 'added value', where the sound adds more meaning to the image. Watching Dalton's facial expression without sound clarifies *something* scared him, yet the menacing sound effect deepens his distress. Having Dalton look towards the camera also places the invisible agent in the same segment of off-screen cinematic space as the audience, supporting the conceit that the dead in these films lurk in the audio-visual realm.

Figure 102: Dalton looks towards the source of the sound in Insidious.

This confusing sound announces the demon's presence in both films. It is difficult to identify the individual components of the sound effect. The clicking implies an insectoid creature, while it sounds like both a package being broken open and something being stretched. It is unclear if it is a vocalisation or the movement of body parts and the difficulty associated with distinguishing the individual elements means that not only do we not know the identity of the presence, we do not know the *nature* of it. The creature is only glimpsed in the human world before its full appearance in the Further, creating a disconnect between its fleeting visual appearances and extended sonic interludes.

It implies the eerie agent is also weird, complicating the argument that it is the living that do not belong in houses claimed by the dead. Yet this creature is in this world purely for Dalton, who transgressed into the creature's world, thus drawing his attention. This explanation for the creature's presence softens its potential to be weird. Unlike Cole, whose psychic abilities allow him to find a new form of community, Dalton's psychic abilities have drawn the attention of dangerous powers. The insectoid sound also works like the flies buzzing in *The Amityville Horror*, standing in as an aural marker for the Further, reflecting the sonic 'weight' of the Further and its proximity to the living.

Both approaches to the point of audition rely upon acousmatic sounds, which by their nature are provocative, prompting a physical reaction from a character. This makes the ghostly forces that create the sounds more powerful, since the living can only ever react to the actions of the dead. This also appears in *The Sixth Sense* since Cole can only respond to the requests of the dead and cannot initiate actions himself. In *Chapter 2*, Tucker (Angus Sampson), Spex (Leigh Whannell), Lorraine (Barbara Hershey) and Carl (Steve Coulter) are inside Parker Crane's childhood house. Scratching fills the soundtrack, yet the framing shows it is not generated by the characters. The sound prompts Tucker to investigate an empty bookcase, and he raps on the wood, creating a visualised sound (Fig 103). Two loud, clear knocks respond with the same resonance as those made by Tucker, implying they also come from the bookcase. Yet the source remains acousmatic, prompting questions about the nature of the agent doing the knocking.

Figure 103: Tucker knocks on the bookcase in Chapter 2.

This sequence draws upon the historical context of spirit communication through the basic 'code' of a single knock for 'yes' and two knocks for 'no'.[11] The pair of double knocks produces an aural conundrum since Tucker's double rap opens the dialogue with a negative term, and the entity responds in kind. This double negative ultimately produces a positive—the supernatural force mirrors Tucker's actions, revealing the presence of an intelligent agent, capable of independent actions. A single answering knock could be attributed to a plausible explanation, but two defined knocks affirm a presence. While this revelatory use of sound leads to the discovery of Parker's murder victims, it is never clear who or what replied to Tucker's knocks, or why. Withholding the agent's identity means that the eerie is not dispelled, ensuring the supernatural space retains its power within the narrative.

Yet the ghosts do not always remain off-screen. In one sequence in *Insidious*, a ghost moves in and out of the acousmatic space, demonstrating the permeability of the boundary between the world of the living and the Further. A long take follows Renai around the new house while piano music plays on the record player. She goes outside and the camera remains on her through the window, moving the entire domestic space off-screen and into the acousmatic space. While the musical soundtrack lies beyond the scope of this chapter, this use of diegetic music is important because it represents an interaction of a supernatural figure with the material world. The music changes to Tiny Tim's 1968 rendition of 'Tiptoe Through the Tulips' and, when combined with running footsteps and loud high-pitched chuckling, these disembodied sounds create an atmosphere of mischief, rather than menace. Renai sees a small figure and pairing the sounds with the shots of a boy in antiquated clothing supports the assumption that the figure is a child from an earlier century, mirroring the 1929 origin of the song (Fig 104). This contrasts with the threatening 'clicking' sound associated with the antagonist, demonstrating the range of supernatural beings within the *Insidious* universe.

[11] Both the Cock Lane Affair of 1762 in London and the hoax perpetrated by the Fox sisters in New York state in 1848 saw the living claim to communicate with the dead through this simple system of knocks. See Roger Clarke (2012) for a fuller description of these events.

Figure 104: The ghost dances beside the record player in Insidious.

The links between sounds and images can also be understood using the Law of Proximity. In the opening sequence of *Chapter 2*, a younger Elise (Lindsay Seim) opens the closet and reaches her hand inside. We hear a hiss then a slashing sound, and Elise pulls back her arm to reveal claw marks on the exposed skin (Fig 105). The brain links the hiss and the slash to think of a large cat, while the subsequent visual confirms this interpretation through the claw marks. Dzuban's sound design in this brief scene draws upon the primal nature of the sounds and the visual to underscore the predatory nature of the figure stalking young Josh (Garrett Ryan). Locating the entity in the closet references cultural associations with monsters in closets, reinforced by the sound effects, while harking back to the closet as a portal to the other side in *Poltergeist*.

Figure 105: The claw marks on Elise's arm in Chapter 2.

