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Haunting the Imagination: The Haunted House as a Figure of Dark Space in American Culture

Amanda Solomon

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Haunting the Imagination: The Haunted House as a Figure of Dark Space in American Culture

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In contemporary America the haunted house appears regularly as a figure in literature, film, and tourism. The increasing popularity of the haunted house is in direct correlation with the disintegration of the home as a refuge from the harsh elements of the world. The mass media populates society with dark images and subjects, portraying America as a dark place to live. Americans create fictional narratives of terror and violence as a means of coping with their own modern horrors. Their horrors are psychologically displaced within these narratives. The haunted house is therefore a manifestation of contemporary anxieties surrounding the dissolution of the home, a symbol of the infusion of terror and violence into domestic space.

Keywords: haunted house, dark space, uncanny

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Introduction

In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," the narrator travels to the home of his childhood friend, Roderick Usher. Upon his arrival at the house, the unnamed narrator vividly expresses overwhelming feelings of dread and unease: "with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit...I looked upon the scene before me...with an utter depression of soul."¹ These disturbing impressions are provoked by the dilapidated appearance of the "mere house...the bleak walls...the vacant eye-like windows...a few rank sedges" and "a few white trunks of decayed trees."² Adding to the narrator's desolate impressions is the presence of "a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn."³ This fissure, which later widens considerably, foreshadows the eventual destruction of the House of Usher. Following the death of Roderick and his sister--the last members of the Usher line--the narrator flees from the mansion amidst a violent storm. As he watches, the house crumbles and collapses, engulfed by the deep, rank waters of the lagoon. More than the mere timbers of the house perish in the destruction: as disturbingly described by the narrator, the house is an evil, sentient entity whose "importunate and terrible influence" had "moulded the destinies of Roderick's family" for centuries.⁴ In essence, the House of Usher was destroyed from the inside out by its own dark and malignant cancer.

¹Poe, "House of Usher," 199.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 202.

⁴Ibid., 209.

Like the famous “Usher” house, the house and home of modern America may be seen as a figure of architectural uncertainty, a place which ostensibly acts as a well-groomed, domestic refuge while becoming increasingly entangled with that which is unhomely and inhospitable. Reports of murder, rape, abuse, torture and other forms of violence are the lifeblood of the mass media. One has only to glance at a newspaper or a mobile phone screen to read or hear about aggressive and horrific acts perpetrated by one human against another. While the house has always been a place of potential horror, American media broadcasts real-life horror with increasing frequency. Real crime television shows and video games promulgate this vision of violence. Consequently, the stark reality facing contemporary Americans is that the home, mankind’s last and most intimate of shelters, is in reality a modern reflection of Poe’s “House of Usher.” Through the media, the underlying tensions of the house as a place of horror are being realized. And, not only are its protective borders disintegrating, the spaces of the house have become the center of unrest and anxiety.

Although terrifying events do make up a significant portion of life experience, this is not to suggest that all of America’s homes have been transformed into horrific places. Daily life for most Americans continues on a path of strongly engrained moral values and an instinctive aversion to violence. Nevertheless, the mass media presents an asymmetrical vision of society populated with dark images and subjects. The darkest elements of human nature are often the most publicized. In his work, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic*, Mark Edmundson articulates:

It’s on the news that we learn to fear the serial killer, the molester, the abuser, the psychopath, the mad bomber, nuclear disaster, environmental catastrophe, and all of the other Gothically rendered dangers. It’s on the news that the diverse images of the Gothic coalesce into a world view. The actual experience of TV horror may be safe enough, but the result of an ongoing stream of such stuff is to hardwire anxiety into the populace.⁵

⁵Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street*, 30.

What is broadcast with consistency on the news is that which shocks viewers and triggers their fear responses. The collective image that is presented via the news and other media is that America is a dark place to live and getting darker all the time. And this image speaks, at least on some level, to the lived experience of most American viewers. The nation has experienced its share of earthquakes, floods, tornados and other natural disasters. Many even witness acts of violence in their own homes or neighborhoods. The terrorist attacks at the twin towers and the Pentagon in September of 2001 was a traumatic event shared by all those living in the United States at the time. Taken individually, these isolated incidents are bearable but, according to Edmundson, a daily dose of distressing and horrendous events is enough to alter perceptions of lived experience. Anxiety is programmed into the American psyche during prime time. As Edmundson remarked, the “Gothic shows the dark side, the world of cruelty, lust, perversion, and crime that, many of us at least half believe, is hidden beneath established conventions.”⁶

Edmundson wrote *Nightmare on Main Street* as a cultural study of America in the 1990s, and more specifically, its constant proliferation of Gothic novels and films. Edmundson argues that the marked presence of Gothic elements in American culture was attributable to anxieties concerning the then approaching millennium. The fears associated with the end of the millennium were so overwhelming that society sought, and found, outlets for their terror in Gothic narratives. Society’s “fin de siècle” anxieties could be symbolically extracted and displaced, bound within the Gothic novel or film. In essence, the real horrors of daily life could be rendered less threatening if fictionalized. In *Danse Macabre* Stephen King also articulated the value of the horror genre in harnessing cultural fears. He remarked that the horror movie “has that ability to form liaisons between the real and the unreal---to provide subtexts. And because of

⁶Ibid., 4.

their mass appeal, these subtexts are often culture-wide.”⁷ According to King, the vampires, serial killers and malevolent ghosts of the horror genre are a façade, metaphoric manifestations of society’s angst and unease. What is common in the arguments of both Edmundson and King is that the Gothic narrative acts as a type of cultural scapegoat, the proverbial “fall guy” upon which society can unload its burden of fear. But the purpose of this subconscious displacement is to separate the self from its interior horrors when those horrors become too overpowering.

The infiltration of Gothic elements in American culture therefore engages the question of space and, more specifically, the violation of structured spaces by threatening elements. In his work *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Anthony Vidler states that “space is assumed to hide, in its darkest recesses and forgotten margins, all the objects of fear and phobia that have returned with such insistency to haunt the imaginations of those who have tried to stake out spaces to protect their health and happiness.”⁸ These “darkest recesses” and “forgotten margins” are what Vidler refers to as dark space. According to Vidler, in the modern period the idea of transparency, or the opening up of space to light and air, led to the construction of designated places of containment: hospitals, asylums, and other similar institutions. These designated spaces were meant to keep society free from perceived social ills and dangers. Although the physical construction of places of containment had very practical applications, the structure of these borders was highly psychological. Places of quarantine cannot always prevent the spread of disease, for example. But, if human perceptions dictate that disease, madness, perversity and crime can be bound within designated places then that space becomes very dark indeed. As Vidler continues, “the moment that saw the creation of the first ‘considered politics of spaces’ based on scientific concepts of light and infinity also saw, and within the same

⁷King, *Danse Macabre*, 132.

⁸Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 167.

epistemology, the invention of a spatial phenomenology of darkness.”⁹ In essence, as humans seek to extract and separate the self from the “objects of fear and phobia,” space is shaped, structured and transformed by these externalized fears.

In short, the citizens of contemporary America have structured their own metaphoric dark space in the form of the haunted house; variations of this icon can be found throughout popular culture, especially in literature and film, but also in tourism. But in whatever shape or size the house appears, whether frequented by ghosts or natural evil, the haunted house is a subtext for the invasion of domestic space by threatening or malevolent forces. The relationship between humans and the spaces in which they dwell is of particular importance because “houses inscribe themselves within their dwellers, they socialize and structure the relations within families, and provide spaces for expression and self-realization in a complex interactive relationship.”¹⁰ Domestic space is therefore paramount in the construction of both personal and familial identity. When this space is violated by destructive forces, the house is transformed from an intimate place of shelter into a place of horror. The haunted house is therefore both a reflection of and a repository for contemporary anxieties concerning the home.

There are three particular aspects or characteristics of dark space which I will describe are reflected in certain conceptions of the haunted house. Chapter one discusses the nature of the house as an uncanny place in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*. Hill House is a place which is literally evil, blatantly subverting the boundaries between the homely and the unhomely. The “uncanniness” of Hill House is manifested not only in the manner of its maniac construction but also in the precise manner in which it manipulates individual fears and weaknesses. Jackson’s Hill House reflects both the theoretical as well as the literal aspects of the

⁹Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 169.

¹⁰Curtis, *Dark Places*, 34.

uncanny. Accordingly, the work of both Sigmund Freud and Anthony Vidler provide a useful framework for understanding this dual nature of the uncanny. While Freud indicates that the uncanny is largely a psychological phenomenon, Vidler argues that manifestations of the uncanny can also be found within architecture. Because the uncanny is both physical and psychological in nature, its manifestations also have applications in the construction of domestic space. Within the borders of Hill House each of the novel's characters, and especially Eleanor, attempt to psychologically restructure their surroundings against the house's dark atmosphere. Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* is especially useful for understanding the nature of the relationship between humans and the places considered as home. Although his work is primarily concerned with positive notions of home, the process by which this relationship is formed has applications for the haunted house. Even the safest spaces can induce feelings of terror and anxiety; the way in which the shadows play upon the wall, for example. The human mind constantly structures and restructures perceptions of lived-in space, evidence that, at least subconsciously, the mind already perceives domestic space as fluid, or uncanny, in nature.

As a place which is uncanny in nature the haunted house induces feelings of disorientation and ambiguity in spatial relationships. Chapter two discusses the haunted house as a place of spatial disorientation in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. Jack Torrance, hired as caretaker of the Overlook hotel, experiences increasing degrees of disorientation as the dark atmosphere of the hotel manipulates his weaknesses. Jack's personal identity is gradually and completely subsumed by the hotel by the end of the film. Yet despite the horror of losing himself to the surrounding space, Jack refuses to leave. He is perversely attracted to the Overlook even though it threatens to destroy him. Underlying Jack's absorption by the hotel is the threat of a loss of distinction between the self and the milieu. In this way the interior of the

Overlook is synonymous with the dark; darkness often induces feelings of disorientation both literally and figuratively as objects blend together and the mind loses its sense of self.

Of particular importance in contextualizing Jack's perverse behavior is Roger Caillois' essay, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" in which he identifies insect mimicry as a temptation by space. Some insects undergo the process of camouflage even though it is unneeded. In addition, these insects place themselves in even greater danger by imitating surrounding flora and fauna. In essence, insects are allured by space even as it threatens to subsume them. Similarly, American viewers are attracted to the haunted house film even though its narratives inspire feelings of disorientation and horror.

Finally, space becomes haunted as humans extract and embed their fears and phobias within its borders. The third, and final, chapter discusses haunted space in the context of haunted historic sites. Because of their nature as storehouses of memory, historic sites are also fitting repositories for the containment of social fears and anxieties. Although this chapter discusses physical haunted houses, its focus is primarily on historic sites and not on other, more temporary haunted houses which appear only during Halloween. While these haunted houses share some of the same functions as historic sites, they lack the added depth of a structure that is embedded with elements of the past. As tourist attractions, haunted sites provide locations for visitors to express their fears within literal spaces. In *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* Dean MacCanell articulates that the nature of tourist sites reflects human perceptions of their own culture. More than just locations of leisure, tourist sites fit the needs and wants of society at that particular time. Consequently, such sites are largely shaped and constructed by tourist perceptions. This chapter focuses in particular on the popular Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, California. Once the home of Sarah Winchester, the Winchester House is popularly

believed to be haunted. Although there is no clear evidence that Sarah was ever influenced by any supernatural forces, online images and videos, billboards, and even the tours of the house highlight and promote this perception. Haunted sites are particularly intriguing as reflections of the manner in which humans symbolically structure and shape physical spaces. Although the architectural design of the Winchester House was conceived of by Sarah Winchester herself, the aura of its interior and exterior spaces has been shaped and molded by tourist expectations. Consequently, humans find meaning in spaces which are embedded with elements which reflect their own lived experiences.

Although treated individually, the haunted house in literature, film, and tourism each possess the three elements of dark space: each are uncanny in nature, induce a sense of spatial disorientation, and the haunting found within this space mirrors that of contemporary society. The forms of novel, film, and tourist site require increasing levels of engagement from readers, viewers, and tourists, respectively. While the novel supplies a textual narrative, film narratives have an added visual component, while tourist sites also provide physical spaces for engaging visitors. What is common between each of these “dark spaces” is their ability to harness and transform cultural fears into cohesive narratives. These narratives provide a safe framework from which humans can confront and contextualize their fears. As Stephen King remarked, “We make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones.”¹¹ Whether found within the pages of a text, on the movie screen, or in the social, lived-in spaces of American culture, the haunted house acts as a metaphor for dark space.

¹¹King, *Danse Macabre*, 26.

