Dangers Inside the Home: Rereading Haunted House Films from a Gothic Perspective
（家庭内にある危機：ゴシック研究から読み直す幽霊屋敷映画）

Chiho Nakagawa*

SUMMARY IN JAPANESE: 本論文は 1970 年代から 80 年代に公開された『家』、『悪魔の棲む家』、『シャイニング』などの幽霊屋敷映画が、アメリカの家族の問題を探るものであると指摘し、21 世紀の幽霊屋敷映画においてその問題がどう変化したかを検証するものである。現代アメリカの幽霊屋敷映画は、女性が自分と家との関係を探る女性ゴシック、そして家父長が自分と家の関係を探るアメリカン・ゴシックの伝統を受け継いでいる。そのフォーミュラをデイル・ベイリーの幽霊屋敷物語の議論に基づいて示した上で、1982 年公開の『ポルターガイスト』と 2015 年公開のリメイクの違いを中心に現代の幽霊屋敷映画を考察する。その結果、20 世紀後半の幽霊屋敷物語が家父長制・資本主義社会の父親の理想像の失敗を検証したのに対し、21 世紀ではその失敗を認めた上で修復に努力する物語へと変化していると指摘できる。

＊中川　千帆　Associate Professor, Faculty Division of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nara Women's University, Nara, Japan.

Every year we see new haunted house films, and many directors and writers are taking pains to offer the audience new twists, not just to follow and recreate old tricks. One of the most commercially successful haunted house films in the 1980s, *Poltergeist*, was remade in 2015, and its reworking reflects the changes in one of the most important themes of haunted house films, family. In this paper, I will first attempt to define the American haunted house film as an established genre rooted in the formulas of Gothic fiction. Then I will delineate the thematic changes in haunted house films through an analysis of the films today in comparison to the films in the 1970s and 1980s, in order to understand their significance in terms of Gothic criticism.

I will argue that the heyday of American haunted house films in the late 1970s and early 1980s established the subgenre as an exploration of the American family from a male perspective. New developments in recent years, however, suggest that the concept of family is going through a minor change. The haunted house films in the 1970s and 1980s question and confirm the nuclear family structure that was perceived to be threatened during this period by a worsening economy and the changing social conditions that gave rise to second-wave feminism. Newer films depart from long-held assumptions regarding the family structure and suggest that the power of patriarchy is not taken for granted anymore. In order to clarify the current changes in haunted house films, my argument will focus on a comparison between the old and the new *Poltergeist* (1982/2015). I shall also refer to *The Amityville Horror* (1979), and *Burnt Offerings* (1976) and *The Shining* (1980)—the prototype of haunted house films—as well as new movies such as *The Possession* (2012) and *Haunter* (2013) to illuminate changes in the concept of the American family.

The Horror Film and the Gothic

Kim Newman mentions that the popularity of haunted house films is "perennial rather than cyclical" (217), and claims that haunted house films never come in cascades and do not fall into excess like other horror subgenres. Yet one can detect some regularity or cycles not only in horror films but also in haunted house films. Mark Jancovich notes that horror films in the 1950s and 1960s were remade in the 1970s and 1980s, and there is a

wave of remakes of 1970s and 1980s haunted house films in the twenty-first century.[1] Either way, the long-term popularity of haunted house films must convince anyone that they are a solid subgenre, although there are not many academic discussions.

Of the major patterns of haunted house films, one puts psychic investigators in the center, and another puts a family. Psychic investigator stories place a group of people, both amateur and professional, into an uninhabited haunted house to do research on supernatural phenomena, while family stories normally start with a family—father, mother, multiple children—moving into a new house only to find themselves tormented by supernatural phenomena. Although one of the first critically acclaimed American haunted house films is *The Haunting* (1963), a classic psychic investigator story, which is based on Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), more family stories have been produced and released in the United States.

Family is such an important element for many horror films that Tony Williams argues for the genre "family horror film," which belongs—as he says—to an "American tradition whose literary roots influenced a cinematic tradition developing from Universal, Val Lewton, Hitchcock, and other films into a definable 1970s genre" (14). The haunted house film of the family theme can be a part of this genre. On the other hand, Andrew Tudor dismisses family as a mere "convenient and powerful" tool for "audience identification" (75), and insists that the family is not a homogeneously agreed concept in the genre to consider as a valid theme. I would like to argue, conversely, that family is an important theme because its concept is contested, and haunted houses provide the optimum setting for exploring what it means to be a family through interactions with other family members inside their home.

The origin of haunted house stories as a species of family drama can be found in the subgenre of female Gothic, and more directly in American Gothic fiction. Comparisons between the horror film and Gothic literature are not new, as many arguments on horror films cite Gothic fiction as one of their ancestors. For example, David J. Skal traces the sources of the American horror film to Gothic literary tradition and the carnival or freak show, Mark Jancovich notes the Gothic elements in early Hollywood horror films in the 1930s, and then those in the 1950s (3-4), and Rick Worland finds

a "Gothic revival" in horror films between 1957 to 1974. Harry M. Benshoff finds the direct ancestor of horror films in the mid-nineteenth century "penny dreadfuls"—cheap serial pulp fictions, which in fact combine the "visceral shocks of the era's freak shows" and Gothic horror (212). In most cases, what film critics call "Gothic elements" are visualizations of Gothic novels and characters, such as vampires and Frankenstein's monster, and atmospheric settings such as "deserted cobwebbed mansions, creaking doors, secret passageways, dark clouds skirting across the moon" (Benshoff 220). The "Gothic elements" that I refer to in my discussion of the haunted house film are its thematic concerns, especially those of female Gothic, because the haunted house film also explores the issues of family by focusing on the domestic space.