Strangely, this use of anachronistic animal sounds is not continued in the soundscape of the Further, which instead emphasises its distortion of time and space. Josh's first entry into the Further is marked by the use of sound; a metronome adds temporality to the Further,

a realm outside of known time and space. It is this description of the Further that leads Marko Lukić and Tijana Parezanović to see the Further as a Foucauldian heterotopia, a place "clearly delineated from the ordinary sites of everyday reality and not superimposable upon them" (2016: 28). Seeing the Further as a heterotopia initially separates the supernatural space from the domestic space, yet it also transforms the domestic space *into* a heterotopia since the Further is the human world's dark double. The Further's set design physically recreates the familiar world, while the sound design amplifies and exacerbates the distortions of the domestic space, particularly through the use of muffled sound effects and reverb on vocalisations.

Yet Elise proves that communication between the spaces is possible, if unorthodox, since her voice becomes distorted and disembodied once Josh enters the Further (Fig 106). The content of her speech is unimportant since the focus is upon *how* technology alters the vocal track to reflect the nature of the Further. Her vocals are double-layered, with each layer played at a different pitch and tempo. This dual vocal is an aural indicator that Elise has sonic power in both worlds, even if she cannot physically enter the Further. The metronome becomes a muffled pulse on the soundtrack, acting as a bridge between the two realms; Elise only stops its ticking once Josh has entered the Further. This muffled pulse is important since the soundscape in the Further is devoid of elements of auditory setting, and no ambient noise allows the audience to 'place' where Josh is within time or space. His voice echoes when he is 'outside' the houses in the Further, indicating the hollow nature of the Further. Both the incessant whispers and tortured screams of the dead surround the living characters, reflecting their disorientation within the Further while highlighting their status as the weird element that does not belong. In *Chapter 2*, Dalton takes his string can telephone into the Further to help him find his way back out (Fig 107). The primitive communication device allows for the material communication of voices since the voice generates physical vibrations in the string. This corporeality creates the physicality that the characters need to locate themselves in time and space in order to leave.

Figure 106: Josh's astral body watches his physical body in a trance in Insidious.

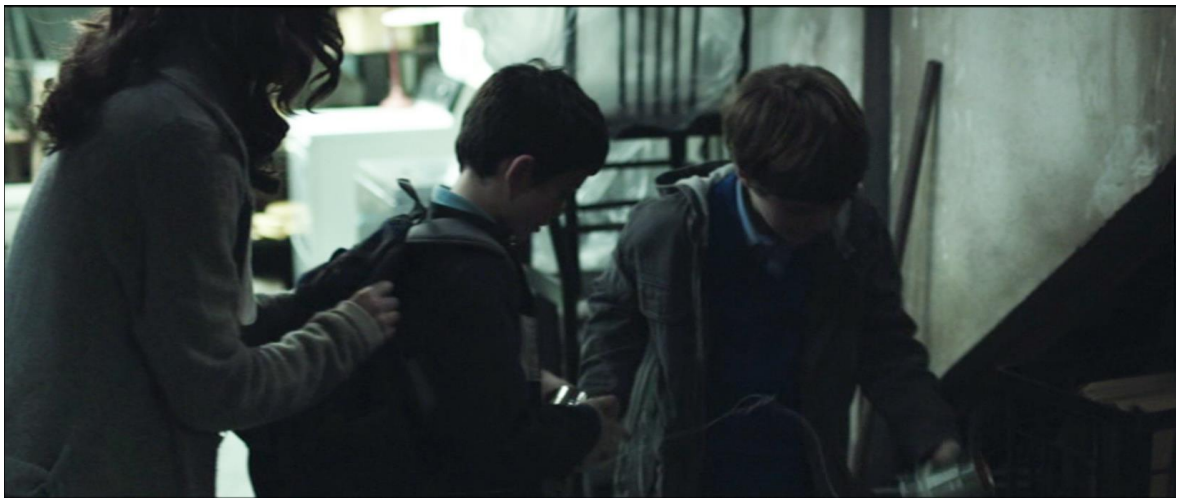

Figure 107: Dalton takes the string can telephone into the Further in Chapter 2.

For much of *Insidious*, the living passively receive communications from the dead and they cannot control when or how the ghosts make contact. The sounds associated with supernatural appearances dominate the soundscape, such as the unearthly voices heard over the baby monitor, the chuckling of the child-size ghost who changes the record, or the impatient footsteps of the ghost pacing outside the window. The soundscape of the séance in *Insidious* underscores the chaos generated when the living make a concerted effort to communicate with Dalton within the Further. It begins with visualised sounds that are associated with on-screen technology, grounding the scene in a tangible setting, such as the beep of the hospital equipment that provides a stabilising force as a regular pulse in the ambient field of sound. This is ironic given the general unfamiliarity of hospital equipment within a domestic context. Elise's heavy breathing and barely audible whispering through the gas mask is layered over the heart monitor within the ambient field (Fig 108). The heart monitor beep accelerates to match the faster whispering, showing an increase in anxiety, until

it flatlines. This marks the point at which the stability of the séance, and thus the soundscape, falls apart, and the point at which cinematic sound technology intervenes as the source of the sonic spectrality. While the demon uses the unconscious Dalton as a puppet to enact physical chaos within the room, thunder-like crashes on the soundtrack act as 'added value' to the image to provide a sense of chaos and threat. Cross' sound design switches to acousmatic space with the switch marking the point at which the supernatural enters the space.

Figure 108: The gas mask amplifies Elise's words in Insidious.