Chapter 1: The House as an Uncanny Place in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*

While Shirley Jackson was travelling through New York her train stopped at the 125th Street station and “dim and horrible in the dusk, I saw a building so disagreeable that I could not stop looking at it; it was tall and black and as I looked at it when the train began to move again it faded away and disappeared.”¹² This experience so impressed Jackson that she later “woke up with nightmares, the kind where you have to get up and turn on the light and walk around for a few minutes just to make sure that there is a real world and this one is it.”¹³ Jackson later wrote *The Haunting of Hill House* featuring her own version of the “disagreeable” building she saw in New York. One of the most chilling characteristics of Hill House is that the haunting comes not from ghosts or goblins but from the house itself. Like Poe's “House of Usher”,¹⁴ Jackson's novel magnifies the terror of inhabiting space that consistently threatens to dismantle constructed boundaries between the homely and the unhomely. Hill House is a locus of evil, and it is this predisposition towards the uncanny which renders the house a metaphor for dark space.

While Jackson's *Hill House* features a structure that actively seeks to manipulate the weaknesses of all its inhabitants, much of the scholarship produced about the work thus far views the text only through a lens focused on feminist psychology. While offering intriguing avenues of study, a feminist psychological view overlooks Hill House as a source of darkness and evil. Jackson even indicated that her primary purpose in conceiving of the novel was to “set up my own haunted house, and put my own people in it, and see what *I* could make happen.”¹⁵ A major

¹²Jackson, “Experience and Fiction,” 201.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴First published in 1839, *The Fall of the House of Usher* is also centered on the theme of a house which itself is evil rather than being haunted by external forces. The House of Usher is construed by Roderick Usher as a sentient entity which for centuries has contributed to the decline of the Usher family. The house contains an oppressive atmosphere similar to that of Hill House and is therefore rendered an unhomely place.

¹⁵Jackson, “Experience and Fiction,” 201.

contribution of Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* is her treatment of the house as a place that is not only theoretically but also literally evil:

Somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because the face of Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice...this house...reared its great head back against the sky without concession to humanity.¹⁶

Physically, Hill House is a place of architectural uncertainty because of the nature of its construction. The “maniac juxtaposition” of its roof and angles and the personification of its exterior make Hill House a place which scoffs at the perception of home as a place of safety. The physical insecurity induced by Hill House in turn generates psychological distress as the characters attempt to maintain a sense of normality in an atmosphere of dark malevolence. Hill House is a vortex of disruption, specifically destabilizing the fundamental notion of the house as a place of security and refuge. Hill House is therefore an unhomely or uncanny place.

The psychological effects of the uncanny nature of Hill House are best understood in light of Freud's treatment of the subject. In 1919 he published a paper on the uncanny in which he investigates the relationship between the heimlich, or homely, and the unheimlich, or unhomely. Freud begins by emphasizing that the homely is actually dual in nature and that this duality predisposes the homely towards becoming identical with the unhomely. The first meaning of the homely has to do with that which belongs to the house, or that which is both intimate and familiar.¹⁷ However, the friendliness and intimacy of homely space often masks its second meaning which has darker underpinnings. The homely also refers to that which is concealed, kept out of sight or withheld from outsiders.¹⁸ As Freud indicates, the homely and the

¹⁶Jackson, *Haunting of Hill House*, 35.

¹⁷Freud, “The Uncanny,” 222.

¹⁸Freud, “The Uncanny,” 222.

unhomely are not opposites but are instead intimately connected in the function of containment. The homely must be kept within while the unhomely threatens to break through the containment. The homely thus becomes the unhomely through the process of revelation. It is this metamorphosis, the fluctuation from the one to the other, which is the basis of the uncanny. Freud describes the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.”¹⁹ At some point between the moment of repression and its return that which has been repressed undergoes a transformation and is changed into something which is no longer recognizable. Homely space is therefore fluid in nature, and it is this fluctuation which is the basis of the uncanny.

While Freud’s treatment of the uncanny is enlightening when considering its psychological ramifications, Jackson’s novel emphasizes that the uncanny also resides in the physical realm. The construction of Hill House consists of a disorienting blend of roof, windows and angles which together form a place “without concession to humanity.”²⁰ Hill House is inherently evil; a characteristic which necessitates a more comprehensive analysis of the text rather than a strictly theoretical approach. In his work *The Architectural Uncanny*, Vidler draws on the theoretical aspects of the uncanny and grounds them within the domain of architecture. He suggests that

Architecture has been intimately linked to the notion of the uncanny since the end of the eighteenth century. At one level, the house has provided a site for endless representations of haunting, doubling, dismembering, and other terrors in literature and art. At another level, the labyrinthine spaces of the modern city have been construed as the sources of modern anxiety, from revolution and epidemic to phobia and alienation.²¹

Vidler suggests that architecture is mimetic in nature, a projection of mankind’s phobias. It is therefore the architecture itself, whether the house or the city, which gives rise to feelings of

¹⁹Ibid., 220.

²⁰See footnote 18.

²¹Vidler, *Architectural Uncanny*, ix.

terror. It is the physical nature of architecture which engages the uncanny, “for if the theoretical elaboration of the uncanny helps us to interpret the conditions of modern estrangement, the special characteristics of architecture and urbanism as arts of spatial definition allow us to advance the argument into the domain of the tangible.”²² Perhaps even more troubling, is that the cause of the terror comes not from an outside source but rather from within the confines of inhabitable space.

Both Freud and Vidler articulate that the uncanny is intimately linked with domestic space; Freud emphasizes the fluidity of the homely as it undergoes its transformation into the unhomely, and Vidler locates the unhomely within the physical space of the house. Jackson’s novel draws on both the psychological and physical elements of the uncanny and binds them together in the structure of Hill House. Like the “labyrinthine spaces” of Vidler’s modern city, Hill House is at the center of all that is terrifying. Within the confines of Hill House there is no escaping a confrontation with one’s deepest and most profound fears. And, for the characters in Jackson’s novel, this confrontation occurs within the house. It is a place of containment wherein those who traverse its boundaries must face the disturbing reality that the origin of the haunting resides within the self.

From the Homely to the Unhomely

In order to better understand the way in which homely space becomes unhomely it is vital to first comprehend the way in which humans construct perceptions of homely space. In his essay Freud indicates that the uncanny is largely a product of the mind. A memory or an image is repressed or forgotten for so long that when it is recalled the mind no longer recognizes it as something familiar. Freud remarks that the uncanny “is in reality nothing new or alien, but

²²Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 13.

something which is familiar and old established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.”²³ According to Freud, the process of alienation is intimately connected with human memory. St. Augustine’s discourse on human memory highlights the process of memory construction as largely based on fragmentation and reconstruction, a process which also alters and transforms images. Consequently, the transformation of the homely to the unhomely can best be understood in the context of memory construction.

In Book X of his *Confessions* St. Augustine undergoes a process of self-evaluation in which he seeks the origin of his knowledge of his love of God. After questioning various external sources St. Augustine turns inward to the human mind and begins to describe the process of acquiring and retaining images. St. Augustine suggests that in order to acquire these images one may turn to “the fields and spacious palaces of memory, where lie the treasures of innumerable images of all kinds of things that have been brought in by the senses...and there too is everything else that has been brought in and deposited and has not yet been swallowed up and buried in forgetfulness.”²⁴ As St. Augustine suggests, the mind contains a vast and immeasurable number of images that have been acquired over time. But these images undergo a process of sifting and sorting before being stored within memory. St. Augustine describes this as the “proper classification [of] all sensations which come to us, each by its own route.”²⁵ According to St. Augustine the mind, and specifically memory, is an endless source of images in a constant flux of remembering and forgetting. This fragmentation of the human memory is useful in that it allows the mind to categorize and store a vast amount of images to be called to recollection when needed.

²³Freud, “The Uncanny,” 241.

²⁴St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 208.

²⁵Ibid., 210.

Despite the ability of the human mind to store an abundance of images, human perception is limited in scope. Philosopher Henri Bergson, while describing the way in humans acquire images of their surroundings, argued that perception “is limited, since it should be the image of the whole, and is in fact reduced to the image of that which interests you.”²⁶ If, as Bergson suggests the mind only retains those images that are of interest than there remain gaps or holes within the memory. In order to conceive of an object in its entirety the mind must “fill these intervals...to harmonize [the] senses with each other, to restore between their data a continuity which has been broken by the discontinuity of the needs of [the] body, in short, to reconstruct, as nearly as may be, the whole of the material object.”²⁷ The mind, out of necessity, is therefore capable of transforming images to fit the needs of the body in order to maintain a sense of equilibrium. The remarks of both Bergson and St. Augustine highlight memory as being fluid rather than static in nature; the senses act as a source of images and the human mind manipulates these images to compensate for the changing needs of the body. The fluidity of human memory is therefore an adaptive mechanism. Because these images are stored within the human mind they can also be transported by the imagination and recollected as needed in order to reconstruct homely space in a variety of environments.

Although St. Augustine’s model of memory construction centers on the senses as a source of images, the house also functions in much the same way. In his work *The Poetics of Space* philosopher Gaston Bachelard closely examines the relationship between humans and the spaces considered as home. According to Bachelard “the house furnishes us dispersed images and a body of images at the same time. In both cases...the imagination augments the values of

²⁶Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 34

²⁷Ibid., 47.

reality. A sort of attraction for images concentrates them about the house.”²⁸ When committing images of the house to memory the mind may retain an image of a single piece of furniture in a room while simultaneously seeing an image of several pieces of furniture in relation to one another. If, as St. Augustine suggests, memory is indeed comprised of a vast storehouse of images then the imagination is free to extract any number of images and reconstruct them. The imagination not only reconstructs these images but ascribes them a heightened sense of reality so that, at least within the imagination, the reconstructed image becomes the real one. While it is the objects themselves which provide the human mind with a body of images it is the imagination which ascribes meaning to these images. During the same process the mind further adapts by reforming these images so that the image actually retained most likely differs from the true one. But, as Bergson suggests, the restructured images are those that pertain to one’s interests so that the end product is imbued with meaning for the individual and is crucial to one’s sense of well-being.

Like the way in which the mind reconstructs sensory experiences it also reconstructs perceptions of homely space in order to maintain a sense of balance. According to Bachelard “a house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality.”²⁹ What Bachelard indicates is that while the physical nature of the house itself remains constant the imagination alters perceptions of the surrounding space. The physical characteristics of the house supply the imagination with a set of images, yet because the imagination is not limited by physical characteristics it can sometimes create a slippage between the homely and the unhomely. Bachelard states that “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home...we shall see the imagination build “walls” of

²⁸Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 3.

²⁹Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 17.

impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection—or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts...the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter.”³⁰ Like Freud’s *heimlich* and *unheimlich* the house is both a place of familiarity and comfort and a place to fear. The imagination already perceives the house as a sometimes sinister place disguised as a refuge and human perceptions of home fluctuate until the homely becomes the unhomely.

Although elements of the uncanny are often produced psychologically the uncanny can also be found within the physical realm. In his pursuit of articulating the nature of the relationship between humans and domestic space, Bachelard was intrigued by the primal need of humans for shelter. He observed that “it is not a question of describing houses, or enumerating their picturesque features and analyzing for which reasons they are comfortable. On the contrary, we must go beyond the problems of description...in order to attain to the primary virtues, those that reveal an attachment that is native in some way to the primary function of inhabiting.”³¹ Physically, traditional notions of home often dictate that the house is first and foremost a place of refuge. In the literal sense the house, as a physical structure, exists to maintain the well-being of man and woman. Indeed, “well-being takes us back to the primitiveness of the refuge. Physically, the creature endowed with a sense of refuge, huddles up to itself, takes to cover, hides away, lies snug, concealed.”³² The house is a place which literally covers the individual and protects them from the outside elements. But Bachelard indicates that the house is also a place of concealment where one can “hide away” from the world or from the eyes of those who would perhaps endanger one’s well-being. This duality echoes Freud’s analysis of the homely as

³⁰Ibid., 5.

³¹Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 4.

³²Ibid., 91.

both a place of intimacy as well as a place of secrecy. In both cases it is this twofold function which creates an inclination towards the uncanny.

Although its dual function already predisposes the house to the uncanny there is yet another element which further opens the house to the unhomely. In *The Architectural Uncanny*, Anthony Vidler articulates that “architecture reveals the deep structure of the uncanny in a more than analogical way, demonstrating a disquieting slippage between what seems homely and what is definitively unhomely.”³³ According to Vidler architecture is intrinsically uncanny, a characteristic which engages domestic space in the interplay between the homely and the unhomely. But even for Vidler the uncanniness found within architecture has a psychological foundation. He suggests the uncanny “is not a property of the space itself nor can it be provoked by any particular spatial conformation...it is a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming.”³⁴ In this way the uncanny is embedded within domestic space because it is a reflection of one’s psychological state at any given time. And, if as Vidler suggests, human anxieties are projected and embedded in architecture then there occurs an estrangement between humans and their fears. If the uncanny is absorbed within architecture then humans are also confronted with these projections in the tangible realm. The uncanny therefore permeates the structure of the house on two levels; psychologically as perceptions of the house fluctuate between the homely and the unhomely, and physically as these perceptions are projected outward and relocated in domestic space.

