

Haunting the Domestic Foam: A Political Spherology of Contemporary Haunted House Films

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A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
MA in Political Science

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University of Ottawa
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Abstract

This thesis is focused on the intersection between horror, gender and politics American haunted house films. Taking a “spherological” approach, the author argues that horror is evidence of a spherical breakdown, or a violation of existential space. Applying this approach to Hollywood haunted house films, the author demonstrates how those movies have, in the years since 2005, responded to a masculinity crisis discourse: by figuring haunting as a horrific disruption of paternal authority by violent masculine entities and powerful female ones, film-makers situate the movies in that discourse. By positing “security moms” (Grewal: 2006) and “paternal sovereigns” (Gunn: 2008) as responses to the “crisis”, the films construct a domestic space where women are militant mothers and men are sovereigns. Because the family is an important metaphor for the American “nation” (Lakoff: 2002), this construction can be seen as part of a paternalistic national poesis.

Résumé

Cette thèse se concentre sur l’intersection de l’horreur, le genre et la politique dans des films américains de maison hantée. En prenant une approche “sphérologique,” l’auteur constate que l’éclatement d’une sphère existentielle s’accompagne du sentiment d’horreur. Concernant les films de maison hantée, l’auteur démontre comment ces objets-là se sont adressés, depuis 2005, au discours de la crise de masculinité: en figurant l’hantise comme la subversion de l’autorité du père par des menaces masculins et féminins, les réalisateurs mettent les films dans la trajectoire du discours de la crise. À fin de répondre à la crise, les films construisent l’espace domestique de façon que les femmes soient des mères militantes (les “security moms”) (Grewal: 2006) et les pères soient souverains (les “souverains paternels”) (Gunn: 2008). Finalement, car la famille reste une métaphore importante de la nation Américaine (Lakoff: 2002), cette construction peut être vue comme partie de la paternalisme nationale.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dalie Giroux. Without her insight and guidance, this project would never have been possible.

I would also like to thank the members of the committee, Paul Saurette and Jean-Pierre Couture, whose inspirational teaching, advice and encouragement I will carry with me well beyond my time at the University of Ottawa.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my partner, Diana, whose support, enthusiasm and unshakeable faith in my ability to see this work through sustained me when times were toughest.

Introduction

There are at least two remarkable things about horror movies: one, they call into question what people take for granted, and two, they are often terrifying. Perhaps the best examples are haunted house movies, which, in launching an assault on the safe-haven, become some of the most uncomfortable cultural objects—second maybe only to body-horror films, like *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *The Human Centipede*. In this work, I interpret haunted house movies politically, and explain how such movies affect power relations in American social life. According to author Dale Bailey, the Gothic genre “has always been about progressive politics.” (1999, p. 3). For example, the modern haunted house story, whose form has been more or less consistent since the beginning of the nineteenth century, started out as a vehicle for exploring theocracy and aristocracy in Europe and the United States (Bailey, 1999, pp. 3-5). Things have changed a little since Poe’s *Fall of the House of Usher*. Though theocracy and aristocracy are still relevant, the world has seen the rise of other forces in the past two hundred years, including the evolution of the gothic genre itself. The gothic has given way to the horrific.

It is difficult to say if Poe’s contemporaries felt chills down their spines when they read his stories, or if Walter de la Mare’s readers slept with one eye open, but one thing is certain: contemporary Haunted house stories—at least successful ones—are undeniably scary. If they do what their makers intend, they create intrigue, curiosity, and horror. In fact, their commercial success depends largely on the artful construction of the horror, so the horror experience is what makes those films economically, culturally, and politically relevant. If, as

author Paul Santilli suggests, the horrific lies outside of our understanding, than the horrific house represents a corruption of the domestic space, an incomprehensible inversion of home. And since each movie must present a plausible version of this inversion to be successful, reading haunted house movies is a political exercise in cataloguing the culturally-plausible American interior and its double, the corrupt domestic space.

Literature Review: Freudian and Cultural Approaches to Horror and Politics

To account politically for horror in haunted house films, one needs to explain the “undesirable” and its effects on power in contemporary life. Two major trends in that analysis have emerged since the 1960s, when horror theory, spurred by Robin Wood’s work, gained some traction in academia (Prince, 2004, p. 118): psychological and “social” or cultural theories (Prince, 2004, p. 118). Inspired by Sigmund Freud, theorists like Robin Wood and Gesa Mackenthun have explored the politics of horror from a psychoanalytic perspective, locating the origin and resonance of filmic horror in the Subject’s neurotic psyche. According to those authors, the undesirable in horror films reflects what Americans repress on a daily basis. Consequently, scary movies sometimes sustain and sometimes subvert colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. In terms of methodology, reading the horror film for these authors means monitoring how the repressed is treated in particular movies. Some authors, like Linnie Blake, even use the framework to explain how horror films bring to light the repressed points of view on “national traumas,” like the September 11th attacks.