Watching the scene replayed without sound makes the value of sound design clear since the sight of actors falling about looks faintly ridiculous. In these films, sound design both supports the imagery and underscores the corporeality of the ghosts. Sounds are often created through their interplay with props, such as baby monitors, or their interaction with the set, creating footsteps and piano music. This reflects the tight relationship between set design and sound, but it also helps to locate the ghosts within the home, increasing the suspense generated by the haunting. That the ghosts often manifest through technology also reflects the ease with which the dead dominate the audio-visual space, which has as many entry and exit points as there are devices connected to it. The séance also reinforces the idea that the living provoke instances of haunting, since the demon's arrival follows their incursion into the Further, and the living remain the weird element within the Further. Yet the séance is not intended to allow communication with the dead, but rather the living *within the Further*. The gas mask amplifies the sounds of the living for the medium, and once Josh visits the Further, the need for amplification becomes clear, given the distorted soundscape of the Further.

Yet the sound design is most successful at conjuring ghosts when it relies upon acousmatic sounds like the almost-incomprehensible demonic clicking or the piano music from an empty room. Here, the acousmatic space becomes the supernatural space, and the

ghosts cross from the Further into the world of the living *through* the acousmatic space. The acousmatic space becomes the frontier between the world of the living and the Further, which also supports the argument that the off-screen space is dominated by the supernatural. This is easiest to see in *Insidious*, in which much of the haunting takes place through sound, both through its presence and absence. The absence of the elements of auditory setting outside *both* houses in the first film isolates the Lambert family within the community, reflecting the lack of such elements in both *The Amityville Horror* and *The Sixth Sense*, since the absence of traffic noises, or even people walking past the house, reflects the lack of background noise in the Further. Dalton's incursions into the Further invite the supernatural into the world of the living, and the family cannot settle in either home until the haunting is resolved.

While the family appear not to suffer overt anxiety about financial issues, with the film cutting from one house to another in the first film to skip the moving process, their ongoing inability to settle in a home through their proximity to the Further belies an unconscious difficulty in being able to belong. That the difficulties in settling are provoked by sound are telling: the aural assault of the burglar alarm, the voices over the baby monitor, and the changing of the music on the record player underscore the threat posed by the highly visible supernatural figures. These sounds emanate from the off-screen space, thus granting more agency to the ghosts through their ability to interact with the realm of the living. Following such events, the Lambert family's easy abandonment of the house stands apart from other haunted house films, such as *The Amityville Horror*, in which ownership is a personal goal of Kathy, or *The Conjuring*, in which economic pressures drive the family to buy a house with a difficult history at auction.

Emanuelle Wessels suggests that post-GFC horror is subject to the "affective economy", which "is not so much about specific fear of another collapse or economic crisis [...] Rather, it accrues meaning through lack of clear object" (2015: 512). Anxiety is all-pervading, cited as "the 'dominant' constitutive affect of post-collapse capitalism", but it has no single concrete cause, and thus the film invests in the sense that "'something' dreadful, albeit vague and undefined, is worried to be impending" (2015: 513). The lack of financial anxiety in both the *Insidious* films and the *Paranormal Activity* films appear to support this, in which the anxiety is a more generalised one caused by the haunting, rather than being due

to economic concerns.[12] In the *Insidious* films, this anxiety manifests through the use of sonic spectrality, with sound heralding the arrival of the ghosts from the off-screen space and thus further persecution of the family by them. That much of this sonic spectrality also manifests through consumer technology reflects earlier concerns about the relationship between technology and hauntings; in the *Insidious* films, the ghost in the machine strides forth into the world of the living. The soundscape within the Further best exemplifies Wessels' generalised anxiety; sounds do not echo, being instead swallowed by the infinite space of the Further, and the inability to place oneself within such an infinite space impending dread of the affective economy. Only the sound of a metronome brings a sense of time to this otherwise timeless realm in which the living are not meant to find themselves.

The Case for Sonic Spectrality

This chapter has examined the use of sound to create moments of supernatural activity, a concept I term as 'sonic spectrality', insofar as the weight of the ghostly activity rests upon the use of sound, rather than solely examining the visual. This approach is inspired by acoustemology, although the nature of filmmaking requires the approach to explore the relationship *between* the aural and the visual, rather than jettisoning the visual. This re-evaluation of the relationship between the visual and the aural allows for an understanding of *how* the supernatural is created, rather than the typical focus on what the ghost *represents*. As well as understanding the ghost in this representational fashion, following an acoustemological cue also allows for an *experience* of supernatural sound. Ideally, the pair should work in concert with one another. It is no coincidence that sound has been a contributing source of paranormal 'evidence' for parapsychology (and the less academic 'ghost hunting') since the early days of spiritualism, due to its role in the aural experience of a haunting, through sighs, disembodied voices, and knocks, captured here in sound cinema.