The intrusion of the uncanny into domestic space effectively strips the house of any vestige of the homely. As Stephen King once remarked “your house is the place where you’re

³³Vidler, *Architectural Uncanny*, ix.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 11.

supposed to be able to unbutton your armor and put your shield away. Our homes are the places where we allow ourselves the ultimate vulnerability; they are the places where we take our clothes off and go to sleep with no guard on watch.”³⁵ There is no longer any place untouched by the terrors of the dark, and it is the image of the house as subversive that is the most terrifying. Shirley Jackson manipulates this fear in *The Haunting of Hill House* and begins her story with a structure that is already saturated with the terrors of the dark. The uncanniness of Hill House is more than a psychological projection; it is described as a place that was “born bad.”³⁶ It is a place where the characters are unceasingly confronted by their most profound fears, and from which there appears to be no escape.

Hill House as an Uncanny Place

The fluidity of the imagination is vital to human survival because it allows the mind to adapt to a variety of environments so that the individual feels stabilized and secure. *The Haunting of Hill House* is useful in this context because the characters, and especially Eleanor, must learn to construct their own sense of homely space within the context of a house which is the antithesis of this type of shelter. In an atmosphere such as that of Hill House this adaptability is necessary because the house subverts traditional notions of home on two fronts, physical and psychological. Shirley Jackson’s conception of the haunted house draws on both Freud’s analysis of the uncanny as a mental construction, as well as Vidler’s suggestion that the uncanny also resides in the physical realm as a projection of one’s mental state. But Jackson delves further into the realm of the uncanny by conceiving of Hill House as a place which is intrinsically evil. She begins *The Haunting of Hill House* with the following description:

³⁵King, *Danse Macabre*, 254.

³⁶Jackson, *Haunting of Hill House*, 70.

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.³⁷

There are some elements in the above description which suggest that Hill House could, at some level, be construed as a place of refuge. The narrator highlights the upright walls and firm floors of the house, yet this perception is deceiving. Although Hill House has already been standing for eighty years and could conceivably remain erect for that long again it is, after all, “not sane.” There is no measure of security in its construction of wood and stone. It is a place which is isolated and its walls conceal an atmosphere of darkness. It is within the darkness of Hill House that the characters attempt to construct some mien of homeliness against an atmosphere which blatantly resists conforming.

Jackson narrates her novel largely through the voice of Eleanor Vance, a thirty-two year old single woman who spent the last eleven years caring for her invalid mother. Eleanor’s notions of homely space are made apparent prior to her arrival at Hill House. At one point she passes a house with pillars, shutters on the windows, and a pair of stone lions at the steps “and she thought perhaps she might live there.”³⁸ Eleanor’s daydream continues and she imagines that “inside the house the rooms were tall and clear with shining floors and polished windows. A little dainty old lady took care of me...when I slept it was under a canopy of white organdy, and a nightlight guarded me from the hall.”³⁹ Further along her drive she sees a line of oleanders leading to a ruined gate and then forming a square around an empty field. Eleanor imagines these oleanders to be a protective barrier against intruders, deterring those from the outside with their

³⁷Ibid., 3.

³⁸Jackson, *Haunting of Hill House*, 18.

³⁹Ibid.

poisonous branches. She imagines this place as a type of fairyland whose inhabitants are waiting for her to come and break the spell. The spell will be broken and “then, coming down from the hills there will be a prince riding, bright in green and silver with a hundred bowmen riding behind him, pennants stirring, horses tossing, jewels flashing.”⁴⁰

The first of these examples illustrates the nature of homely space as familiar, tame, and intimate. Eleanor may sleep under her “canopy of white organdy” while the “dainty old lady” provides her with comfort. Eleanor’s second daydream, inspired by a row of oleanders reflects the darker side of the homely. Eleanor’s fairyland is surrounded and protected by a border of poisonous oleanders apparently holding its inhabitants in the grip of a spell. The purpose of the oleanders is to conceal the fairyland from outsiders until Eleanor arrives and breaks the spell. In this daydream Eleanor has constructed space whose inhabitants are waiting for her but only from behind the mask of poisonous vegetation. Eleanor’s two separate daydreams reflect the dual nature of the homely. She already conceives of domestic space as ambiguous in nature and she later draws on elements of these daydreams to restructure her conceptions of homely space in the dark atmosphere of Hill House.

During her journey to Hill House Eleanor anticipates her arrival and views her participation in Dr. Montague’s research as an escape from her dreary life. However, upon her arrival “the house...caught her with an atavistic turn in the pit of the stomach...her hands turned nervously cold so that she fumbled, trying to take out a cigarette, and beyond everything else she was afraid, listening to the sick voice inside her which whispered, *Get away from here, get away.*”⁴¹ Eleanor’s reaction was prompted by the appearance of Hill House as “a place without

⁴⁰Jackson, *Haunting of Hill House*, 20.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 35.

kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope.”⁴²

Eleanor’s first sighting of Hill House is also a pivotal moment in which she must choose to follow her conscience and “get away” or ignore the voice in her head and continue on into Hill House. Although Eleanor’s daydream of a fairyland has darker underpinnings there was still, in her mind, the anticipation of a warm welcome from its inhabitants. Hill House offers no such welcome and the only inhabitants to speak of are Mr. and Mrs. Dudley, longtime caretakers of Hill House. To Eleanor the house “seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying together into its own powerful pattern under the hands of its builders, fitting itself into its own construction of lines and angles.”⁴³ Hill House is a structure which exudes evil and Eleanor “looked along the lines of its roofs, fruitlessly endeavoring to locate the badness, whatever dwelt there.”⁴⁴ The exterior atmosphere of Hill House alone is enough to disabuse the characters of any thoughts that it is a homely place.

Hill House is also an uncanny place because of the nature of its construction. Dr. Montague even describes Hill House as a “masterpiece of architectural misdirection.”⁴⁵ Hugh Crain designed Hill House and within its walls “every angle is slightly wrong...angles which you assume are the right angles you are accustomed to, and have every right to expect are true, are actually a fraction of a degree off in one direction or another...for instance...you might believe that the stairs you are sitting on are level, because you are not prepared for stairs which are not level...are actually on a very slight slant toward the central shaft; the doorways are all a very little bit off center.”⁴⁶ The physical distortions of Hill House contribute to its overall aura of unpleasantness but the threads of the uncanny run much deeper. But it is not only the outward

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Jackson, *Haunting of Hill House*, 35.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., 106.

⁴⁶Ibid., 105-06.

appearance of Hill House which is subversive. The unhomely nature of Hill House also comes from within. Dr. Montague also remarks on the atmosphere of Hill House while he is relating the history of the house to his three guests. "Hill House, whatever the cause, has been unfit for human habitation for upwards of twenty years. What it was like before then, whether its personality was molded by the people who lived here, or the things they did, or whether it was evil from its start are all questions I cannot answer."⁴⁷ The subversive nature of Hill House is threatening because, as Dr. Montague remarks, "an atmosphere like this one can find out the flaws and faults and weaknesses in all of us, and break us apart in a matter of days."⁴⁸

Jackson never clearly articulates the exact nature of what makes Hill House an evil place. Dr. Montague seems to think that the evil comes from the house itself and relates the history of Hill House to the other guests in an attempt to logically explain its "badness." In the novel Hill House was originally built by Hugh Crain, an affluent gentleman who wished to build a home where his progeny could be raised in luxury. Hugh was married three different times and each of his wives died; two of them at Hill House. Hugh eventually left Hill House and his two daughters were raised by a family cousin. After reaching adulthood the two sisters spent much of the succeeding years disputing over the heirlooms in the house. The older sister, who had hired a girl from the nearby village as a companion, eventually died at Hill House. Her companion is driven to suicide by the younger sister who continually persecuted her about inheriting Hill House from the older sister. Hill House was briefly inhabited by a few other tenants but was eventually closed to anyone except for the caretakers. Dr. Montague suggests that Hill House itself is responsible for its own tragic history. He remarks to the other guests that "the evil is the house itself, I think. It has enchained and destroyed its people and their lives, it is a place of contained

⁴⁷Jackson, *Haunting of Hill House*, 70.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 124.

ill will.”⁴⁹ It is the very ambiguity of this nameless source of evil and ill will which makes Hill House an uncanny place.

Hill House is a vortex of disruption on every level. The atmosphere of both the interior and the exterior are malevolent in nature and this malevolence is reflected in the disjointed architecture. There is no safe haven within Hill House, no place of refuge from which to escape its evil. The characters, each of whom chooses to remain at Hill House for the duration of the experiment, have no choice but to dwell within the darkness. However, as Bachelard indicates, there exists a survival mechanism within each human which motivates one to seek shelter. And, within that shelter, the human mind alters perceptions of the surrounding space in order to maintain a sense of equilibrium. To some degree each of the characters in Jackson’s novel attempts to reconstruct the surrounding space of Hill House. While describing the architectural oddities of Hill House Dr. Montague remarks “we have grown to trust blindly in our senses of balance and reason, and I can see where the mind might fight wildly to preserve its own familiar stable patterns against all evidence that it was leaning sideways.”⁵⁰ After their initial meeting in the entrance hall of the house the guests begin to play-act and imagine a new identity for themselves. Eleanor introduces herself as a courtesan and Theo calls herself a princess. Even Luke and Dr. Montague introduce themselves as a bullfighter and a pilgrim respectively.

There are even instances when the four guests of Hill House create an atmosphere of homely space together. “They had come through the darkness of one night, they had met morning in Hill House, and they were a family, greeting one another with easy informality and going to the chairs they had used last night at dinner, their own places at the table.”⁵¹ The atmosphere of Hill House does nothing to encourage feelings of comfort and intimacy. The

⁴⁹Ibid., 82.

⁵⁰Jackson, *Haunting of Hill House*, 107.

⁵¹Ibid., 97.

characters are therefore psychologically restructuring the surrounding space to coincide with their notions of homely space. Against the unfamiliarity of Hill House these four individuals are restructuring their shelter via the imagination. The tendency of the characters to reconstruct Hill House as homely space is therefore a means of self-preservation.

The tendency to reconstruct perceptions of homely space is most apparent in the character of Eleanor. After their arrival at Hill House Theodora asks Eleanor to describe her own home. Eleanor responds “I have a little place of my own. An apartment, like yours... white curtains. I had to look for weeks before I found my little stone lions on each corner of the mantel, and I have a white cat and my books and records and pictures. Everything has to be exactly the way I want it, because there’s only me to use it.”⁵² This particular description contains elements from several different sources. Eleanor actually saw a pair of stone lions in front of a house on her way to Hill House and she models her own apartment on that of Theodora. Eleanor has restructured fragments of images acquired at various moments and restructured them to reflect her own version of homely space. Eleanor even perceives Hill House as a homely place at various points throughout the story. After her first night spent in Hill House Eleanor muses while she looks out the window. “It was clearly going to be wet all day, but it was a summer rain, deepening the green of the grass and the trees...it’s charming...she wondered if she was the first person ever to find Hill House charming...she shivered, and found herself at the same time unable to account for the excitement she felt, which made it difficult to remember why it was so odd to wake up happy in Hill House.”⁵³ Eleanor, literally homeless after escaping from her sister’s house, is slowly transforming Hill House into a place of refuge. Her need for a sense of home is so powerful that she will even seek shelter in a place which threatens to destroy her.

⁵²Jackson, *Haunting of Hill House*, 88.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 95.

Eleanor's reconstruction of her surrounding space is so profound that she eventually perceives Hill House as home. Near the end of the novel Eleanor, finally consumed by the evil of Hill House, finds herself at the foot of an iron stairway in the library. The stairway curves around leading up to the tower and the reader is led to believe that once she reaches the top Eleanor means to jump. Eleanor stops at the bottom of the stairway before beginning her ascent and thoughtfully remarks to herself, "I have broken the spell of Hill House and somehow come inside. I am home...I am home, I am home...now to climb."⁵⁴ Eleanor's perception of Hill House as homely space is remarkable given its propensity for evil. Jackson even implies in the novel that it was the influence of Hill House which induced Eleanor's descent into madness. But in Eleanor's mind Hill House has become her own piece of domestic space, a place which she believes "wants her to stay."⁵⁵ Because of her primal need for shelter Eleanor begins to reconstruct the house into a place which she believes has become intimate and familiar. For Eleanor, Hill House is ultimately a projection of her imagination, a transformation which is a product of her continued habitation in a place that is essentially unlivable.

Hill House is unlivable because it is a site which contains eighty years worth of tragedy and despair compressed into its interior space. The compressed darkness of Hill House is a danger to the characters because it constantly threatens to dismantle all the boundaries they have created in order to remain apart from its darkness. Dr. Montague even remarks that "I think we are all incredibly silly to stay...we have only one defense, and that is running away...promise me absolutely that you will leave, as fast as you can, if you begin to feel the house catching at you."⁵⁶ Eleanor becomes so immersed in her perception of Hill House as home that she is ultimately unable to recognize it as a place of malice. Dr. Montague has to force Eleanor to

⁵⁴Jackson, *Haunting of Hill House*, 232.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 240.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 124.

leave, but even in the very act of driving her car into a tree she repeatedly asks “*Why* am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don’t they stop me?”⁵⁷ The atmosphere of Hill House is so pervasive that even Eleanor’s death is touched by its darkness.