Female Gothic has established the trope in which architectural structures become a symbol to represent inter-human relationships. In Ann Radcliffe's Gothic novels, old castles and monasteries become a prison for women, representing the fears and horrors of family life from a woman's perspective. Male Gothic does not limit its male protagonist to an enclosed structure in pursuing his insatiable desire, which often takes him over to the demonic dimension. Kate Ferguson Ellis argues that female Gothic "subvert[s] the idealization of the home," demonstrating that the safe haven is in fact a prison for a woman (viii).[2] Contained in the house are desire, hope, disappointment, obsession, and hatred surrounding the family. Radcliffe's novels, or novels written in her fashion, indicate that the ghosts that the heroines see or think they see are symbols of their anxieties and fears of situating themselves in the patriarchal family structure.[3]

In the New World, Gothic house fiction has gone through a slight but definitive change. The first American Gothic novelist, Charles Brockden Brown, produced a very American Gothic novel, based on actual incidents that occurred in the New World. *Wieland* is a story of a patriarch who murders his entire family, seduced and lured by a mysterious voice. Elizabeth Barnes argues that Brown chose familicide—killing of one's spouse and children—as the "subject of his national novel" in order to "establish a new 'American' (as opposed to British) literature" (46-47). Later haunted house stories in American literature, such as *The House of the Seven Gables* and "The Fall of the House of Usher," also focus on the relationship of the patriarch with the house, rather than a female protagonist with her home. The American

Gothic haunted house story illuminates the concept of family from the other side, not from the perspective of women.

Major haunted house films in the 1970s and 1980s, and to some extent today, justify Newman's claims that haunted house films are literary in nature (217), because they do correspond to the theme that was found and explored in the first American Gothic novel. The American haunted house stories predominantly deal with familicides by one of the family members, in many cases the father. He may be possessed by bad spirits, demons, or those of the past residents of the house.

In fact, Bernice Murphy calls Theodore Wieland a "direct ancestor of *The Shining*'s axe-wielding Jack Torrance" (106). In addition, the patriarchs of the family in *The Shining*, *Burnt Offerings* (1976), and *Sinister* (2012) are all writers, or rather would-be writers. Frederic Jameson argues in his discussion of *The Shining* that Jack Torrance's failure to write—he sits in front of his typewriter all day but he just types repeatedly "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy"—is inevitable since he has "nothing to say": the "family unit of which he is a part has been reduced to a kind of stark isolation, the coexistence of three random individuals who henceforth represent nothing beyond themselves, and those very relations with each other [are] thus called (violently) in question" (94). Other writer-fathers also fail to write in the midst of hauntings and their families falling apart. Ben Rolfe in *Burnt Offerings* hardly spends his time in his own office, and Ellison Oswald in *Sinister* just watches family films—Super 8 mm films of the victims of haunted houses/familicides—instead of writing. It is true that the former two are based on novels, and one can argue that those novels are writings about not being able to write. When they are turned into films, however, there is another layer. Dysfunctional families may not give fathers anything to write but films a great deal to show; in other words, the father succeeds in immortalizing himself not in writing but in pictures. The endings of the films all show them in photographs or other visual recording media. Jack Torrance finds his resting place in a picture with all the ghosts of the past; Ben Rolfe is memorialized in one of the photo frames in the living room as one of the numerous victims of the house; and Ellison Oswald becomes a character in one of the family films that depict the victims of demonic familicides. Barry Curtis argues that the "space of the photograph, like the space of the screen, is capable of communicating across time, functioning as

a portal that enables travel between locations" (125). Those photographs and films are the portals to hauntings or to the other dimension for another family, and for the audience.

Having a writer-father, however, has developed into a common trope possibly because of the plot advantage that particular character setting offers: he stays home more because he works at home, and thus the audience can tangibly see his conflict between his work and family life. The father's struggle as a father and a family man, and a writer and an ambitious professional, unfolds inside the family home. Gothic in its concern, the haunted house film explores the conflicting and changing family relationships that unravel inside the home.

The Formula of the American Haunted House Film

In this section, I will present a formula of the American Haunted Film, based on the one Dale Bailey discusses in his study on haunted house fiction—his discussion is limited to novels—but revised and fine-tuned so that it corresponds to the haunted house film from the 1970s to the 1980s, and to today. His formula captures the essence of haunted house films, but since my focus is to see ideological changes in the concept of family in the American haunted house film, my formula reflects particularly American conditions.

The first item in the formula is the setting, which can be any house, old or new, disturbed by non-human entities. In Bailey's lists, what is needed in a haunted house are "1. an unsavory history, 2. an aristocratic name," and for it to be "3. disturbed by supernatural events usually unrelated to human ghosts" (56). Other critics also emphasize the importance of the past. For Curtis, haunting is "a reminder that the forces of history and the economy create restless spaces" while "disturbed spirits" are displaced and marginalized (14), and for Newman, a past is "essential to a haunted house" (217). An ancient castle or an old aristocratic house with a dark past is more atmospheric as the setting, but a brand-new house in the suburbs can be haunted, too. Contemporary American haunted house films have to reflect American conditions, as American Gothic fiction does. In fact, the lack of Gothic castles was a problem in creating American Gothic stories, but

writers, such as Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne, made up for this lack with what they could find in the New World: the wilderness, native American legends, and the vast woods. In the preface of *Edgar Huntley*, Brown states:

> Puerile superstition and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness, are far more suitable; and, for a native of America to overlook these, would admit of no apology. (3)

Thus, as Murphy and others point out, American Gothic looks to "its own landscape to provide substitute settings" (105). Murphy insists that the early Puritan surroundings of "enticing yet deeply threatening swaths of thick forests" direct them to see their home and families as the "only trustworthy elements of a strange new world" (106), thus turning itself into a claustrophobic unsafe place. *Poltergeist* is the prime example of American haunted house fiction in the sense that the house in question is an ordinary not-so-old house in the suburbs.