In exploring this sound-based approach, the theme of communication with 'the other side' links both instances of haunting but also the films themselves. Both versions of *The Amityville Horror* prioritise Ronald DeFeo's hearing of disembodied voices from the walls, while unseen presences issue guttural commands to unwelcome visitors. The 2005 film features a much stronger soundscape, though the use of buzzing in the 1979 film to denote

[12] *The Conjuring* straddles this boundary, being concerned with haunting through a sense of generalised post-GFC anxiety, while also featuring economic anxiety through its being haunted by *The Amityville Horror*.

the abject is a good example of sound design's power to evoke complex ideas. While both films emphasise visuals, with the 1979 film wedded to what's happening on screen, the 2005 film is more successful at embedding communication within its supernatural soundscape, with its emphasis upon whispers in the walls, the 'speech' achieved by the house itself, and the vocals denied to individual ghosts. The tangibility of the sounds grants a materiality to the soundscape that underlines the personhood attributed to the house, further supporting the argument that the Lutzes can never belong there. Their financial investment in a property that they cannot truly own is the most explicit engagement by these films with the precarity of home ownership and the difficulties associated with belonging in the domestic space.

Communication is also important in *The Sixth Sense* and the *Insidious* films, concerned as they are with the interaction between the living and the dead. These films differ from *The Amityville Horror* through their portrayals of active attempts to communicate with the dead, although *The Sixth Sense* explores this as a one-to-one conversation while *Insidious* sees characters employ technology to both speak to the dead and contact the living within the Further. *The Sixth Sense* offers the potential for collaboration between the living and ghosts since interactions with the dead can help the ghosts vacate their claimed space and free it up for the living. Here, we see a greater focus on the concept of community, which casts a new light on the ever-present whispers on the soundtrack. This unobtrusive sound design indicates the dead have always been in the space, yet the fact that the whispers disappear at the point that a ghost vacates his home, replaced by the crackling of a fire in the hearth, shows that the presence of the dead is not always permanent, and the living may yet gather around the hearth, the traditional heart of the home. Blurring the boundary between 'living' and 'dead' through communication can open a space for belonging.

Insidious reverses this positive potential by returning the living and dead to clearly defined spaces, though it is the encroachment by the living *into* the space of the dead that provokes the haunting. The intrusion casts the living as weird, returning the anxiety about the inability to belong in the domestic space to the haunted house narrative. Given the release of the two films in the years immediately following the GFC, it is unsurprising that these films would mark the cultural fallout of such a major financial upheaval, particularly one so connected with the ability to buy and sell homes. Yet they were also made during a period of greater consumer interaction with audio-visual technology, and in these films, the sounds made by the ghosts dominate the soundscape through consumer technology. Rasping breaths over the baby monitor, a screaming burglar alarm, or the changing of an LP on a record player allow the dead to interact with the living with consumer technology via sound. The

dead's domination of the aural domestic space recalls Samara's domination of the audio-visual space in *The Ring*. Technology reveals the omnipresence of the dead through the tangible use of sound through and by these devices.

Yet these films also emphasise the importance of the acousmatic space, here doubled with supernatural space. That many of the ghosts announce their presence or arrival through sound suggests an acoustemological root to their supernatural activity. In *The Amityville Horror*, moments of sonic spectrality remain in the acousmatic, or supernatural, space, leaving them in the territory of the eerie. While we know something is causing the sounds, due to their tangibility, we rarely know *which* presence is responsible, meaning the eerie remains at play throughout both the 1979 and 2005 films. Visualised sounds, by comparison, rarely possess the same power as acousmatic sounds since we see the cause and they are positioned as the avatars of on-screen technology that produce logical sounds. This is contrasted with the illogical nature of acousmatic sounds, such as disembodied voices or footsteps in empty rooms, created by off-screen cinematic technology. That said, when they are combined with the correct cinematography, visualised sounds can equally provoke unsettling feelings for the viewer when the identity of the agent is still withheld, as in the house blessing sequence in *The Amityville Horror*, when we do not know who (or what) closes the door. By focusing upon sound design, we do not merely see dead people, as directed by the cinematography, but we also hear them too.

Conclusion

In these films, the concept of haunting creates a cinematic spectacle since ghosts are a diegetic reality, making the 'how' of the appearance more relevant than 'if' ghosts exist. Reading the technical practices of filmmaking enables an understanding of this 'how' while also providing for new interpretations of cinematic hauntings supported by the practical elements of cinema. This approach complements existing critical work that views haunting as trauma by allowing such interpretations to be grounded in the language of cinema. This conclusion acknowledges the twin approaches taken by this thesis towards these films, before providing an overview of the three technique-based chapters, and discussing the theme of belonging alongside the perils of the economic age. Next, I explore the pervasive fears accompanying the concept of a digital otherworld, and other technology-based anxieties in these films. I then discuss the importance of the filmic language of haunting, in which the power lies in the combination of techniques, to re-centre filmmaking in Film Studies. Next, I discuss the weird and eerie in these films, before concluding with remarks about the use of space in haunted house films.

The thesis uses two frames of reading; a sociocultural lens that takes into account the wider political and social context in which these films are made, and an aesthetic lens, which focuses on the film grammar created by the techniques and practices of filmmaking. The former places the focus onto nebulous ideas of precarity and belonging, predicated on the capitalist realism that characterises the period, and which underpins the idea that it is the living that do not belong in these homes; indeed, they cannot belong in these homes since they are already claimed by the dead or the demonic. This leaves only two choices for the living, to either attempt to evict the dead by force, echoing the violent settlement of the United States itself, or to abandon the property altogether. This foreclosure of the property echoes the foreclosure of the future predicted by Mark Fisher and demonstrates the way in which the films are haunted by both the neoliberal policies of the age and the preceding films which likewise engaged with capitalist preoccupations. The sociocultural reading of the haunted house film, even with a focus on filmmaking practices, echoes the work of horror scholar Robin Wood. It is also not entirely divorced from the examination of these films as films, given the link between cinema and capitalism through film as a commercial product.