While the tendency of Hill House to manipulate the weaknesses of its guests is frightening the true threat is its unsettling ability to reveal what should have remained hidden. Dr. Montague suggests that “we are only afraid of ourselves” to which Luke replies, “no...of seeing ourselves clearly and without disguise.”⁵⁸ Hill House forces the characters to confront the terrors of their own human natures. Like Hill House the haunted house novel in general represents the outward projection of human fears and phobias. These fears are materialized in the form of the haunted house, a creation intended to protect the self from one’s own dark spaces. Thus, whether or not a house is truly haunted the mind perceives it as such. “As a concept...the uncanny has...found its metaphorical home in architecture: first in the house, haunted or not, that pretends to afford the utmost security while opening itself to the secret intrusion of terror.”⁵⁹ Just as Hill House threatens to reveal what the other characters have carefully kept hidden the real threat of dark space is the possibility that man and woman will be confronted with that which they have attempted to rid themselves of. There is, however, no real means of completely separating the self from the dark.

The indissoluble bond between Eleanor and Hill House is representative of the connection between humans and their perceptions of homely space. Because the construction of homely space is primarily a product of the imagination there can be no rigid boundary that definitively separates the homely from the unhomely. The house, whether or not it is haunted, will always be a place which induces the uncanny. The fluidity of homely space makes the house

⁵⁷Jackson, *Haunting of Hill House*, 246.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 159.

⁵⁹Vidler, *Architectural Uncanny*, 11.

an uncanny place where the boundary between the homely and the unhomely is constantly being violated. This slippage between boundaries coincides with the process of re-imagining and transforming homely space as the mind consistently seeks to maintain a sense of equilibrium between the senses. But, just as the concept of dark space was born from that of transparency the haunted house is a product of the construction of homely space. The source of the uncanny therefore comes from within the self. The fear and anxiety ejected from the self are relocated, finding space in the haunted house. The haunted house novel is therefore not solely a source of entertainment but provides a site from which man and woman can safely confront the abject things of the dark.

Chapter 2: Spatial Disorientation in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*

In 1980 Stanley Kubrick directed *The Shining*, featuring a haunted hotel isolated in the mountains of Colorado. Although *The Shining* is predominantly a film about a haunted place, there exists beneath the veneer of ghostly sightings the horror of losing oneself amidst this surrounding space. Jack Torrance, played by Jack Nicholson, is hired as caretaker of the Overlook Hotel during the winter season. Jack begins to experience periods of insanity and disorientation which increase in frequency the longer that he remains, and he is gradually transformed from a troubled, yet loving, father into a murderer. By the end of the film, Jack is chasing both his wife and son around the hotel with an axe. But, the most troubling aspect is that the Overlook is the principle cause of Jack's maniac tendencies. The atmosphere of the hotel appears to overpower and consume Jack until all vestiges of his former self are obliterated. Consequently, both the characters and viewers of the film experience a sense of disorientation as the boundaries between the self and space disintegrate.

Space becomes a threat when there no longer exists a point of reference from which to view the self in relation to one's surroundings. French intellectual Roger Caillois remarked on this phenomenon in his essay titled "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia." He articulates that "from whatever side one approaches things, the ultimate problem turns out in the final analysis to be that of *distinction*: distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between waking and sleeping, between ignorance and knowledge... among distinctions, there is assuredly none more clear-cut than between the organism and its surroundings."⁶⁰ Caillois was intrigued by the process of insect mimicry and its applications to the relationship between personality and space. As Caillois notes, some insects have the ability to assimilate to their surroundings, undergoing a

⁶⁰Caillois, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, 16.

transformation process so extreme that the insect no longer appears as a distinct entity. The camouflaged insect is literally consumed by space. Jack Torrance undergoes a similar transformation and Caillois' study is useful in contextualizing the extremity of this change. Like the camouflaged insect, Jack experiences a "depersonalization by assimilation to space"⁶¹ as the Overlook manipulates and molds him for its own dark purposes. Jack's personality becomes indistinct from that of the hotel, evidence that he has surrendered himself to the milieu. And, because of his insistence on remaining at the hotel, Jack becomes a participant in his own destruction.

Similar to its role in the process of insect mimicry, space as a consuming force also has applications in the human realm. In his essay on dark space Vidler remarks "space...has taken on an almost palpable existence. Its contours, boundaries, and geographies are called upon to stand in for all the contested realms of identity."⁶² As Vidler articulates, space functions on every level as a foundation from which one creates a sense of self. There are, however, no infallible boundaries between space and the self. Even the spaces of containment conceived of during the modern period often failed to contain all traces of disease and madness. In contemporary society, disease and other perceived social ills are persistent in their violation of constructed boundaries. Indeed, "the realms of the organic space of the body and the social space in which that body lives and works...no longer can be identified as separate."⁶³ Similarly, the uncanny nature of dark space and its tendency to elide constructed boundaries creates a sense of spatial disorientation. That is, it creates uncertainty about the identity of the self in relation to one's surroundings. In a literal sense, darkness induces a physical sense of disorientation. Objects in a darkened room, although once familiar, can no longer be individualized but instead blend in with the surrounding

⁶¹Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," 30.

⁶²Vidler, *Architectural Uncanny*, 167.

⁶³Ibid., 168.

darkness. Depth perception is so affected that the mind begins to feel a sense of uncertainty about one's surroundings. All the objects in the room merge with the darkness and are subsumed. The room becomes, in a sense, unfamiliar. The threat of dark space is the possibility of a loss of individuality, a merging of the self with the elements of the dark.

This theme of space as threat is prevalent in Kubrick's *The Shining*. Both the interior and exterior of the Overlook Hotel promote a loss of self; inside as the characters become enmeshed in an atmosphere without time and outside in the form of the hedge maze. Both Jack and the camouflaged insect engage in a type of self-perpetuating disorientation, renouncing all claims of individuality for the sake of a brief respite from perceived danger. Similarly, American viewers also engage in a type of self-induced disorientation. Maurizia Natali remarked on the role of film in sustaining ideologies about America as an empire in her essay "Course of the Empire." She articulates, "Freud argued that dreams protect our sleep. Comparatively, film narratives protect the spectators' ideological sleep...through narrative facades and sensory effects, the American ideological dream tries to keep audiences "sleeping" in front of the screen."⁶⁴ Although not directly linked to the fantasy of America as an empire, the iconic figure of the haunted house is protective of another type of ideology; that all is well and good at home and that the horror and evil found within the haunted house film is merely a fictional narrative. There is a measure of perceived protection in this deception, and humans are willing enough to resist the truth if the alternative is to remain in a sleep state. What the haunted house film does is provide a way for American viewers to remain in this limbo, whether conscious or not of its effects. And, although a sense of spatial disorientation is part of the experience, the allure of separating the self from the darkness of personal fear and anxiety is a temptation hard to resist.

⁶⁴Natali, "Course of the Empire," 104.

There is somewhere in the psyche of American viewers an insatiable attraction for the dark elements of haunting. American audiences view the haunted house film as a reflection of the danger found in their own lived experience. The danger is not in the form of a predator per se, but rather lies in the knowledge that the contemporary house has the potential to become a dangerous place. There exists a tension between the human need for safety and a fascination with danger. Humans want to believe that everything dangerous exists elsewhere rather than at home. Spectators are lulled by the perception that all conceivable horrors are bound up in film narratives. However, what *The Shining* represents is a projection of the fears and phobias of all humans. The events on the screen are therefore manifestations of the interior of the self, disguised as a fictional narrative. This “disguise” allures viewers even though what they are watching is, in fact, a dramatization of their own personal haunting. The effect is a sense of disorientation within the viewer, rendering *The Shining* as a metaphor for dark space.

The Haunted House Film as a Temptation by Space

The disorientation experienced within the context of dark space stems from a loss of distinction between the self and the other, or a “disturbance in the perception of space.”⁶⁵ In his remarks on insect mimicry, Caillois emphasized the sometimes unnecessary process of camouflage; some insects which are inedible still undergo the process of disguising themselves according to their surroundings. Consequently, Caillois suggests that insect mimicry is not necessarily a defense mechanism but rather “a real temptation by space...in short, from the moment when it can no longer be a process of defense, mimicry can be nothing but this.”⁶⁶ As the insect becomes a part of the surrounding milieu it becomes, in a sense, a spectator viewing its own destruction. It no longer acts as a distinct entity in opposition to its surroundings but instead

⁶⁵Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” 28.

⁶⁶Ibid., 28.

rests in a state of perceived safety, watching the interactions of plant and animal life within its sphere of existence. There appears to exist within the primitive makeup of the camouflaged insect a drive towards the dissolution of distinctions and a willful insistence to dwell in a state of spatial disorientation. Caillois' fascination was stimulated by the inherent dangers of insect mimicry wherein the camouflaged insect is frequently more vulnerable than it was before its assimilation.⁶⁷ The camouflaged insect thus enters into a type of sleep state, lulled by its sense of safety. Consequently, the insect fails to perceive the greater danger in which it has placed itself, including the threat of being consumed.

Film can function in much the same way as the process of insect mimicry. There are, of course, no physical dangers associated with viewing a haunted house film. No predators will escape from the screen and engulf the spectator. But the haunted house film acts as a type of camouflage, manipulating the fears and anxieties of spectators and transferring them to the movie screen. Indeed, "one of the common functions of the Gothic is to turn anxiety...into suspense. The Gothic novel or film in effect gathers up the anxiety that is free-floating in the reader or viewer and binds it to a narrative. Thus the anxiety is displaced and brought under temporary, tenuous control."⁶⁸ According to Edmundson, the Gothic genre acts as a leveling agent. Similarly, one of the purposes of insect mimicry is to balance the stakes between predator and prey. It is better to be engulfed by one's surroundings than slowly digested in the stomach of some unknown predator. The insect can always reemerge from its disguise once the perceived danger is gone. For the insect, space acts as a means of containing or at least delaying immediate danger. Similarly, the haunted house film functions, at least on one level, as a means of

⁶⁷Caillois uses multiple examples of this in his essay including that of the geometer-moth caterpillars, which disguise themselves as shoots of shrubbery, and the Phyllia, which disguise themselves as leaves. The former are often "pruned" by gardeners and the later are mistaken by their own species as leaves and are therefore sometimes the victims of cannibalism. See pp. 25 of his essay.

⁶⁸Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street*, 12.

perceived containment. If human anxieties are bound up and enmeshed in the narrative of the film then viewers are, in a sense, separated from their own fears. The haunted house film therefore acts as a buffer between the spectator and the darkness of personal phobias.

The binding nature of the gothic genre and of the haunted house in particular, is facilitated by the threat of dark space. The uncertainty associated with the dark is a pervasive threat, one which penetrates every facet of human life. Caillois remarks that “The magical hold...of night and obscurity, the *fear of the dark*, probably also has its roots in the peril in which it puts the opposition between the organism and the milieu.”⁶⁹ But, despite the fear associated with losing the self to space, there appears to be in man a drive toward the dissolution of constructed boundaries. One such boundary is that between the exterior of the human body and the interior. Advances in medicine and psychology subjected body and mind to intrusions by both human and machine. For example, “the ‘invention’ of cinema, usually taken to date from the earliest projection of film to an audience in 1895, coincided with two other explorations of dark places, both suggested to their originators in dreams. The x-ray and the early formulation of psychoanalysis shared in new kinds of interiority.”⁷⁰ The ability of the x-ray to infiltrate the innermost recesses of the human body is representative of the nature of film in two important ways. First, film is also a catalyst for bringing hidden things into the light of transparency. If the x-ray was responsible for revealing the hidden structures of the physical body, film exposes the inner workings of the human mind and heart. The key however, is that in both cases there occurs a blurring of distinctions between the self and surrounding space.

Secondly, both the x-ray and film function as a means of magnification and projection as they are manipulated to intensify specific details. But, while the x-ray is limited by the

⁶⁹Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” 30.

⁷⁰Curtis, *Dark Places*, 150.

physicality of the human body, there are fewer boundaries within the context of cinema. In film, the images seen on the screen may be representative of material objects but they can also influence perceptions of surrounding space. The manipulation of both physical and psychological elements creates a sense of shared experience between the viewer and events on the screen. Curtis suggests that the “fascination with supernatural presences in film coincides with the spectral nature of viewing. Ghost and spectator share a realm of suspended animation in which time and space are manipulated in a fantastic limbo of repetition and irresolution against which the narrative of the film works as a kind of exorcism, capable of restoring normality as it brings about resolution and closure.”⁷¹ It is within this sphere of shared experience that the temptation of the haunted house film is found. Viewers are attracted to the dark elements of this genre because they resonate with the fears and anxieties of lived experience.