The second element is the characters, which are a nuclear family of father, mother, and multiple children, with occasional appearances of psychic investigators. Bailey's lists of characters include similarly "1. a middle-class family or family surrogate, skeptical of the supernatural, who move into the house, 2. knowledgeable helpers who believe in the supernatural," and "3. an oracular observer who warns of danger" (56), but psychic investigators, priests, mediums are not essential characters in the haunted house film of the family theme. While some films, such as *The Conjuring* (2013), focus equally on the story of a family and that of a psychic investigator team, most of the American haunted house films, including *Poltergeist*, focus on family dramas. Psychic investigators are called when they are needed; a scared family may invite psychic investigators into their house to help them solve hauntings or poltergeists. In many cases, the father insists that he can solve problems himself, or that those psychics are frauds—he does not want to call for help because asking for help implies his incompetence and inability to save his family. Fathers often want to keep hauntings within the family, making them "family matters."

Bailey's explanation of the plot as a dual structure of 1. an escalating series of supernatural events which isolates the family physically and psychologically, and 2. the discovery of provenance for those events, holds in most of the haunted house films of today, and thus I do not add any change to his plot formula. The plot advances as the family dynamics are explored; the mother and the father, or one child and his or her parent, start fighting more because evil spirits or ghosts take possession of one family member, or highlight their discrepancies. The issues of the family, which surface through supernatural incidents, lie dormant before they move into the haunted house. In some films, a search for the truth drives the story forward, in which case one family member—more likely to be the father—is engaged in the search. Curtis argues that the protagonists that confront and explore haunted houses are mostly young women (15),[4] but in the case of American haunted house films, the central figure in the family is more often the father, following the tradition of American Gothic. *Poltergeist* is one of the examples in which the search for provenance is not the focal point of the film, although the father's involvement in the family's predicament is very much the key.

The climax takes the form of either 1. the escape of the family and the destruction of the house, or the escape of the family and the continued existence of the house, or 2. the annihilation of the family, which establishes the recurring nature of evil, as Bailey posits. In some films, the whole family survives, and in others, some members do, or in some others the whole family dies. Lighthearted films, such as *Poltergeist*, tend to preserve the whole family intact, while darker and more serious films tend to go toward the path of the family's annihilation. Many films have tried and still try to find a perfect answer to the most frequently asked question about haunted house films: "Why don't they just leave?" Psychologically, the family has such an emotional attachment that they cannot easily abandon the house. Technically, many supernatural events prevent the main characters from leaving. Sometimes an answer is given by not making the house itself haunted; it is the character who is haunted, so leaving does not mean leaving the haunting behind. A truly innovative answer is provided by *Sinister,* in which leaving the house itself triggers the curse, so the familicide occurs at the next house the family moves into.

The most important element in the formula is the theme. I would like to argue that the essential theme of the haunted house film is the fragile nature

of the family, leading to economic and emotional conflicts arising from gender, class, and social expectations. Bailey breaks down the theme into six categories: "1. class and gender conflict, 2. economic hardship, 3. consequences of the past (especially unpunished crimes), 4. Manichean clash of good and evil, 5. clash of scientific and supernatural world views, 6. cyclical nature of evil" (56), but mine is a lot more simplified since it can be summed up as the issues surrounding maintaining and putting together the family. The conflicts that surface at a haunted house are rooted in the pressures and failure to meet the expectations about and for the family (as a whole, and about each other) in a patriarchal/capitalist society. A variation of this theme has appeared in recent years: haunted house films with young couples. The not-so-haunted-house films,[5] *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *The Apparition* (2012), fall into this pattern, in the sense that supernatural incidents help open their hidden problems.

In the golden age of haunted house films, the most visible trouble in the family takes the form of financial problems. And family finances are tied, in most cases, to the father; for example, *The Shining*'s Jack Torrance takes up the caretaker job at Overlook Hotel because he was fired from his job as a teacher. Stephen King himself also points out in *Danse Macabre* that what lies underneath horror films such as *The Amityville Horror* is "economic unease" (142). Barnes notes that in the early republic familicide cases—actual cases—those fathers were under pressure to "prove their manhood by providing ever better for their families" (54), especially because many cases occurred in the face of the "perceived threat of economic ruin" (47). Combined with Michaels' assertion that Hawthorne wrote *The House of the Seven Gables* at the start of "one of the peak periods in nineteenth-century American land speculation" (90), one can say that economic concerns are always behind American haunted house stories.

However, economic concerns are becoming less important or less attached to the role of the father in recent haunted house films, as I will show in my analysis of the two versions of *Poltergeist*. As female Gothic allows the heroine to explore the domestic space to understand the limited capability in which she exists as a daughter, and then as a wife and mother, haunted house films give fathers an opportunity to find out how they fare as fathers, not simply as the provider of the family.