The latter focuses upon film aesthetics, exploring specific techniques relating to cinematography, set design and sound design. The particular area of interest is the use of film

space generated and used by all three disciplines, particularly when the three disciplines work together. This approach also considers how the effect of these techniques might lead to the affect on the viewer. The aesthetic approach largely evinces the sociocultural context in favour of a purely cinematic discussion that entirely prioritises the practices of filmmaking, albeit in a contextual vacuum. While I have shown how these two strands converge where necessary, with the reading of the filmic techniques dovetailing with the sociocultural reading, each approach can also be pursued independently of the other. This would produce either a sociocultural reading of the ghost in the context of the haunted neoliberal home, or a reading of the aesthetics of the haunted house to produce a grammar of the cinematic ghost. As it is, I have endeavoured to use both in an appropriate fashion.

In the chapter, 'The Supernatural Spectacle: Cinematography and the Haunted Screen', I explored how a combination of cinematographic techniques depicts supernatural activity, even when full apparitions are absent from the frame. Framing and composition techniques shift the frame and renegotiate on-screen space, returning temporality to supernatural activity through the movement of the camera or on-screen elements. Colour grading bridges the worlds of the living and the dead, with blue positioned as the supernatural colour, enforcing passivity on the living. Taken as a whole, the cinematography reveals that the living are the weird element that does not belong, and the haunting becomes the dead's attempt to assert their control of the domestic space. Even when the films appear to position the supernatural as weird, as in the *Paranormal Activity* films, the revelation that the living intruded into occult space through an engagement with demonic pacts shows that the supernatural later emerges within the world of the living *at the invitation of the living*.

In these films, technology plays a dual role, being both a tool adopted by the living to investigate the supernatural, and a mode of communication, even where that communication is one-way (as in the television). Access to digital space becomes a substitute for community, with the devices used to extend their social network while the families remain isolated. Media technology does not allow them to end the haunting, since it can only allow them to observe, reflecting the enforced passivity represented by blue colour grading. Yet the dead control digital space using soon-to-be obsolete technological devices, reflecting their status as 'out of time'. The ghosts resurrect old fears around the messages brought into the home by television, updating them to include concerns about the speed of technological change.

The films in the chapter 'Supernatural Set Design: Ghosts and the Built Environment' are concerned with the "body of images" of the house, to use Gaston Bachelard's term. Assembling the separate images of the house describes the house's 'soul'. Changing the

images, through altering the house or its décor, causes distortions in that soul, manifesting in these films as ghosts or returning figures from the past. The distortions are expressed through the set design taxonomy, and the evolving set design records the clash between the living and the dead, making the haunting visual through the ongoing changes to the set. The focus upon antiques within the set design, with all three films featuring antique furniture as part of the denotative set, also aligns the living with the dead through the propensity of the living to look backwards. This both points to an inherently nostalgic mode of the living, looking to what has gone before, while also visualising the Gothic's interest in history and the past within the set design. It indicates the sluggish nature of culture under neoliberalism, while underscoring the financial accessibility of second-hand furniture compared to newer, contemporary forms. Thus, antique furniture visualises the grip of the past over the present within these houses, something often common to Gothic space where "the tyranny of the past [comes to] stifle the hopes of the present" (Baldick 1993: xix).

The struggle for control of the domestic space prompts questions about who belongs in it, and as in the cinematography chapter, the set design positions the living as the weird element that does not belong. Interactions with the set reveal their difficulty of being in the space, in part through the financial precarity implied by their home occupation, and the films become a negotiation for the right to occupy. The films in this chapter also treat haunting as a problem to be solved; the living are largely unaware of their status as the un-belonging element. Therefore, their desire to eject the dead becomes an attempt to release the home from the grip of the past to make it available for present habitation. Both *Stir of Echoes* (David Koepp, 1999) and *The Conjuring* (James Wan, 2013) see the ghost leave the property, indicating that un-belonging is a temporary state, yet the ongoing presence of the dead in each film prompts the potential for the living to co-exist with the dead if the dead release their claim on the property and share the space, rather than dominate it. The living can belong in their chosen domestic space by working *with* the dead to stabilise the house's body of images, here expressed through set design.

In the chapter, 'Hearing is Believing: Hauntings in Sound Cinema', I argued that an examination of the use of sound design shows that acousmatic space, or off-screen space from which sound emanates, is central to the creation of the supernatural in haunted house films. I used the term 'sonic spectrality' to describe the use of sound to create moments of supernatural activity since many ghosts announce their presence or arrival through sound, suggesting an acoustemological root to their activity. I argued in favour of an acoustemological approach to films that honours the relationship between the aural and the

visual. Sound became the means of communication with 'the other side' in these films, with disembodied voices, the buzzing of flies, the creaking of the set, the silence of individual ghosts, and dialogue used to depict such interactions with the dead. The tangibility of sound effects underlines the materiality of the haunting, also experienced through the films in the preceding chapters. The materiality also reinforces the claim of the dead to the space, suggesting that the living cannot belong there, which is often combined with the set design to describe the dimensions of, or materials used within, the built environment.