The temptation is to view film narratives as a substitute for lived experience rather than a mere representation. The displacement of fears and anxieties onto the movie screen facilitates spatial disorientation in the viewer as elements from within the self are transferred to the screen. In the case of mimicry, changes in the perception of surrounding space physically occur when the insect transforms itself in order to be indistinct from its surroundings. The body of the insect undergoes a sometimes significant alteration, so much so that the insect is no longer a distinct and clearly identifiable entity. The insect literally becomes a part of space and is “no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally *no longer knows where to place itself*.”⁷² The body of the insect invades space as it transforms its appearance according to the surrounding elements, and in turn its body is invaded

⁷¹Curtis, *Dark Places*, 26.

⁷²Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” 28.

by space as it is enveloped by its surroundings. The insect experiences a loss of self as the boundaries between space and the subject are dissolved.

While the spatial disorientation experienced by the camouflaged insect is induced by a physical transformation, there are no such transformations in the case of film. The body of the spectator does not undergo any physical alterations while viewing the movie screen. There is, however, an alteration in the relationship between the self and the spaces of the mind and heart. If the haunted house film extracts human emotions and displaces them onto the screen, then these emotions no longer solely exist within the self. What was once “a combat waged in the secret recesses of the heart”⁷³ becomes a series of images on the movie screen. The darker elements of human emotions invade the surrounding space as they are drawn from the inside out. In this sense the spectator exists in two places simultaneously; as a unique individual in opposition to the surrounding space and as a part of space as pieces of the self are bound to film narratives. Like the way in which the x-ray allows the individual access to his or her own inner body, the haunted house film offers the spectator a glimpse of their own terrors. And, although a mechanism for purging the self of the horrors of the dark, the transparency of film is also the origin of spatial disorientation.

Spatial Disorientation at the Overlook Hotel

In Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*, the Overlook Hotel is rife with the ghosts of previous guests and employees. However, underlying this spectral veneer is the more fundamental question of distinction, and more specifically distinction between the self and surrounding space. The Overlook Hotel acts as a form of dark space because it is a catalyst for the blurring of these boundaries; the main characters in Kubrick’s film feel an increasing sense of spatial

⁷³King, *Danse Macabre*, 25.

disorientation the longer they remain within its walls. Essentially cut off from all civilization during the winter season, the Overlook blends in with the surrounding landscape to such an extent that it appears to be almost subsumed. But, despite the isolation and sense of disorientation it induces, the hotel is also a temptation for Jack. The Overlook offers Jack a variety of temptations, each of which manipulates one or more of his weaknesses. Rather than leaving the hotel Jack chooses to remain, forcing his wife Wendy and son Danny to do the same. Jack's eventual breakdown and loss of identity are a direct result of his prolonged stay at the Overlook. For Jack, the allure of the Overlook outweighs the horror of its darkness and his insistence about dwelling within the darkness results in a form of self-induced spatial disorientation. And, although the disorientation is experienced most visibly by Jack, both Wendy and Danny experience a type of disorientation as they are confronted with elements of Jack's dark and hidden depths.

Jack, formerly a school teacher, accepts a job as caretaker of the Overlook Hotel during the winter months when the hotel is closed. His duties as caretaker are to heat different sections of the hotel on a rotating daily basis and to provide overall maintenance and upkeep. The Torrance family, consisting of Jack, his wife Wendy, and their son Danny, are provided a small apartment within the hotel and are free to roam any part of the hotel and kitchens. Early in the film Jack is confronted with a projection of one of his fears. During his job interview Jack is informed by the manager that in the winter of 1970 a man named Grady was hired as caretaker. During his time as caretaker Grady murdered his family with an axe and then killed himself. The manager of the Overlook indicates that Grady suffered from "cabin fever," exacerbated in part by the extreme isolation of the hotel. The discussion about Grady and his downfall foreshadow Jack's own struggle with thoughts of murderous intent towards his wife and son later in the film.

At one point during the film, Jack even begins to have nightmares about killing Wendy and Danny by cutting them into little pieces. After one such nightmare he laments to Wendy “I must be losing my mind.”⁷⁴ Jack increasingly experiences feelings of disorientation as he loses more and more of his sense of self to the evil influence of the Overlook.

The longer that Jack is in the hotel the more prevalent his weakness becomes. As the film begins, viewers are made aware that Jack is a recovering alcoholic. Jack has been alcohol free for several months, but his thirst for alcohol still remains. When the Torrance family first arrives at the Overlook the manager takes them into the ballroom and shows them the bar, now devoid of any type of beverage. Later in the film, Jack’s proclivity for alcohol becomes apparent when he begins to imagine that the bar in the ballroom is stocked with drinks. When Jack initially wanders up to the bar he meets Lloyd who is, or was, the bartender. Although this is his first encounter with Lloyd, of which the viewer is aware, Jack tells Lloyd “I always liked you.”⁷⁵ Jack has either visited with Lloyd before or Lloyd is a part of Jack’s imagination. Either way the viewer is aware of the Overlook’s manipulation of Jack’s weaknesses. Jack’s renewed problems with alcohol intensify as the ghosts actually provide him with alcohol. His familiarity with Lloyd marks the beginning of the disintegration of the boundary between himself and the hotel. The hotel penetrates deeper and deeper into Jack’s mind, extracting, manipulating and enmeshing him in its dark atmosphere.

The manipulation of Jack’s alcoholic tendencies is magnified even more during his second visit to the ballroom. This time Jack meets Grady, the previous caretaker who murdered his family and then committed suicide. Jack collides with Grady and ends up spilling his drink all over his jacket. Grady offers to wash the jacket off for him and the two fall into conversation.

⁷⁴*The Shining*, scene 18.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, scene 19.

As they begin to talk Grady introduces himself and suggests that Jack has been at the hotel before. Jack asks Grady about his position as caretaker, yet Grady insists that Jack is the caretaker. Grady then remarks “You’ve always been the caretaker. I should know sir, I’ve always been here.”⁷⁶ At this point in the film it appears that the boundary between the darkness of Jack’s fears and reality has virtually disintegrated. The possibility that Jack has “always been the caretaker” at the hotel is reflected by his remark to Wendy that “when I came up here for my interview it was as though I’d been here before. I mean, we all have moments of déjà vu but this was ridiculous. It was almost as though I knew what was going to be around every corner.”⁷⁷ Jack feels such familiarity with the hotel and everyone in it because they are all elements from the dark spaces of his mind. Jack is watching and participating in a narrative of his own fears and remains helpless against the allure of surrendering himself to the milieu. In fact, there is nothing else he can do once the supernatural elements of the Overlook become his reality.

The influence of the Overlook is also felt by Danny even before they arrive at the hotel. Danny is clairvoyant: he has the ability to read the thoughts of others and can also see some future events. He is also especially sensitive to ghosts and is the first to see ghosts in the Overlook. Danny’s imaginary friend, Tony, periodically shows Danny future events. Danny describes Tony as “a little boy that lives in my mouth.” No one can ever actually see Tony because Tony “hides...in [Danny’s] stomach.”⁷⁸ Before his arrival at the Overlook, Tony shows Danny an image of a hallway with an elevator at one end. In the vision the elevator doors open and a deluge of blood pours out from the elevator, flooding the hallway. Danny doesn’t necessarily understand the significance of the vision at the time of its occurrence, and perhaps views it more as a horrific dream. But this vision has marked importance for Danny’s feelings of

⁷⁶*The Shining*, scene 24.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, scene 11.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, scene 5.

disorientation. Tony shows Danny this vision because he [Tony] does not want to move to the Overlook. The vision is symbolic of an attempt to maintain and preserve the boundary between



Figure 1: Danny's vision of blood pouring from the elevator⁷⁹

Danny and the dark and murderous atmosphere of the Overlook. The outpouring of blood foreshadows the emergence of Jack's darkest self, a self which eventually overpowers and consumes him.

The influence of the Overlook on Danny's visions continues after the Torrance family arrives at the Overlook. While Jack and Wendy are viewing parts of the hotel Danny eats a bowl of ice cream with Mr. Halloran, the Overlook's head chef. Danny asks "is there something bad here?" to which Halloran replies "well...when something happens it can leave a trace of itself

⁷⁹All images from *The Shining* can be found in google images.

behind.”⁸⁰ For Danny, the disorientation experienced at the Overlook is closely tied to his visions. The ghosts Danny sees, or “traces” as Halloran calls them, are also projections of elements of Danny’s visions. What was once restricted to a mental image becomes, for Danny, a living version of the dark elements of his visions. Throughout the film Danny is consistently confronted by these ghosts. Grady’s twin daughters, seemingly well and alive, also appear to Danny at various points throughout the film. Danny sees them multiple times and at one point they invite him to “come and play with us Danny, forever and ever and ever.”⁸¹ This same phrase is later repeated by Jack when he tells Danny, “I wish we could stay here forever, and ever and ever.”⁸² Danny’s visions begin to coalesce with Jack’s loss of identity. The invitation of the Grady twins for Danny to forever remain at the hotel echoes Jack’s desire to do the same. Danny appears to be, at least in part, privy to the manifestations of Jack’s weaknesses. But for Danny, these manifestations are a warning of the dangers of remaining too long in an atmosphere such as that of the hotel. Danny’s disorientation occurs as a direct result of Jack’s insistence that they remain at the Overlook.

Danny’s disorientation is also demonstrated in the scenes where he rides his tricycle around the halls of the Overlook. These shots are filmed from Danny’s eye-level so that the viewer sees the hotel from a child’s point of view. The camera is also always at Danny’s back so that the viewer can also see where Danny is going. In some scenes Danny follows the same route, over the patterned carpet, onto the tile, then back onto the patterned carpet. Although Danny’s routes seem to get repetitive, they often end in a confrontation with some supernatural element. It is during one of these scenes that Danny sees the murdered bodies of the Grady twins. In another scene his route leads him past room 217, where he is eventually assaulted by a ghost.

⁸⁰*The Shining*, scene 10.

⁸¹*The Shining*, scene 15.

⁸²*Ibid.*, scene 16.

The repetition of Danny's routes, and the way in which they always seem to lead him to some new danger, hints that for Danny, there will be no escape from the evil of the hotel. His



Figure 2: Danny pedals around the Overlook's hallways

disorientation is magnified by the fact that, although Danny follows the same routes on his tricycle, it appears that he is being led down different paths as ghosts appear in a previously empty hallway. As Danny continues to probe the interior spaces of the hotel its horrors are unleashed. No matter how furiously Danny pedals his tricycle down its endless hallways, the hotel continues to try and engulf Danny as it does Jack. This difference is that, while Jack's assimilation and disorientation are self-induced, Danny is threatened by the dark spaces of the Overlook through his father.

The spatial disorientation felt by both Jack and Danny is also experienced to a degree by Wendy. Wendy's disorientation comes not in the form of ghosts or clairvoyant messages of

danger, but rather from the very real horror of watching her husband surrender to the darkness of his inner demons. Jack's transformation is a projection of one of Wendy's worst fears, that Jack will harm their son again just as he did when he broke Danny's arm. As Jack's grip on his sanity continues to deteriorate, he demonstrates more and more violent tendencies towards Wendy. At one point, Wendy is forced to defend herself against Jack with a baseball bat. She incapacitates him, and then locks him in one of the kitchen pantries. This gesture is not only to physically protect both her and Danny, but is also symbolic of her attempt to contain her own fears. While Jack is in the pantry, Wendy tells him she is going to take Danny down to Sidewinder on the snow machine. Jack replies, amidst maniacal laughter, that "you got a big surprise comin' to you. You're not goin' anywhere."⁸³ Jack disabled both the radio and the snow machine, effectively eliminating any means by which Wendy and Danny can escape. More fundamentally, Jack has eliminated Wendy's ability to negotiate the dark atmosphere of the Overlook. The radio and the snow machine were their only means of communication with the outside world during the winter season, and both functioned to tether Wendy and her family to reality. Without these devices, Wendy and Danny are doomed to forever remain in a state of disorientation. This is further emphasized when, despite Wendy's best efforts, Jack escapes his temporary prison.

The culmination of Wendy's disorientation occurs when she realizes that Jack is intent on murdering both her and Danny. Danny is the first to come to this realization, although he is in a trance-like state when he makes Jack's intentions known. Danny uses Wendy's lipstick to write the word "REDRUM" on one of their apartment's mirrors while Wendy is sleeping. When she awakes, Wendy sees the word in reverse which spells "MURDER." Soon after she sees this Jack breaks through the apartment door carrying an axe. Danny escapes through the bathroom window and hides in the hotel's maze. Wendy only escapes death because Jack is distracted by

⁸³*The Shining*, scene 30.

the sound of an approaching engine and leaves Wendy to investigate. Although Wendy appears to be the most unaffected by the atmosphere of the Overlook, in the end even she is in danger of being subsumed by its evil. As the hotel manipulates Jack through his weaknesses, Wendy in turn is manipulated as her husband continues to descend into madness. Wendy's fear is magnified by the isolation of the Overlook. Wendy is left with no option but to remain at the hotel and confront Jack's transformation. Wendy experiences the confusion of disorientation as the boundary between her fears and reality disintegrate the longer they remain at the Overlook.