The Original *Poltergeist* and the Remake

It is in this context that I would like to examine the original *Poltergeist* (1982) and the remake (2015), and other new haunted house films. The plot developments of both *Poltergeist* films are similarly tame and lighthearted. No family member dies, and both families succeed in fleeing the ominous house. Although the original was directed by Tobe Hooper of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) fame, it is an essentially family (meaning benign and harmless) film, possibly because it was written and produced by Steven Spielberg. The pictures of cookie cutter houses, combined with a soundtrack that ranges from lullabies to quasi-religious choruses, which some find very effective,[6] do not necessarily prepare the audience to be scared for one's life. The remake keeps the same tone, understandably since it is directed by Gil Kenan, who also directed the animated comedy horror *Monster House* (2006). Overall, the remake does not depart so far from the original, but unlike the remake of *The Amityville Horror* (2005), which tries to recreate the atmosphere by setting the story in the same time period, it is updated to show a family today with various minor changes that make the new version a story of the twenty-first century American family. I have to note, however, the idea of a twenty-first century American family in the remake is still a nuclear family consisting of a heterosexual couple and children, even when more and more TV dramas depict non-traditional families.[7]

The most striking and instantly recognizable difference between the original and the remake is the impression that the fathers give, and that discrepancy in their images is most notably represented by the actors that play the fathers of the families. The father in the 1982 version, Steve Freeling, is played by Craig T. Nelson, who towers over almost anyone in the film. On the other hand, Sam Rockwell plays the new father, Eric Bowen, whose gentle demeanor clearly conveys a different message regarding the family relationship. The original's father, Steven Freeling, is a more traditional father, while the new *Poltergeist* shows a more caring father. Alan Scherstuhl mentions that the appearance of a "loving, attentive, constantly present father" is the best evidence that Spielberg is not involved in the film. Yet the difference cannot be attributed only to the non-involvement of one creator—it is a result of the different expectations that people have of the father back then and today.

The remake also is qualified to be called a suburban Gothic—Jerrold E. Hogle calls the original *Poltergeist* an "epitome of the suburban Gothic (xxv)" because the film proves to us that a new suburban American house can be haunted. They both utilize very American setting of the suburbs and houses that do not seem to have any dark horrifying history. In a study in which Murphy delineates the subgenre "suburban Gothic," she explains that the "apparent disparity between the outwardly placed, banal exterior of the modern suburban home and the sheer incongruity therein of any overtly supernatural incident" help this genre to be more unsettling and thus more effective than "if they had taken place in a damp old castle or picturesque ruin where such an event might have been anticipated" (105). These suburban houses are haunted from the sense of "anxiety about ownership," to use Michaels' words (89). In many cases, Michaels explains, those anxieties are conveyed through references to native American legend or presence, as seen in the novels by Brown and by Hawthorne. Murphy argues that there is a "gnawing awareness that America as a nation has been built on stolen ground" (104) and it is not difficult to detect this in *The Amityville Horror* and *Pet Sematary* (1983). As Renée L. Bergland states, "setting out to build a haunted house" is not absurd in America, since "every white American home displaces an Indian one (if not a wizard's)" (60).

The house does not stand on native American ground but on an old graveyard in *Poltergeist*, although some critics suggest that the white smoke-like manifestations in the original *Poltergeist* look like figures of native American men, and a character in the remake jokes that the house does *not* stand on a "tribal burial ground."[8] Both the old and the new *Poltergeist* films are an updated version of the Indian burial ground story.[9] New houses in a subdivision in a sunny American town have become more common as a setting of haunted house films since the original *Poltergeist*. In that sense, *Poltergeist* has built a new tradition in the American haunted film, since recent films, such as *Paranormal Activity* and *The Apparition*, use effectively a feeling of dissonance at having supernatural phenomena in ordinary new or relatively new houses.

The original *Poltergeist*, however, does not include a typical scene in which a family is in the process of moving into a new house, looking forward to a new life. Curtis points out that those scenes convey the "optimistic intentions of the people who foolishly fail to take heed of warnings about

their isolation, or their cheapness" or all the elements that signal the wrongness of that particular house (16). The camera often shows a family in a moving car while they are talking about the new house, expressing their worries and uncertainties. A carload scene is often seen again near the end of the film when the family is scrambling away from the house—they desperately gather and pack their family in their car to flee the ominous house in a hurry—as in both versions of *Poltergeist*. However, the beginning of the original *Poltergeist* goes directly to show their everyday life—the father and his friends watching a football game together, while the mother cleaning a child's room finds her pet canary dead. After the opening credits, the camera moves from idyllic mountains and hills to a highway, and follows a car to a street that runs through the subdivision where the Freeling family lives—Cuesta Verde, where numerous houses are lined with the exact same space in-between. The aerial view of the Torrance family car going up the mountain to the Overlook Hotel at the beginning of *The Shining* forewarns of the coming isolation of the family away from civilization, but the aerial view of the Freeling family house at the beginning of *Poltergeist* tells us that this story can happen to anyone in the audience, or any ordinary American who lives in the suburbs.

The new *Poltergeist*, on the other hand, starts with a more conventional scene of a carload of family members approaching their new house. While still in the car, when the oldest daughter jokes about the dangers of living close to high-voltage powerlines, one can recognize a typical sign of doom awaiting the family and their house. The updated version is even more conventional in the sense that the move is directly tied to their financial plight—because the father has been unemployed, they have to move to a more affordable place. In that regard, the new *Poltergeist* is a sort of remake of many haunted house films of the 1970s and 1980s, and not simply of the 1982 *Poltergeist*.