While *The Amityville Horror* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1979) is the quintessential economic horror film and explicitly engages with the financial precarity of home ownership, the *Insidious* films (James Wan, 2010-2013) sidestep this concern to focus on the interaction between the dead and technology. Not only do the dead claim domestic space, but they also manipulate audio-visual space, reflecting the technology-based hauntings of the cinematography chapter. Across the films, the removal or lack of communication technology isolates the families, while the use of sound involved with technological devices reveals the omnipresence of the dead, and therefore their greater claim to belong. Only *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) offers a positive potential outcome by showing collaboration between the living and the dead, with the change in ambient noise from subtle whispers to a crackling fire marking the transfer of the ownership of the space from the dead to the living.

All the films in this chapter involve children to a greater or lesser extent, and children in *The Sixth Sense* and the *Insidious* films play a central role in the haunting since their increased perceptive abilities leave them more open to supernatural experiences. Samara in *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002) becomes the logical extension of these psychic children, whose abilities enable her to create a vehicle of haunting through the videotape. That she encodes herself onto a material object associated with cinema is telling, given the emphasis on the techniques of cinematography to enact the haunting. The children's psychic abilities align them with the technology in the films since they broadcast to and receive transmissions from the supernatural. These considerations answered my first two research questions; "In what ways does the representation of the haunting depend upon the technicalities of filmmaking?" and "How do the technologies of cinema work to visualise Gothic space and its supernatural inhabitants?"

The films in this thesis coincide with a new economic age, offering a different flavour of haunting compared with earlier titles. Family homes in cities, suburbs, remote rural areas, and the bayou replace the rambling country houses of earlier haunted house films. These films resurrect old Gothic fears of isolation by separating protagonists from their neighbours

or the wider community, and the inability of these families to integrate with their communities leaves them vulnerable; the lack of a social network is sometimes replaced with a reliance on technology, or bringing outsiders into the haunting, such as demonologists, hoodoo workers, or priests. The films feed into the cultural imaginary of the United States while simultaneously revealing the unconscious anxiety about the ability of these white protagonists to belong on contested land. Such a focus on haunting seems almost inevitable in the United States, where "[i]n another context, setting out to build a haunted house would be absurd. However, in America, where every white house displaces an Indian one [...] it may be inevitable" (Bergland 2000: 60). Only *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982) and *The Amityville Horror* are explicit in their engagement with discussions about the original occupants of the land. *Poltergeist* privileges the deceased prospectors as the original inhabitants, rather than the Indigenous population centred by *The Amityville Horror* remake, the only one of these films that openly engages with the crimes of the nation's foundation.

The anxiety about belonging was perhaps inevitable, given the committal of atrocities during a period of rapid expansion, and for Johan Höglund, "[e]ven a cursory examination of US history shows that since its inception it has grown tremendously in terms of both territory and power" (2014: 2). The fear this growth is unsustainable or ill-founded fuels anxiety about belonging. The economic precarity of the 1970s prompts this anxiety to emerge within haunted house cinema, although *The Amityville Horror* was based on Jay Anson's *The Amityville Horror* (1977), a supposedly non-fiction account of the alleged haunting. That these dramas play out within the domestic space is unsurprising given the link between built space and the Gothic. As Fred Botting noted, "[a]rchitecture [...] signalled the spatial and temporal separation of the past and its values from those of the present" (1996: 3). Yet in these haunted houses, the ongoing existence of the dead within the property blocks such a separation. Many ghosts make their presence felt through architecture—here, through the set.

Yet the concept of belonging holds the potential for an individual to be able to do so if they can integrate with those who belong there. *The Skeleton Key* (Iain Softley, 2005) provides an interesting example since the hoodoo practitioners continue to exist on the land through their use of hoodoo, a syncretic practice created by disparate groups of marginalised peoples bound by their common experiences at the hands of white interlopers. The practitioners use hoodoo to haunt bodies, rather than the house, and the 'ghosts' are ostensibly still living. In other films in this thesis, those characters who work *with* the ghost, integrating into *their* world, also find a sense of belonging. The forced ejection of Bathsheba from the house in *The Conjuring* holds the possibility for integration with the remaining

ghosts since they are not dangerous, and the family on which the film is based did so for several years; the 'based on a true story' motif underscores the diegetic reality of these ghosts.

A struggle to occupy or to belong in these films belies an inability to 'fit', a search for community, and wider feelings of being unsettled. This search for community also serves a dual purpose, with newcomers isolated within their local environment in typical Gothic fashion, but also disconnected from their home's previous occupants. This schism in continuity within the home reflects the schism in the wider community caused by death or violence among its inhabitants, a schism these newcomers are often unable to mend. Emanuelle Wessels considered such a generalised sense of dread, provoked by nothing singular but experienced in a range of ways, to be a product of the global financial crisis (2015). Yet the appearance of such a sensation in earlier films suggests the social and economic conditions since the 1970s prompted such dread before the global financial crisis, no doubt following the neoliberal policies that caused cultural stagnation on both sides of the Atlantic.