Not only do the characters experience a sense of disorientation in the interior of the hotel, but also its exterior. The maze at the Overlook is an element of spatial disorientation. Curtis remarks that "the maze is a metaphor for all haunted places-involving a quest for what lies at its heart and a need to negotiate its complexity and learn how to return."⁸⁴ The maze is a series of disorienting twists and turns with numerous false endings. Once inside the maze one could potentially wander endlessly in an effort to reach the center and once there one must still find the way back out. In one scene, Wendy and Danny are navigating their way to the heart of the maze while Jack remains inside the Overlook watching as they enter. The camera briefly leaves Wendy and Danny and focuses on Jack, who is now hovering over a model of the maze inside the hotel. As Jack gazes down at the model it again transforms, but this time back into the maze outside the hotel. However, Jack appears to be watching from above the maze, gazing down at a miniscule Wendy and Danny finally arriving at its heart. At this point in the film Wendy, at least, is unaware of Jack's descent into madness and the maze is representative of a place of safety where Jack can only follow by his gaze. The maze is a place which people enter willingly despite the inherent feelings of disorientation experienced while trying to navigate its confusing pathways. Those who enter the borders of the maze become a part of its complexity, intruding

⁸⁴Curtis, *Dark Places*, 174.

upon its space and willfully remaining inside its borders. In this way the maze is not unlike the camouflaged insect which willingly abdicates its place of opposition to the surrounding space.



Figure 3: Jack overlooking the hedge maze

The maze also represents the final disintegration of the boundaries between Jack and his weaknesses. At the end of the film, Danny runs into the maze in an effort to escape the axe-laden Jack who is intent on murdering him. Danny hides within the maze, and then escapes while Jack is still wandering around endlessly trying to find his way out. However, Jack freezes to death within the maze, destined to remain permanently within its complex borders. The disorientation of the maze overwhelms Jack and ultimately consumes him. Jack's fate is emphasized by the closing shot of the film, in which the camera zooms in on a photo of the July 4th, 1921 ball at the Overlook. Jack is in the photo, a testament that he finally surrendered himself to the darkness of the hotel. But this photo has other implications as well. The events at the Overlook are all somehow connected to, or reflections of, Jack's weaknesses and proclivities; his quickness to



Figure 4: The Overlook Hotel's July 4th Ball in 1921 with Jack Torrance front and center

anger and his propensity towards alcohol, for example. In this light, the Overlook functions in much the same way as the haunted house film, penetrating into the inner spaces of the human body and projecting one's fears into the surrounding space. Jack's feelings of kinship with the hotel are evidence of this. The Overlook feels familiar to him because what he sees are manifestations of his own fears. Jack's feelings of losing his mind reflect his complete disorientation as these manifestations begin to blur his reality. His sense of self begins to disintegrate as he begins to interact with the ghosts of the hotel, thus making himself a part of his own nightmare.

Jack literally surrenders his "élan vital" to the Overlook, and the only remaining vestiges of his life are his frozen corpse in the maze and his face in the hotel's photo from 1921. Like the

camouflaged insect, Jack is tempted by the space of the Overlook. It is not warmth or comfort that draws Jack to the hotel; the Overlook is anything but warm and welcoming in its blatant manipulation of Jack's weakness and proclivities. For Jack, the draw of the hotel comes from something more fundamental. Jack cannot perceive that the Overlook presents more of a danger to him than does the outside world. The outside world is a world where he could no longer drink, and where his writing went unappreciated. Within the hotel's walls Jack is free from some of these restraints. He spends long hours typing, he can visit the bar virtually any time he wishes, and he can even kiss lovely young women such as the one in room 217. But there is always a catch. Jack types for long periods of time but his writing is nonsensical, an endless repetition of the line "all work and no play make Jack a dull boy."⁸⁵ He can continue to put his drinks on his "account" at the hotel, but only if he murders his wife and son, and the lovely young woman he kisses is really a necrotic old woman in disguise. Despite all this, Jack chooses to stay because the Overlook represents a place where all of Jack's fears and anxieties can play themselves out. The danger comes when Jack begins to view the Overlook as his new reality and leaves behind the world in which he lives.

Jack's renunciation of the real world in favor of the world within the Overlook results in a self-induced state of disorientation. His perverse attraction for the darkness blinds him to the threatening spaces of the hotel. By the end of the film, Jack's personal identity is so enmeshed with that of the Overlook that even the viewer begins to question the boundaries between the two. Caillois was intrigued by this same tendency of self-perpetuating destruction in the process of insect mimicry. Within the camouflaged insect "alongside the instinct of self-preservation, which in some way orients the creature toward life, there is generally speaking a sort of *instinct of renunciation* that orients it toward a mode of reduced existence, which in the end would no

⁸⁵*The Shining*, scene 28.

longer know either consciousness or feeling—the *inertia of the élan vital*, so to speak.”⁸⁶ The danger of the Overlook is found in its ability to orient Jack towards a state of inertia. By the end of the film Jack is devoid of any ability to resist surrendering to the hotel’s influence. The image of Jack’s face frozen in the snow mirrors his own state of “reduced existence,” revealing the truth that despite its dangers, dark space is disturbingly attractive.

While Jack is barraged by visual manifestations of his personal fears with the spaces of the Overlook, the American viewer undergoes a similar experience in the form of *The Shining*. American audiences consistently engage themselves in a visual version of mankind’s most deep seated anxieties, manifested on the screen and disguised as fictional narratives. This disguise keeps viewers fixed to the movie screen, unaware that the allure of the haunted house film lies not in its ability to terrify, but rather its eloquence in expressing that which is hidden in the dark spaces of the human organism. One cannot go so far as to say that this attraction signals the “inertia of the élan vital” in the viewer, but it is arguably a form of surrender. While Jack eventually surrenders his entire self to the Overlook, American viewers symbolically surrender portions of the self in favor of remaining in a sleep state. The haunted house film acts as a means of separating the self from one’s personal fears and anxieties, but the danger is found in the displacement. The greater the distance placed between the self and perceived dangers, the greater the sense of disorientation. That is, the more American audiences view the horrors of the fictional haunted house, the more desensitized they become to the actual horrors found within their own lived experience. While the haunted house film has value in its ability to coalesce fears and anxieties into a coherent narrative, the binding nature of film orients viewers towards a temptation by dark space.

⁸⁶ Caillouis, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” 32. The term “élan vital” can be translated as “vital impetus.”

Chapter 3: The Winchester Mystery House as Haunted Space

Resting in the middle of the city of San Jose, California is a massive and bizarre mansion known as “the house built by spirits.”⁸⁷ The mansion, known today as the “Winchester Mystery House,” was originally the home of Sarah Winchester, a wealthy heiress and stockholder in the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. When Sarah first purchased the home in 1886, it was an eight-bedroom farmhouse resting on a forty-five acre piece of property. She called her home “Llanada Villa.”⁸⁸ Sarah began remodeling her new home using self-sketched plans, focusing her attentions on one space at a time. As a result, her new home “was a maze of halls and rooms and foyers and parlors, connected by doors and windows and porches and verandas.”⁸⁹ By 1900, Sarah’s home resembled a large and sweeping castle rather than the modest farmhouse it once was. Today, the aura surrounding the “Winchester Mystery House” and its architect bears little, if any, resemblance to the woman who conceived of its design. Instead, a major attraction of the site is that it is reportedly haunted, perhaps even by Sarah Winchester herself. Specialized tours such as the flashlight tours, hosted every Friday the thirteenth, as well as the gala event “Fright Nights” clearly designate and mark the Winchester House as haunted space. Sarah’s Llanada Villa has been transformed into “the world’s most terrifying Halloween experience.”⁹⁰ The psychological construction of the house as a place infused with frightening elements makes the Winchester House a metaphor for dark space.

The supposed “supernatural” attractions of the Winchester Mystery House are consistent with a growing and popular trend in America; haunted house tourism.⁹¹ As a haunted historic

⁸⁷Official website for the Winchester Mystery House. www.winchestermysteryhouse.com.

⁸⁸Ignoffo, *Captive of the Labyrinth*, 91.

⁸⁹Ibid, 108.

⁹⁰ Official website for the Winchester Mystery House.

⁹¹There are a plethora of historic sites which offer special ghost tours; the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado and the Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield, Ohio, for example. There are also numerous guide books to the most

site, the Winchester House is a unique marriage of history and gothic phenomena. While inside its walls and touring its grounds visitors can enter into a dialogue with historic artifacts and simultaneously aspire to transcend the boundary between life and death. The popularity of the site certainly testifies of the success of the tourist industry in packaging the paranormal into an economically successful enterprise. But, for the tourist, there is a deeper and more fundamental meaning in these haunted structures. In his work *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Dean MacCannell remarked that “tourist attractions are an unplanned typology of structure that provides direct access to the modern consciousness or ‘world view.’”⁹² That is, tourist attractions are a product of the needs of society at a given time and directly reflect human views about their own culture. The plethora of haunted historic sites in America reflects a fascination with both history and the supernatural. Although seemingly disparate in nature, these two subjects coincide with the desire of tourists to unite with their own cultural past as well as assign meaning to their own lived experience. In essence, the “tourists’ quest is not limited to a search for traditional elements restored and embedded in the modern world; they also search for natural and contemporary social attractions in the same matrix.”⁹³

The American landscape is speckled by sites dedicated to the act of remembering; there are currently 87, 265 total listings on the National Register of Historic Places alone.⁹⁴ The vast number of historic places in America is directly related to the perception that such sites function as a source of memory for the tourist. Bachelard articulates that “the old house, for those who know how to listen, is a sort of geometry of echoes.”⁹⁵ As Bachelard suggests, the “old house” is

haunted sites in America. See *Haunted Hotels: A Guide to American and Canadian Inns and Their Ghosts* by Robin Mead, for example.

⁹² MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 2.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁹⁴ See www.nps.gov/nr/.

⁹⁵ Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 60.

comprised of a vast and intricate network of memories, absorbed into the stones and walls. The house possesses an absorbent quality where memories are collected and contained. Historic sites are perceived in the same way; embedded with images and stories of the past, historic sites are akin to vast storehouses of memory for tourists. This is important when considering that what matters most about memory is “simply the conviction that we have, as part of the sensation of remembering, that particular past experiences are not just the object, but in some vital sense the source, of our present recollections.”⁹⁶ The presence of the past is therefore both vital and pivotal in shaping and structuring human conceptions of the self. Historic sites act as an anchoring mechanism for tourists, allowing them to engage with the past in such a way that the tourist can feel a sense of individual continuity.

The absorbent nature of historic sites also opens them to the infusion of elements perceived to “haunt” their interior spaces. The transformation of historic sites into haunted spaces is linked to the marked presence of Gothic elements in American culture. Edmundson describes gothic as “the art of haunting,”⁹⁷ and articulates that “we now find ourselves in a culture where the Gothic idiom has slipped over from fiction and begun to shape and regulate our perception of reality, thrusting us into a world in which crazy militiamen, deranged priests, panoptic power, bizarre molesters, Freddy, Jason, and Leatherface constitute reality. They are— to more and more of us—what’s out there.”⁹⁸ That is, that the gothic convention of terror is not solely relegated to the fictional novel or film; television and newspapers are rife with accounts of violence, catastrophe and mayhem in real life. The American subconscious is shaped by these images, infusing lived experience with a sense of hyperreality. This hyperreality in turn shapes tourist expectations of haunted sites. Consequently, tourist attractions have become embedded

⁹⁶ Cubitt, *History and Memory*, 78.

⁹⁷ Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street*, xi.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

with the dark elements which help shape and structure human perceptions of society and of the world in which they live and interact. The value of haunted historic sites is in their ability to not only fulfill desires of authenticity, but also to provide places where tourists can fulfill their expectations in literal space.

The Winchester House functions in much the same way, rooting the tourist to the past while simultaneously resonating with the “horrors” of the present. The tours and events at the Winchester House are meticulously constructed to match tourist expectations. Although the house itself is perceived to contain the occasional wandering spirit, the specialized tours at the site heighten the tourist experience with new levels of anxiety-inducing elements. Visitors are promised “bone-chilling creatures and blood-curdling moments” in a “mansion empowered by the undead.”⁹⁹ What is intriguing about the Winchester House in particular is that perceptions of the house as haunted space emerged even before Sarah Winchester’s death. Popular legends claim that her construction decisions were motivated by attempts to appease the spirits of those killed by Winchester Rifles. Today, some of the tours take visitors through parts of the house where the spirits of some of Sarah Winchester’s employees have been sighted. The overall effect is of a palimpsest of spirits, all contained within physical space. Consequently, the supernatural acts as a medium for dialogue between tourists and Sarah Winchester. In fact, because of the long held belief that the Winchester House is “a house built by spirits,” the supernatural lens is often the only lens through which visitors frame their perceptions and connections with the site.