The gravest danger to the families in *Poltergeist*, both old and new, takes the same form—potential loss of the daughter. She disappears from the house but *into* the house—because she is abducted to the supernatural dimension. As Carol J. Clover claims that "satanic possession is gendered feminine" (72), women or children are more likely to be the receptacle of supernatural entities, reflecting the traditional view of supernatural phenomena and spiritual possessions: the "weaker sex" and immature egos are believed to

be susceptible to the force of ghosts and spirits. In this case, supernatural possession or dispossession of a child dramatizes parents' nightmare—losing their children whether by accident or by sickness. *Poltergeist* suggests that this nightmare can be traced back to parents' failure in providing a safe, loving home. When they bring in psychic investigators to communicate with Carol Anne (in the original)/Madison (in the remake), the daughter asks from the demonic dimension, "Where are you?" In the original, the mother, Diane, answers, "We're home, baby!, we're home!" This is probably the most poignant, as well as the most revealing scene in the film, since it sums up the question regarding home and family. They are home, where a family is supposed to be, but ironically the daughter cannot find her family, because the family cannot be held together at home.

There is a minor but significant difference in this critical scene in the original and the remake. In the new version, the mother, Amy, also starts calling out to her daughter inside the TV, but the father joins her to call out to his daughter, telling her that he is also home. While the daughter's cry for help is directed to the mother in the old version, the daughter asks her father for help in the new version. Eric's degree or nature of involvement in childcare clearly differs from Steve's. In the original *Poltergeist*, when a psychic asks who the daughter is more afraid of, in order to find out from whom the daughter is likely to take an instruction, the couple unwillingly reveals that the father is the disciplinarian. On the other hand, there is no suggestion that Eric is in any way feared by his daughter. More than Steve Freeling, Eric is at home, in the sense that he is physically and mentally there with his family. Steve's love for his family is expressed through his almost-absent presence and his ability to provide for them, while Eric is an even-tempered caring father.

The original *Poltergeist* does not go so far as to suggest that Steve's authoritative attitude can develop into angry outbursts against his own family, like that of the fathers in *The Amityville Horror*, *Burnt Offerings*, and *The Shining*. *Poltergeist* is never a story of familicide. Yet the father and the mother both admit that Carol Anne is more scared of her father. As George Lutz in *The Amityville Horror* menacingly mumbles that the children need discipline, Ben Rolfe in *Burnt Offerings* loses himself in the middle of pool bathing and tries to sink his son underwater, and Jack Torrance in *The Shining* terrorizes his family who are "disobedient" to him, American

haunted house films of the 1970s and 1980s picture the father as the one to be feared. Elizabeth Jean Hornbeck argues that *The Shining* is a story about domestic violence, and these films all have the possibility of being seen as one.

Depictions of the potential dangers of abusive fathers in those haunted films are a result of the reconsideration of the father's role in the late twentieth century. Tony Williams argues that the 1970s was an era in which the American family was confronted with monstrosity in Hollywood movies, which "contradict normal idealized family images in mainstream American film and television" (13). In the late 1970s, films and TV dramas started picturing men as struggling but nurturing fathers, as seen in *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979). Vivian Sobchack also notes the contrast between the popular family melodrama in the 1970s and 1980s showing a "sweetly problematic *paternity in ascendance*," and the horror film in the same era showing the "terror and rage of *patriarchy in decline* (savaged by its children or murderously resentful of them)" (both italics original 182). This contrast can be explained by the fact that horror films are the other side of mainstream films and TV shows, for they are supposed to reflect people's anxieties and fears. If American TV and films depict the American family to be nurturing and loving, horror films depict it to be flawed and troubling. Whether depicted as an abusive father or struggling to be a caring one, both in the horror film and in the melodrama, the father is no longer given a pass by simply being "masculine" and a distant breadwinner, who fulfills his duty only outside the home—the inside of the home becomes his domain as well.[10]

The original *Poltergeist* indicates that danger involving the youngest daughter may be something of a national threat. Characteristically, the film opens with the national anthem. We hear the Star-Spangled Banner, which marks the end of broadcasting before the TV turns into a static screen, right before the unknown entities begin communicating with the daughter. Something evil reaching out to one's daughter behind the static screen—while her father is dozing off on the couch—connotes a fundamental danger that can threaten the concept of the American family.

In that regard, *Poltergeist* is seen as a sort of critique of the era, as many critics note that the father is seen reading a book on Ronald Reagan. Mark Olsen takes the scene to hint at "what might be lurking and repressed underneath the façade of a perfect suburban life," and Douglas

Kellner defines the film as an expression of the "underlying anxieties of the new middle class in the Age of Reagan" (220), with "growing fears of unemployment, losing one's home, and losing control over one's life and possessions" (228). The anxieties of seemingly happy suburbanites become true when a child communicates unintelligibly with the TV when the parents' supervision is lacking. TV as an element that breaks up the family, according to Murphy, reflects the growing concern over the use of TV in the American family home as a "babysitter" for children (129). The troubles that fall on the Freeling family through TV reveal the anxieties of the suburban middle-class America in the 1980s.