Yet beyond a Woodian equation between these films and the economic conditions surrounding their production, these films also coincide with the dawn of the Digital Age. The public debut of the internet and 'cyberspace' in 1991 created new digital frontiers, and the resurrection of earlier social concerns about television and its impact on the family recall fears about an "electronic elsewhere" (Sconce 2000: 126). When such fears encompass other forms of audio-visual technology, such an "electronic elsewhere" becomes a digital version of the Further, defying physical boundaries of time and space, and capable of preserving the dead as pixels and megabits in the swirl of digital information. Cinema shares this flexible concept of space, with a continual renegotiation of on-screen and off-screen space by the movement of the frame demonstrating the porosity of digital boundaries. With sound design able to expand the limits of the space beyond what is seen, these films occupy a cinematic version of this electronic elsewhere. Even the temporality of this space is called into question through the use of editing to manipulate time, although this lies beyond this discussion.

The tendency in these films from 2007 onwards to position demons within these narratives, as well as or instead of ghosts, coincides with the faster development of digital technology, particularly surrounding internet accessibility. That the intrusion of the living into any realm associated with the dead or demonic might provoke a haunting speaks to anxieties about who, or what, may be encountered in unmoderated digital realms. One can only wonder how horror films will engage with such questions regarding the Metaverse;

Samara almost pre-empts such debates, given her appearance as a hellish avatar. These concerns recall twentieth-century fears about what the television might beam into the domestic space while reflecting contemporary anxieties about online material. While these films do not directly engage with a specific technology and its associated perils, they are concerned with a broader, non-specific worry about connection to digital spaces. This recalls the points made by Wessels about the unfocused form of anxiety or dread produced by the affective economy. Where Wessels relates this dread to the global financial crisis, I argue it also relates to the anxiety produced by the speed and complexity of the digital age, especially where the use of cinematic technology creates and sustains these hauntings.

In the films in this thesis, the living use technology to document or understand the haunting, and it is highlighted on screen within the set as a visible symbol of affluence. As noted earlier, "the television and computer now stand in for the hearth of antiquity" (Augé 2008: vii). Moving the hearth, represented by the furnace, into the basement is symptomatic of this replacement of the hearth by technology; technology lies at the heart of the household, not a source of warmth. The dead often turn technology against the living, where it becomes a doorway or a means of communication, thus disrupting the Gothic binary that technology represents civilisation while ghosts are primitive. Using audio-visual technology to see and hear ghosts within these films reflects my approach that reading these films from a primary standpoint of their technical discipline reveals the mechanisms used to create and sustain the haunting. The close-ups of viewers sitting in darkened rooms, mere inches from the television while they watch Samara's videotape, demonstrate the power of filmmaking to visualise a haunting through technological means, both diegetically and behind the camera (Fig 109).

Figure 109: Rachel (left) and Aidan (right) watch Samara's tape in The Ring.

This power of filmmaking to render space on screen returns me to considering the technical practices of filmmaking that, when taken together, create a filmic language of haunting, returning ghosts to discussions about the haunted house film. The tendency of scholarship to focus upon spectrality through trauma overlooks the concept of the

supernatural as ‘real’, whatever form ‘real’ might take. Hauntings do not demand an either/or binary, exploring stories of haunting as either metaphor or literal. Ghosts exist in the liminal space of both/and between these poles, allowing scholars to examine haunting across a wider spectrum. This thesis has focused upon the literal end of that spectrum given the insistence of these films that ghosts are a part of their diegetic reality. Yet I have explored the technical aspects to re-centre filmmaking within Film Studies and demonstrate how the language of film shapes the representation of cinematic haunting. Future work may apply similar textual readings of filmmaking techniques through a lens of metaphorical haunting to examine how these mechanisms also visualise spectrality.

While each chapter discussed how that specific technical practice created and maintained the haunting, we find the true cinematic haunting within the *combination* of the technical aspects of filmmaking. Cinematography enables filmmakers to render hauntings on screen, using lighting and framing to direct the gaze while withholding and revealing supernatural activity through camera movements. Framing and composition create a container for the visible effects of haunting, often enacted through the movement of props or changes in the set. Lighting or movement *within* the set guides the gaze to the correct part of the set to highlight the supernatural activity. Cinematography and set design share a symbiotic relationship to create the supernatural spectacle; the screen needs to have supernatural activity to show, and the set design needs a way to visually organise and present the changes within it to show the haunting as it occurs. Yet these cinematic hauntings also rely on sound design to aurally shape and colour the haunting, extending the haunting into the off-screen space. Here, the ghost may either interact with the set to produce sounds such as footsteps or create its own sounds, like the disembodied voice. Sound design also aurally illustrates the movement of on-screen objects within the set indicated by framing and lighting. These technologies of cinema create and maintain the haunting, in which ghosts are seen, heard, and their presence felt through their interaction with the material environment, which links these tales to the centuries-old literature detailing ghost encounters involving the senses of sight, hearing, and touch. Given the use of these senses to build the experience felt by the viewer, this approach of cinematic haunting could see the supernatural take its place within Affect Studies, with the focus switched from the experience of haunting by the diegetic characters to the experience of haunting by the audience.

These technical languages also work across the film’s running time. For example, *Poltergeist*’s use of the television as the establishing shot reveals that the dead occupied the space before the living, and the narrative supports this reading later in the film when the

family discover the house stands on a cemetery. Far from contradicting existing critical work, taking this approach to read filmic techniques *first* offers both new and supplementary readings of these films; new, since many of these films have not been read in such a way, and supplementary, since this approach supports more theoretically driven analyses.