The Tourist-Site Relationship

In his discussion on dark space, Vidler suggests that space becomes haunted when the mind perceives that all its fear-inducing elements are on the brink of reemerging from their

⁹⁹ Official site for the Winchester Mystery House.

marginalized space. Vidler indicates that the modern period's hospitals, prisons, asylums and other such places of containment functioned to "eradicate the domain of myth, suspicion, tyranny, and above all the irrational."¹⁰⁰ That is, feelings of doubt, fear and uncertainty could be counteracted by dividing the rest of society from the sick, from criminals, and from the insane. But the conception of such spaces was also a way of restructuring the dynamics between the self and the other. In essence, it was a means of creating a new reality, one in which the self could be permanently separated from perceived social ills, and feared and threatening elements could be exorcised from within the body of society. More fundamentally, these places of containment were literal places, grounding the theoretical dark spaces within the realm of the tangible. Today, America's hospitals, prisons, and other similar institutions fail to completely contain disease and violence. The dangerous elements of society still penetrate the more intimate spaces of the home via the news and other media, as well as in literal acts of domestic violence and disease. In this same vein, one of the premises of the gothic "is that we ought to be very afraid—and of nothing so much as ourselves."¹⁰¹ Consequently, humans attempt to psychologically extract the dangerous elements of society in an effort to create their own tangible dark spaces. Although the "haunting" of historic sites is generally in the form of supernatural phenomenon, the ghosts found within their spaces mirror the ghosts which haunt American culture.

Although humans seek to distance themselves from perceived horrors, at the same time they seek to bridge the gap created by the separation. In relation to literature and film, Edmundson remarked that "Double stories seem to proliferate when people sense an unnegotiable divide between the true or natural self and society, between nature and culture."¹⁰² The "divide" in American culture is a divide between parts of the self, both personal and societal.

¹⁰⁰ Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, 168.

¹⁰¹ Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street*, 11.

¹⁰² Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street*, 10.

Even though this divide is self-imposed, it nonetheless creates a type of void or negative space between the self and one's culture. Consequently, human nature seeks to fill in the void. In America, tourism is a mechanism by which humans can find new ways to negotiate the gulf between the self and society. Historic sites in particular are rendered as conduits of American culture, and "it is by means of ... museums, monuments and living reminders that the present frames up its history."¹⁰³ Not only are they perceived as permanent fixtures in the American landscape, they also function as places where memory is stored. In this way, historic sites engage in the role of containment, opening them up to the absorption of other elements, namely those that are psychologically abject to society.

The first way in which haunted historic sites enable humans to bridge the gap between the self and culture is directly linked to their role as storehouses of memory. French historian Pierre Nora describes historic sites as places where "memory crystallizes and secretes itself,"¹⁰⁴ and asserts that their rise is attributable to "a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn."¹⁰⁵ The consciousness of a gap in human memory bears significant consequences in the context of self-realization. Memory is a mechanism through which humans are assured that they existed in the past, that they presently exist, and will hopefully exist in the future. Consequently, the "anchoring of memories in past experiences somehow testifies to our own essential continuity as conscious individuals."¹⁰⁶ Similarly, historic sites function as a means of reforming or restructuring the past in such a way as to provide a sense of continuity for visitors. Historic sites are viewed as places from which visitors can directly access the past from the present, and even as a shortcut to that which is

¹⁰³ MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 88.

¹⁰⁴ Nora, "Les Lieux de Mémoire," 7.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Cubitt, *History and Memory*, 78.

outside of one's own memory. These sites anchor humans with a fixed point of reference from which to understand the place of the self in the linear progression of time.

Closely related to the function of historic sites as conduits to the past is their role in the formation of relationships between visitors and the history of a site. Next to feeling a sense of continuity, the authenticity of the historic site is paramount. In his study of the meaning of tourist sites in America, Dean MacCannell remarked, "The generalized anxiety about the authenticity of interpersonal relationships in modern society is matched by certainty about the authenticity of touristic sights. The rhetoric of tourism is full of manifestations of the importance of the authenticity of the relationship between tourists and what they see."¹⁰⁷ In light of MacCannell's assertions, perceptions about the authenticity of historic sites are at least as important as daily human interactions. Conceptions of the self are largely constructed around one's relationships with others, whether based on shared interests or just as a point of reference from which to view the self. For a site to be attractive for tourists, it must offer this same level of intimacy. Historic sites in particular have an aura of authenticity as preserved relics of the past. As tourists visit these sites they acquire new images of the past, which in turn create new memories for the tourist. Consequently, visiting tourist sites plays a pivotal role in the construction of personal identity. Even though a site may not be part of one's personal history, "who we think we are need not be wholly determined by what we are aware of personally remembering."¹⁰⁸ The physicality of historic sites engages visitors in a type of dialogue with the past which cannot be found by any other means. The authenticity of a site is magnified by the presence of physical structures, which structures act to separate, symbolically at least, tourists from the present.

¹⁰⁷ MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 14.

¹⁰⁸ Cubitt, *History and Memory*, 123.

Period furniture, costumes, and other items heighten this experience. Although highly structured around tourist expectations, it is the perception of sites as authentic that is paramount.

Because historic sites are often perceived as synonymous with authenticity, tourists begin to seek more and more such sites as the only source for authenticity in the modern world. Lived experience does not satisfy the need for authenticity for “everywhere in the minutiae of our material culture, we encounter reminders of the availability of authentic experiences at other times and in other places.”¹⁰⁹ If it is perceived that meaningful experiences can only be found elsewhere, then daily life adopts a sense of falseness or unreality. MacCannell articulates that “a spurious society is one that must be left behind in order to see a true sight. From the standpoint of the tourist, his own everyday life in the modern world is spurious.”¹¹⁰ Because of the alluring promise of authentic experiences, American tourists remain enthralled with historic sites.

Visitors return again and again seeking reassurance that, at least somewhere in American culture, one can find a measure of the genuine and briefly escape the more spurious side of society. What is particularly intriguing about this idea of an elsewhere of authenticity is that the information provided about historic sites is often “loaded in favor of the present.”¹¹¹ That is, bits and pieces of historical events and people associated with a particular site are fashioned together in such a way as to present a coherent narrative for visitors. Even though much of the information present is not always accurate, tourists favor the perception of authenticity over actuality.

The American obsession with historic sites is matched by its obsession with haunted spaces. Edmundson remarked that the “gothic...sets out to haunt its audience, possess them so they can think of nothing else. They have to read it—or see it—again and again to achieve some

¹⁰⁹ MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 148.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

peace.”¹¹² As a gothically rendered space, America gives place to this same type of possession by haunted sites. For many American tourists, authenticity is found within haunted space. Haunted space is authentic space because it echoes the reality of a lived experience infused with horror. Barry Curtis also remarked on this dual nature of the haunted house. Culturally, “the haunted house became both desirable, as evidence of a place fully possessed and animated by history and meaning, and anxiogenic, as a place of unresolved historical conflicts.”¹¹³ Just as tourists “transfer” authenticity from daily life to historic sites, the same can be said about their relationship with haunted spaces. The displacement of the threatening elements of society within marginalized spaces enables the construction of a new world, one in which violence and terror remain on the periphery. Consequently, haunted historic sites are more than mere commodities. They are, instead, “a means to an end. The end is an immense accumulation of reflexive experiences which synthesize fiction and reality into a vast symbolism, a modern world.”¹¹⁴ In this new world, confrontations with feared and threatening elements are a matter of choice rather than a guarantee. If human fears and anxieties are bound within haunted spaces they can be controlled.

Structuring Haunted Spaces in the Winchester Mystery House

In the spring of 1923, just six months after the death of Sarah Winchester, John H. Brown and his wife, Mayme, leased the Winchester property and shortly thereafter opened its doors to the public as a tourist attraction.¹¹⁵ From the beginning, the Browns capitalized on rumors of Sarah’s supposed interest in spiritualism to advertise her home as a bizarre and mysterious structure haunted by spirits. But, the Browns were not the first to highlight spiritual presences in

¹¹² Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street*, 5.

¹¹³ Curtis, *Dark Places*, 44.

¹¹⁴ MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 23.

¹¹⁵ Ignoffo, *Captive of the Labyrinth*, 208.



Figure 5: Front view of the Winchester Mystery House. ¹¹⁶

the house; rumors purporting that Sarah was heavily influenced by spirits in her architectural decisions abounded even before her death. In June of 1911 *The New York Times* reported that Sarah once told a few friends that “she had received a message from the spirit world warning her that all would be well so long as the sound of hammers did not cease in the house or on the grounds.”¹¹⁷ Today, the tourist industry continues to augment perceptions of the Winchester Mystery House as haunted space, and of Sarah Winchester as an eccentric and bizarre woman who “travelled through her house in a roundabout fashion, supposedly confusing any mischievous ghosts that might be following her.”¹¹⁸ Even the signs and billboards used to attract visitors to the house feature a skull in the center. The image of the Winchester House as a place

¹¹⁶ All photos of the Winchester Mystery House are courtesy of David Swann and can be found on the official website for the house.

¹¹⁷ “Winchester’s Widow Dying,” *The New York Times*, 12 June, 1911.

¹¹⁸ Official website for the Winchester Mystery House.

infested by the supernatural continues to attract tourists, and is enhanced by specialized tours which promise visitors bone-chilling and terrifying experiences. But the advertisements and tours which highlight the supernatural elements of the Winchester House eclipse details of Sarah Winchester's life in favor of tourist expectations.

The image of the Winchester House as haunted space is, in part, facilitated by rumors concerning the person of Sarah Winchester. In her biography of Sarah Winchester, Mary Jo Ignoffo remarks

Few nineteenth-century American women have come down in history as parodied and fractured as Sarah Winchester. A woman of many paradoxes, the wealthy Winchester worked. She did not enjoy leisure, the most prized goal of her class, gender, and social standing. She preferred work, and she spent her California days and her money building and rebuilding her large, rambling house, working as superintendant of the construction project, a decidedly unfeminine occupation, directing architectural and landscape design, tradesmen, and experimental utility installations.¹¹⁹

Sarah Winchester's Llanada Villa, now the Winchester Mystery House, was not the first architectural project she was involved in. In 1866 Sarah's father-in-law, Oliver Winchester, began construction on a home on Prospect Hill in New Haven, Connecticut. Sarah, and her husband William, largely oversaw the design and construction of the estate.¹²⁰ Sarah's architectural interests continued after she moved to California. Sarah not only oversaw the remodeling of her own home, but also assisted in remodeling a home for her sister Belle. She later purchased a number of properties, including a home in nearby Atherton, and a houseboat and cottage in Burlingame Park. She also purchased multiple properties for various family members throughout her life. The number of properties she purchased and remodeled portrays an

¹¹⁹ Ignoffo, *Captive of the Labyrinth*, 121-122.

¹²⁰ Ignoffo, *Captive of the Labyrinth*, 68.

individual with an interest in both real estate and architecture, rather than a preoccupation with appeasing spirits.

Some of the peculiarities of the house which today are attributed to eccentricity, such as stairs which end in ceilings and doors which open into walls, also have practical explanations. Prior to 1906 Sarah's house proper reached five stories in some places, and she even added a seven-story tower at one point. The San Francisco earthquake in April of 1906 caused considerable damage to the house, even toppling the seven-story tower. According to her biographer, in order to render the structure safe Sarah ordered the removal of all the debris and rubble. Portions of the house were also sealed off. Once this was accomplished, Sarah opted to leave the house as it appeared rather than continue with its construction. Consequently, water pipes protruded in odd places, fireplaces were sealed off below ceiling level, and staircases were left intact even though upper floors had been sealed off. In essence, construction on Llanada Villa ceased after 1906, rather than continuing unceasingly up until her death as current legends claim.¹²¹ There are, however, some structural oddities which remain unexplained; such as windows set in floors rather than walls. Because the tours and legends surrounding the Winchester house focus on its bizarre nature, tourists have transferred their perceptions of authenticity from that which is real to that presented as such.

¹²¹ Ibid., 156.

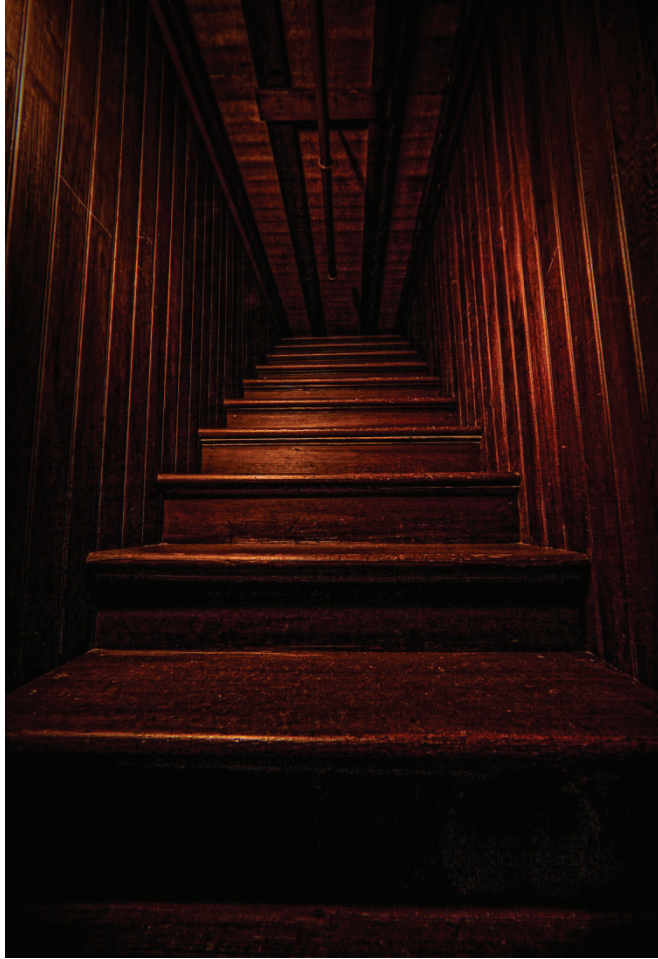


Figure 6: Staircase leading nowhere

Although largely shrouded in mystery and conjecture, the nature of the Winchester House as a historic site still has value for the tourist. As a preserved relic from the past the house is vested with historical value, which speaks to tourists' desire for authenticity. To augment the perceived authenticity of the site, tour guides take visitors through some of Sarah Winchester's most personal spaces, such as her bedroom, bathroom, and the kitchen. This level of intimacy has marked value for tourists. MacCannell designates these more intimate and informal spaces as *back*

regions, and the more formal areas such as the parlor or exterior of the house as *front regions*.