It turns out later that the father is partly responsible for the disaster—the house they live in was developed and sold by the real estate company for which he is a salesperson. The brand-new house in the suburbs, a typical cookie cutter house, is in fact built where a cemetery used to be. Contrary to the assurance of his boss that they had moved the remains before they started building the subdivision, there are dead bodies underneath their house. The *Poltergeist* case is a result of typical corporate greed and negligence, except the outcome takes the form of a supernatural phenomenon, instead of a health hazard. The anxiety about supernatural phenomena and a faulty building are tied in a film like *The Apparition*, too, suggesting that those supernatural problems that turn a new life into a nightmare could be metaphors for construction-related issues with the new house—such as mold or plumbing problems that they did not know about before moving in. Ultimately, in the original *Poltergeist*, the father is complicit in the malicious operation of the real estate business, albeit unknowingly. As Murphy insists, the father sells the "suburban dream to others" (128), and as a result, the father who helps create and realize a picture-perfect family in a brand-new house in the suburbs is doubly responsible for failing the family. The Freelings can be completely free from danger only when the father quits the company and rejects the faulty corporate idea of the American family.

The 2015 *Poltergeist* does not seem to have such an overarching claim about the American family. The physically unthreatening Eric Bowen does not seem to contain any anger or frustration in his efforts to hold his family together. Eric is far from perfect, but he is not guilty of terrorizing his family, or bringing the family into danger either. He was formerly employed by John Deere, so the new house is not at all attached to him in any way, but

unlike the tall Steve Freeling, who is mostly absent, the diminutive Eric is around the house all the time. The fact that he is laid off from John Deere may indicate that the father no longer symbolizes a quintessentially American man—since supposedly agriculture was the major industry in creating and forming the American character in the frontier, as Frederick Jackson Turner insisted. If John Deere has to downsize, it indicates that agriculture cannot sustain American families any longer. Eric is not a man who represents the traditional, brawny, strong America. Yet if subdivisions in the suburbs are contemporary American settlements, as the agricultural frontier once was, Eric is another every American—unemployed. He acts deprecatingly about the fact that he is jobless, but no one accuses him over their newly scaled-down life or the lack of money. If the original *Poltergeist* reflects the inner anxiety of the Reagan era, the remake shows the atmosphere after the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007-2010: one cannot put the blame on one person in the family any more in that severe recession.

The contemporariness of the story is also signaled by numerous technological gadgets that are invading family life. Instead of a close-up of a TV screen, the remake opens with a close-up of a tablet screen, on which one of the children plays a video game, and everyone is always with one or two technological devices such as laptops, cell phones, and tablets, and the house itself has an electronic home security system. While in the original, TV is blamed for causing disruption to the American family, the new *Poltergeist* does not overtly criticize any particular technological device. The camera repeatedly turns to powerlines, but not to suggest their potential health risks but possibly to indicate how "wired" all the family members are.

One of those technological devices, cell phones, leads us to see a changed perspective on financial responsibility in the family. When the cell phone of the older daughter, Kendra, malfunctions due to poltergeist activities, she begs her parents to buy her a new one, but the mother tells her to earn the money herself. Kendra, however, retorts with a snide comment on the fact that the mother herself is not working. The mother, Amy, is a housewife, like most mothers in traditional haunted house films, but she clearly shares the burden of family economy in this case. Eric tells his daughter that her mother's job is "kids," upholding the old-fashioned definition, but Kendra does not consider "stay-at-home mom" to be a full-time job anymore.

Questions about Amy's status as a stay-at-home mom further suggest a change in gender relationship. Earlier in the film, Eric boasts to the real estate agent that his wife is a writer. However, she does not seem to have anything published, suggesting that she is also a failed/would-be writer like Jack Torrance in *The Shining*. A conversation between the couple reveals that they have decided that she focuses on her writing while she stays home and raises their children, although her husband's long unemployment is giving her second thoughts about their plan. Amy may have to work outside the home. One can argue that the mother in this film is depicted as the one with ambition, unlike the mothers in haunted house films in the 1970s and 1980s. Regardless, as she is too busy taking care of her children to write, she is still a housewife as in many haunted house films.

While the father's failure in the old *Poltergeist* is in his (unknown) complicity in causing danger to the family due to his participation in the (irresponsible) market economy, the new *Poltergeist*'s father, although he is not financially successful either, does not fail in his fatherhood. Steve's failure is in his ability to provide for his family; he fails because his seemingly successful career is based on a deceitful practice. On the other hand, Eric is visibly a failure as an unemployed man at home, but he is almost liberated from his burden to financially support his family, while no one in the family successfully carries the burden. Jack Torrance fails as a breadwinner and as a husband/father, but the new *Poltergeist* indicates that those two roles do not necessarily fall onto one person's shoulders. The mother, who again voices the quintessential contradiction and failure of the family by telling her daughter that they are home, is seen as more culpable in causing the family a disaster. The father is no longer pinpointed as the potential family annihilator in the new *Poltergeist*; he is rather the savior, as he causes a literal "breakthrough" when he shows signs of anger and frustration by opening up a portal through which the daughter comes through.

One recent haunted house film particularly focuses on the father's role in healing the family. *The Possession* (2012) starts with a broken family—after a divorce the father alone moves into a new house, which his two daughters, Emily and Hannah, visit on the weekend, while the mother is engaged to marry a new man. The film starts with a carload of family—without the mother—scene but it is not a haunted house film in the strict sense, because the younger daughter, Emily, becomes possessed by a Jewish

demon contained in a box the father buys for her in a garage sale in his new neighborhood. In his new environment as a divorced father, he has to show a renewed sense of commitment as a caring father, yet his fathering capability is questioned when his job may take him away to a different state from his family, and more specifically when he is suspected of child abuse when Emily shows signs of physical injuries. The suspicion is completely unfounded because her injuries are caused by demonic possession: the father is never abusive, just as Eric Bowen never beats his children. The supernatural troubles, and the abuse scare in particular, are a metaphor of familial discord and the negative effects on the children in the middle of a divorce battle. In the end, his dedication and efforts to save his daughter from possession result in reuniting the family, incidentally helped by the demon eradicating the other obstacle, the mother's fiancé.