My third research question asked, "How do the weird and the eerie as modes emerge within and affect the representation of the haunting?" In Fisher's work, these two modes are preoccupied with space, something also intrinsic to both the haunted house and the wider Gothic, with the latter especially focused upon "a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space" (Baldick 1993: xix). Fisher's weird sees something or someone erupt into a space in which they cannot belong, and the inherent juxtaposition between the new arrival and the space creates the weird. The eerie is concerned with who or what is in the space, who should not be, or what is missing that should be present. This 'who or what' question is intrinsic to the mode. Their preoccupation with space makes them ideal modes with which to read the technical languages of filmmaking, which are likewise dependent upon and cognizant of the use of space. Yet contrary to what Fisher believes, these films show that the eerie can and does apply to the supernatural, as long as one accepts that ghosts are a diegetic reality, but the characters are not *expecting* to encounter them, even if they believe in them. The audience is aware the characters are within a haunted space, though the combination of this awareness and the technical practices of filmmaking enables a continuation of the eerie since not everything turns out to be supernatural. As for the weird, reading the film's *narrative* first shows that the ghosts are what does not belong, yet I argue it is much more valuable to read it the other way and read the *cinematic languages* first. This provides a new perspective that supports the narrative while prioritising the fact these are *films* and an awareness of their technical construction honours the art of cinema while offering alternative reading models. Taking this approach and reading the technical languages first reveals the unconscious anxiety about the ability to belong in these films.

The inability to belong is due to the unwillingness of the supernatural to relinquish their claim on the space. As such, the past continues to haunt the house, less as a returning spectre and more as a *resident* ghost. Yet this still raises hauntological questions about the ongoing existence of the past within the present. Even the films themselves are haunted by earlier cinematic hauntings. Those films set in suburbs or rural locations cannot escape the shadow cast by *The Amityville Horror* and *Poltergeist*. These locales also appear in the 'American Dream', the site of the single-family home, yet such homes prove unruly. The supernatural inhabitants, whose occupancy pre-dates the family, highlight the unavailability

of these properties, questioning the viability of the suburbs. By comparison, the films located in cities (*The Ring*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Stir of Echoes*) escape the long shadow of these two earlier films. While the design of the houses and apartments in these films precludes any visual similarity to Ocean Drive or Cuesta Verde, the difference runs deeper. In these films, the protagonists investigate the haunting to help the ghost move on. This reflects the greater possibility for connection when living in a city, given the higher population density, but also expands the concept of community to include the dead.

With the weird and the eerie, Fisher moved away from psychoanalysis as a preferred tool for reading horror films. Despite this, the horror film is intrinsically bound up with the language of psychoanalysis following the work of Robin Wood. Yet widening the scope to include his socioeconomic reading approach can ground the films in their production context. I have built upon Wood's interest in set design to examine other technical practices since it is valuable to examine both the method and context of the film's production to uncover additional information. Future work could follow a technique-based approach to understand the creation of haunting through music, costume design, performance, editing, and post-production; all are vital parts of the filmmaking process, and while they work in concert with these practices, they have fallen beyond my scope.

The films in this thesis span from 1979 to 2015, while the period between 2015 and 2023, the time of writing was dominated by sequels and streaming-based content, such as *The Haunting of Hill House* (Mike Flanagan, 2018) and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (Mike Flanagan, 2019) on Netflix. While *The Conjuring* centred the haunted house in the narrative, all but one of the other films in this cinematic universe focuses instead on demons. This turn away from the haunted house within this franchise, as well as the cessation of production during the COVID-19 pandemic, helps to explain the paucity of Hollywood-produced haunted house films following *The Conjuring*.

I began this thesis with an idea about haunted places proposed by Henri de Certeau; "There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can 'invoke' or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in" (1988: 108). It supports the idea put forward by these films, concerned as they are with an otherworld filled with ghosts and demons that overlaps with our own, that all space is haunted, regardless of whether its inhabitants perceive it to be so. Haunted places become the only ones available to the living, since no place exists that is not haunted. This is notable given de Certeau's definition of space, in that "*space is a practiced place*" (1988: 117, emphasis in original). A place is a space given meaning by the activity within it. Haunted places are thus spaces

caught between the domestic activity of the living and the haunted activity of the supernatural and given meaning by both. This may have a geographical component, given Renée L. Bergland's assertion that building a haunted house in America may be inevitable, given the violent colonial history of the nation (2000: 60).

Whether the living belong in such places depends upon their engagement with their supernatural neighbours. These films depict characters searching for community, both beyond the walls of their home and within them. Giving aid to supernatural occupants, or evicting those causing trouble within the entire household, is the only way to bring equilibrium to the fragile community of the house. The un-belonging can be temporary, especially in those films set in cities, in which inhabitants live in greater density. Yet where the living cannot resolve these tensions with their supernatural squatters, and are themselves evicted by the dead, they find themselves unmoored, ejected from the community, and continually searching for their place in the world. This plays out within the home as a conflict between the activities of the living and the dead as both seek to 'practice' the rules of the space.

This focus upon space reflects the technical practices used to make these films, in which the practices of set design, cinematography, and sound design create, shape, and populate cinematic space with supernatural activity. The haunting is enacted by combining these techniques and technologies, visualising the mechanisms of hauntology to depict the continuing claim on the domestic space by the dead. Ghosts exert their dominance over the space by their existence beyond the borders of the frame itself, particularly lurking in the acousmatic space where they can be heard, if not seen. The cinematic space itself thus becomes haunted through this invocation of filmic spirits, something only made possible by speaking the language of cinema.

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