The allure of back regions is a zone where all of the "real" action takes place. Back regions are perceived to be stripped of all unauthentic elements; role playing or performing, for example.

Opening up the back regions of the house to visitors creates a sense of shared space between the tourists and the "eccentric" Sarah Winchester. This sense of "being 'one of them,' or at one with 'them,' means, in part, being permitted to share back regions with 'them.' This is a sharing which allows one to see behind the others' mere performances, to perceive and accept the others for what they really are."¹²² By delving into the minute details of Mrs. Winchester's personal space, visitors can perceive themselves as part of the setting rather than part of the audience.

¹²²MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 94.

Consequently, visitors play an integral role in shaping the overall persona of the house. The story of the Winchester Mystery House is told in such a way as to encourage visitors to “come up with their own conclusions about Mrs. Winchester and the house after seeing the details and how meticulous she was.”¹²³ In this way, tourists extract meaning from the site that is highly individualized and imbued with a sense of authenticity.

Because visitors play such a pivotal role in the formation of the Winchester House as a historic site, its function is largely structured by the needs of contemporary American tourists. MacCannell articulates that “tourist attractions are plastic forms: the eventual shape and stability they have is...socially determined.”¹²⁴ Intriguingly, the perception of the Winchester House as a haunted place has attracted visitors to the site since it opened to the public in 1923. Although the context of the supernatural legends has changed, the ghostly presences at the Winchester House have remained a consistent theme. Today, the embedding of spirits in the interior spaces of the house is a mechanism through which visitors can bridge the gap between the self and the sometimes elusive past. Barry Curtis remarked that “the proliferation of ‘most haunted’ television programs testifies to the idea of haunting as a popular form of access to history.”¹²⁵ Ghosts are perceived as “avatars of memory,”¹²⁶ capable of engaging history and contemporary humans in a dialogue with one another. Although ghosts are denizens of the past they are, by nature, capable of transcending the boundaries of time. But ghosts are also a means of engaging visitors in a dialogue with their own, contemporary culture. The “haunting” nature of ghosts makes them a familiar entity in a culture that is daily haunted by both violent and fear-inspiring

¹²³Shozo Kagoshima, General Manager of the Winchester Mystery House. Personal interview with author, August 13, 2010.

¹²⁴MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 133.

¹²⁵ Curtis, *Dark Places*, 216.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 215.



Figure 7: Servant's kitchen with doorway open to below

elements. Similarly, “ghost stories... contain spirits; they capture them for us and keep them before our eyes, scaring us but containing that fright in narrative form.”¹²⁷ Even as humans seek to displace the horrors of lived experience, they also seek to reconnect themselves with their own culture.

One way in which ghosts connect visitors to the Winchester House, and to other tourists, is through online media. Tourists can virtually visit the Winchester House without ever leaving the confines of their own home,

and it is often the information about the site which initially structures perceptions about the site itself. In many cases, “the first contact a sightseer has with a sight is not the sight itself but some representation thereof.”¹²⁸ Plentiful information about the Winchester House is available online through the official website. Aside from information about pricing and tour times, the website includes information about Sarah Winchester's life, about the construction of the house and details about the house itself, as well as a collection of legends surrounding Mrs. Winchester and visitors to her home. The website also contains a collection of photos of the house and grounds. One photo in particular features the Winchester Mystery House after dark. In this photo the statue of Chief Little Swan is

¹²⁷ Goldstein, *Haunting Experiences*, 2.

¹²⁸ MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 110.



Figure 8: Nighttime at the Winchester Mystery House with Chief Little Swan in foreground

depicted in the foreground with a full moon shining above, and the house, the moon, and the statue are all shrouded in mist. The mist makes each of these elements spectral in appearance, reflections of the phantasms and spirits which reside within its walls. The online video gallery is also structured to create expectations of haunting. Of particular note is a short documentary titled, “A Legend Told by Mrs. Lillian Gish.” Originally aired in 1963, this film centers on the legends surrounding both Sarah

Winchester and her house. Foreboding background music also adds to the eerie effect.¹²⁹ Other videos reference the appearance of the Winchester House on popular shows such as *Ghost Hunters* and *Most Haunted Live*. Each of these virtual elements functions to enhance the supernatural atmosphere of the site. On a deeper level, the virtual visitors of the Winchester House resemble its ghostly presences; both can wander through the house at will in a state of disembodiment. In this way visitors to the website can also symbolically traverse the boundary between the self and culture.

Another special feature of the website is the availability of visitor accounts of spirit sightings at the Winchester House at various times, and in various locations around the premises.

¹²⁹ The video gallery can be directly accessed at <http://winchestermysteryhouse.com/videogallery.cfm>.

According to the house's official website, there have been a total of 462 spirit sightings as of August 2012. This feature allows individual visitors to connect their personal experiences to a more meaningful whole; as MacCannell remarked, "an authentic touristic experience involves not merely connecting a marker to a sight,¹³⁰ but a participation in a collective ritual, in connecting one's own marker to a sight already marked by others."¹³¹ The website lists each location where sightings have occurred, and includes personal accounts from a variety of visitors at each location. Those who view the website are connected to a variety of individuals through their personal accounts and can feel a sense of shared cultural experiences. Perceptions about the Winchester House are thus not only structured individually, but also through online interactions with other members of society. The ghost sightings at the Winchester House provide a common foundation from which visitors build relationships with one another, and with the site itself.

Although legends surrounding the life of Sarah Winchester already infuse the Winchester House with the supernatural, specialized tours and events augment the perception of the house as haunted space. One of these specialized events is the flashlight tour, held every Friday the 13th and around Halloween. In these guided tours, visitors are led through the Winchester House after dark with only a souvenir flashlight to light the way. The flashlight tours run approximately every 7 minutes from 6:30 p.m. until 1 a.m. and are sometimes sold out weeks in advance. For the 2012 Halloween season, the Winchester House will also be offering self-guided flashlight tours. Guests will be free to wander the darkened mansion on their own "with only the moonlight, a souvenir flashlight, and [their] imagination to provide illumination through the bewildering labyrinth of rooms and stairways."¹³² Flashlight tours have been offered at the

¹³⁰ MacCannell uses the term "markers" to refer to any information about a given site: brochures, maps, lectures, museum guides, stories, etc. Markers are the signifiers whereas sights are the signified.

¹³¹ MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 137.

¹³² Official website for the Winchester Mystery House.

Winchester Mystery House for several decades and were originally instituted as a means of driving local tourism.¹³³ Whatever the reason for their inception, the continued popularity of the flashlight tours suggests that stumbling through the darkened passages of Sarah's labyrinthine mansion is, in some way, alluring. On a much grander and more horrific scale, the Winchester House now hosts a fear-inducing event called "Fright Nights."¹³⁴ The "survival guide" for the event mandates that guests avoid "bloodthirsty long lost souls with Winchester rifles," and that "screaming and crying" are allowed and encouraged.¹³⁵ Participants in the Fright Nights event not only have the opportunity to interact with the spirits which haunted Sarah Winchester, but also the dark elements which daily haunt their own lives.

The specialized events incorporating horror and the supernatural heighten perceptions of the Winchester House as haunted space, and the presence of supernatural elements, whether real or produced, increases the site's aura of authenticity. But this perception also has deeper cultural significance. The Winchester House acts as a form of dark space because it has been both literally and figuratively transformed into a dark place. The proliferation of the flashlight tours, as well as the inception of bigger and scarier events such as Fright Nights, demonstrates a correlation with the proliferation of images of horror and violence in mainstream media. But despite its more frightening elements, visitors are drawn to the Winchester House because of an innate drive to seek genuine experiences. MacCannell suggests that "the touristic experience...presents itself as a truthful revelation, as the vehicle that carries the onlooker behind false fronts into reality."¹³⁶ The "truthful revelation" found within the Winchester House is that the personal spaces of the home are not the only haunted spaces found within contemporary

¹³³Shozo Kagoshima, General Manager of the Winchester Mystery House. Personal interview with author. August 13, 2010.

¹³⁴ This event was first produced for the 2011 Halloween season, and will be available again for 2012.

¹³⁵ Official website for the Winchester Mystery House.

¹³⁶ MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 102.

culture. Even though contemporary fears are not literally transferred from the intimate spaces of the home to the social spaces of tourist sites, the embedding of these fears in tourist sites gives that illusion. As American tourists participate in the popular ritual of visiting haunted sites, they augment the subconscious perception that these sites are designated places of containment. The interior spaces of the Winchester House not only ground visitors to the past but also provide, at least symbolically, a physical boundary separating the self from the horrors which threaten to overwhelm lived experience.

Conclusion

As the American mass media continues to infuse the television and internet with images of the darkest side of humanity, humans find new ways in which to express and contextualize their corresponding fears. Shirley Jackson once remarked that “fiction comes from experience.”¹³⁷ For Jackson, the fictional narratives which humans create are, to a degree, grounded in reality. In this light, fiction takes on a more weighty purpose. Through works of fiction, humans can articulate a wide range of feelings and emotions which cannot always be accurately expressed in nonfiction narratives. Although this is a subconscious process, fictionalizing reality provides a different vantage point from which to view life experiences. For the contemporary American, fictional narratives anesthetize the shocking effects of living in a culture that is portrayed as violent and destructive. But even as humans attempt to externalize and harness cultural fears, they also experience a measure of attraction for its manifestations. Even as the sacred spaces of the home are ruptured and become a source of anxiety, the haunted house narrative simultaneously becomes more popular. Humans are attracted to the haunted house because, underneath the veneer of specters and spirits, lies a subconscious recognition that haunted houses are a product of externalized fears. Haunted houses are a part of the inner recesses of the self and society because the haunted house is initially structured within these spaces. There will always be an indissoluble link, no matter how subtle, between humans and the haunted spaces of society.

As the media continues to facilitate the penetration of cultural violence into the home’s intimate borders, its rooms and hallways are increasingly filled with dark space. Domestic space becomes uncanny as notions of home are subverted and the house becomes the center of unrest and anxiety. As the protective borders of the home crumble, the distinction between the self and

¹³⁷ Jackson, “Experience and Fiction,” 202.

surrounding space is dissolved. Domestic space is thus transformed from a place of perceived refuge into a place that is haunted from within. It is against this threat of the destruction of homely space that humans reconstruct and redefine spaces in order to maintain a sense of equilibrium. In constructing dark spaces, humans seek to steady and locate themselves in an atmosphere that is disorienting. Even though only symbolically displacing perceived dangers, dark spaces nevertheless act to give society a perceived measure of control over threatening elements. Although creating dark spaces won't completely repair the "fissures" in the contemporary home, perhaps the home can at least be prevented from crumbling completely. And, because of the intimate connection between the spaces of the home and both familial and personal identity, the preservation of the house as a refuge is paramount. Further, because it is a subtext for the disintegration of domestic space, the haunted house narrative is widely applicable. It is not a genre fitting only "for people who [live] in the cellars of their own minds and never [want] to come out."¹³⁸ In short, humans need dark spaces in order to understand their place in the "light." The frequency with which the haunted house appears in literature, film, and tourism requires a new lens through which to view its ascendance in contemporary culture. More than just a source of cheap thrills and entertainment, the haunted house is an expression of society's most deep-seated fears. When these fears become too overpowering, they are psychologically displaced and bound within designated spaces. Whether found within the pages of a text, on the movie screen, or in the physical realm of historic sites, haunted spaces provide safe vantage points from which to view cultural fears. Although these spaces become very dark indeed, they match the perceived darkness of lived experience and articulate that experience in cohesive narratives. As America's dark spaces are structured by externalized fears, these spaces in turn

¹³⁸ Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street*, x.

redefine the boundaries between the self, society, and humanity's angst and unease. In this light, the haunted house is a mechanism through which to view the inner spaces of society.

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