The tendency to lighten the load of the father can be seen in another haunted house film with a twist, *Haunter*. Imagine a typical haunted house meets *Groundhog Day* (1993): the haunting is more orthodox—the ghost of a serial killer causes the father to kill his family—but the narrative uses a new structure. It is seen from the perspective of a "haunter," Lisa, who in fact has been dead for more than thirty years: the young girl realizes that she keeps repeating the same day, the day the father kills the entire family, until she finds out why and how her family is in the limbo of a haunted house. The film evokes nostalgia for the golden age of haunted house films by having the protagonist living in the 1980s. While Lisa has to fall victim to her father's violence, the contemporary version of her, or her double Olivia, whom Lisa keeps looking at through a mirror, can have a true happy ending, since her father becomes free from the serial killer's possession thanks to the protagonist-haunter. The potential danger to the family in the twenty-first century is evaded, while the family in the 1980s enjoys the moment of family reunion only after their deaths. A twenty-first century family may experience problems, but murderous fathers are things of the past. The fathers in the new *Poltergeist*, *The Possession*, and *Haunter*, are full of flaws—they may be unemployed, divorced, or almost possessed—but they can reunite and repair their own families.

In the 1970s and 1980s, haunted house films established themselves as a genre to tell stories of the American family. The father became the center of the story—who had to work hard to hold his family together amidst his

own problems, while struggling to manage family finances and his career—and explores how to understand his relationship with his family. Those films reveal that the patriarchal/capitalist family model fails to produce loving, nurturing fathers who at the same time are pursuing financial and social success. Their ambition and the desire to hold a loving peaceful family together collide and cause the family to fall apart. The original *Poltergeist* finds a solution by having the father leave the company and by moving out of the house, leaving the question unanswered about their financial foundation after that (and *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* was made to fill the blank). The father has to choose between his career and his family, and as a genre of and about family, he chooses his family over corporate America. The updated *Poltergeist*, however, does not make the father choose any more. He is free from corporate America from the beginning, and his ability to hold his family together may be questioned, but not critically tested.

The new haunted house films, such as *The Possession* and *Haunter*, show a different direction towards the relationship between the father and his family. Sharing the fundamental concept that haunted house stories are about families and their problems, these two films end with the resolution of hauntings, leading also to the reunification of the family. The focus now seems to move more to the process of solving familial discords than of exploring their causes and sources. The father can still have a destructive effect on the family—whether in a physical or metaphorical sense—but he is simply misunderstood, or he can be given a second chance before real harm is done. The changed family dynamics of haunted house films indicate that the concept of the American family has gone through changes since the 1970s and 1980s, and the father's role in causing devastating results in the family becomes less prominent. The typical nuclear family is no longer perfect—the father may be unemployed, or the parents may be divorced. And it is not difficult to admit the truth, because they can always work together to make things better. Haunted house films still function as films about families—exploring the issues of how to repair broken ones.

Notes

1. Sequels and prequels of the haunted house films and the major horror film franchise that were originally made in the 1970s and 1980s have been continuously made in the 1980s and 1990s, but the remakes started appearing mostly after 2000, such as *Poltergeist* (2015) and *The Amityville Horror* (2005) in films, and *Damien* (2016), a remake of *The Omen*, and *The Exorcist* (2017-) in TV dramas.
2. For discussions of the subgenres, male Gothic and female Gothic, see any introductory books on the genre, such as *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, *The Handbook of the Gothic*, etc. For detailed discussions of the two subgenres, see David Punter's *The Literature of Terror*, Anne Williams' *Art of Darkness*, and Allison Milbank's *Daughters of the House*.
3. In fact, Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, which I have pointed out earlier as setting out the prototype of psychic investigator stories, also reflects the tradition of female Gothic, since the haunted house becomes a place for the protagonist Eleanor to explore her desire and disappointment regarding the concept of family.
4. The best example of this pattern in recent films is *The Awakening* (2011), set in post-WWI England, in which a female psychic investigator finds herself exploring her own family secret, when she is hired to investigate supernatural phenomena at a school.
5. I am calling them "not-so-haunted-house" films because they both use the tropes of haunted house films, but they use the "it is not the house but the person that is haunted" excuse, as I have explained in my discussion of the "Climax."
6. Joe Tompkins analyzes *Poltergeist*'s use of dissonance and atonality in his study of the music of horror films.
7. I have to note still further that even when TV dramas depict non-heterosexual couples, they are subordinate characters and they are mostly male.
8. This joke sounds very similar to the sentiment that is shown in *The House Next Door* (1978), in which the protagonist denies the possibility that her house can be haunted because it is not built on an "Indian graveyard on the property" (161), suggesting that a house on an Indian land has already become a hackneyed trope in haunted house stories.
9. Bernice Murphy mentions that many people mistakenly remember that the house in the original *Poltergeist* is built on an Indian burial ground (211 n82) and Barry Curtis seems to be one of them (178).
10. Williams argues that *The Shining*'s Jack Torrance "overcompensates for masculine inadequacy by patriarchal violence toward his wife and child" (247). While the film does not depict Jack's ability as a father, in the novel his "inadequacy" seems to be compensated for by his eager involvement with his son as a father, to the point that his wife, who is a stay-at-home mom, feels jealous of the relationship between Jack and their son. The grown-up Danny, who is a recovering alcoholic and a wandering hospital orderly, remembers his father in *Doctor Sleep* (2013) as a failure in "teaching, writing, and husbanding" and says that his "only one notable success" was that he refused to kill his son (364-65). The novel *The Shining* (1977) is a story in which the father fails in almost every way but succeeds in not killing his own child, while the film *The Shining* is a story in which the father fails in writing, husbanding, fathering, and killing his family.

Bibliography

Bailey, Dale. *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*. Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1999.

Barnes, Elizabeth. "Loving with a Vengeance: *Wieland*, Familicide, and the Crisis of Masculinity in the Early Nation." *Boys Don't Cry?: Rethinking Narratives of Masculinity and Emotion in the U.S.* Ed. Millette Shamir and Jennifer Travis. New York: Columbia UP, 2002. 44-63.

Benshoff, Harry M. "Horror Before 'the Horror Film.'" *A Companion to the Horror Film*. Ed. Harry M. Benshoff. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014. 207-24.

Bergland, Renee L. *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects*. Hanover: Dartmouth College, 2000.

Brown, Charles Brockden. *Edgar Huntly or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker.* Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 1984.

Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992.

Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

Curtis, Barry. *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film*. London: Reaktion, 2008.

Ellis, Kate Ferguson. *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology.* Champaign*:* U of Illinois P, 1989.

Hogle, Jerrold E. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.

Hornbeck, Elizabeth Jean. "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?: Domestic Violence in The Shining." *Feminist Studies* 42.3 (2016): 689-719.

Jackson, Shirley. *The Haunting of Hill House*. New York: Penguin, 1959, 2006.

Jameson, Frederic. *Signatures of the Visible*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Jancovich, Mark. General Introduction. *Horror, the Film Reader*. London: Routledge, 2002. 1-19.

Kellner, Douglas. "Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush." *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class*. Ed. David E. James and Rick Berg. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1996.

King, Stephen. *Danse Macabre*. New York: Berkley, 1981.

___. *Doctor Sleep*. New York: Simon & Shuster, 2013.

Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*. Oakland: U of California P, 1988.

Milbank, Allison. *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992.

Murphy, Bernice. *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Newman, Kim. *Nightmare Movies: Horror on Screen Since the 1960s*. London: Bloomsbury, 1988, 2011.

Olsen, Mark. "The Remake of 'Poltergeist' is haunted by comparison to its better, original version." *LA Times* (May 23, 2015). Retrieved from http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mm-poltergeist-review-201505023-story.html.

Punter, David. *The Literature of Terror: Vol.1 The Gothic Tradition*. London: Routledge, 1980, 1996.

Scherstuhl, Alan. "Poltergeist, 2015: This House is Meh." *Village Voice* (May 22, 2015). Retrieved from

https://villagevoice.com/2015/05/22/poltergeist-2015-this-house-is-meh/.

Sears, John. *Stephen King's Gothic*. Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2011.

Siddons, Anne Rivers. *The House Next Door*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978.

Skal, David J. *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*. New York: Faber and Faber, 1993, 2001.

Sobchack, Vivian. "Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: U of Texas P, 1996. 171-91.

Tompkins, Jo. "Mellifluous Terror: The Discourse of Music and Horror Films." *A Companion to the Horror Film*. Ed. Harry M. Benshoff. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014.

Tudor, Andrew. *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Williams, Anne. *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.

Williams, Tony. *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated UP, 1996.

Worland, Rick. "The Gothic Revival (1957-1974)." *A Companion to the Horror Film*. Ed. Harry M. Benshoff. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014. 273-91.

Filmography

The Amityville Horror. Dir. Stuart Rosenberg. Perf. James Brolin and Margot Kidder. MGM, 1979.

The Apparition. Dir. Todd Lincoln. Perf. Ashley Greene and Sebastian Stan. Warner Bros, 2012.

*Burnt Offering*s. Dir. Dan Curtis. Perf. Karen Black, Oliver Reed, and Bette Davis. MGM, 1976.

The Conjuring. Dir. James Wan. Perf. Vera Farmiga, Patrick Wilson, and Ron Livingston, 2013.

Haunter. Dir. Vincenzo Natali. Perf. Abigail Breslin and Peter Outerbridge. IFC Films, 2013.

The Haunting. Dir. Robert Wise. Perf. Julie Harris and Clara Bloom. Warner Bros, 1963.

Paranormal Activity. Dir. Oren Peli. Perf. Katie Featherston and Micah Sloat. Paramount, 2009.

Poltergeist. Dir. Tobe Hooper. Perf. JoBeth Williams and Craig T. Nelson. Warner Bros, 1982. Film.

Poltergeist. Dir. Gil Kenan. Perf. Sam Rockwell and Rosemarie DeWitt. 20th Century Fox, 2015.

The Possession. Dir. Ole Bornedal. Perf. Jeffery Dean Morgan and Kyra Sedgwick. Lionsgate, 2012.

The Shining. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Jack Nicolson, Shelley Duvall, and Danny Lloyd. Warner Bros, 1980.

Sinister. Dir. Scott Derrickson. Perf. Ethan Hawke and Juliet Rylance. Lionsgate, 2012.