The second group of authors approaches horror films from a broadly cultural perspective, and bring either anthropological or phenomenological analyses to horror movies. Its authors

differ epistemologically from the first group, because they see Subjects as being constituted by linguistic and cultural categories instead of repression. From this perspective, which Stephen Prince, Paul Santilli, and Barbara Creed share, horror movie viewing is an encounter with what lies outside of those categories. Consequently, the politics of horror hinges on how specific films or groups of films construct cultural boundaries, rather than how they emancipate or re-repress certain identities.

Psychological Perspectives on Horror Films: Horror, Repression and Narrative

Robin Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Regan* is the definitive psycho-political study of horror movies, because it offers the most "detailed" psychological model of horror (Prince, 2004, p. 118). For Wood, horror movies are "collective nightmares, in which the repressed is, from the point of consciousness, so terrible that it must be repudiated as loathsome, and so strong and powerful as to constitute a serious threat." (2003, p. 70). These nightmares follow the "basic formula of horror," which is comprised of three variables: normality, the Monster (or Other), and the "relationship between them." (Wood, 2003, p. 71). The third variable usually takes the form of the Double (Wood, 2003, p. 72), where the normal is threatened by its inverse. Two Freudian suppositions structure the formula: (1) the main repressed in a "society centred on monogamy and family" is "sexual energy", and (2) the repressed "will always strive to return." (Wood, 2003, p. 75).

Using this formula, Wood creates a useful political diagnostic for horror movies, because he categorizes them as progressive or reactionary, depending on how each one portrays the monstrous and the normal. In progressive movies, which comprise most of the horror genre in the 1970s, the monster destroys normality in an apocalyptic turn: "[the apocalyptic horror

film] obviously expresses despair and negativity, yet its very negation can be claimed as progressive: the apocalypse, even when presented in metaphysical terms (the end of the world), is generally reinterpretable in social/political ones (the end of the highly specific world of patriarchal capitalism).” (Wood, 2003, p. 170). In the plots of Reactionary movies, on the other hand, the “normal” characters destroy “abnormal” monsters, or a conservative monster punishes progressive characters (Wood, 2003, p. 171). Films might feature monsters that arouse no sympathy—Wood gives the example of thinly disguised communists-as-aliens in 1950s horror—or victims that are punished for their sexual promiscuity, like the “kissing teenagers” in *The Blob* (2003, p. 171). In the latter case, the monster is an agent of repression, who targets sexually-empowered characters, especially women (Wood, 2003, pp. 173-174).

Wood makes an important contribution to horror theory because he articulates clearly the underlying structure of most Freudian horror models. For example, Gesa Mackenthun’s work on “cultural occlusion” follows Wood’s model. She argues that horror films “disremember” colonial property struggles by depicting them as family crises (1998, pp. 93-94). This disremembering, also called occlusion, amounts to “forgetting and remembering at the same time,” because it displays the past in a coded form (Mackenthun, 1998, p. 93). In the post-colonial case, the nuclear American family is the norm, just as it was in the patriarchal horror film. But the monstrous, which was in that case repressed sexuality, is instead the horrific colonial past¹. Mackenthun explains, using the *Poltergeist* movies as examples, that even if the ghosts and the human-eating monster in *Poltergeist I* are supposedly non-aboriginal, they hearken to the Wendigo, but in an encoded form (1998, p. 99). She goes on to explain how

¹ Renee Bergland also addresses the same phenomenon through the “haunted Indian” trope in American literature (See *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects*).

this implicit link is made explicit *Poltergeist II*, whose ghosts are those of aboriginal people buried on the property (1998, p. 100).

From Mackenthun's point of view, horror movies like *Poltergeist* re-encode the past to preserve the colonial Subject. "The literary mode of the uncanny unshackles the collective memory of struggles over property. But at the same time it wraps them up again."

(Mackenthun, 1998, p. 98). If Americans share a colonial guilt, to represent it directly would contradict their identity. History then, to become palatable for the Ego, must be represented in a form that absolves the American family of any historical wrongdoing. Thus in horror fiction, the Subject projects its violent colonial origins, onto the other, the "monstrous Indian" in this case (Mackenthun, 1998, p. 103).

Mackenthun also replicates Wood's distinction between progressive and reactionary horror movies. *Poltergeist's* re-staging of the "frontier scenario", in which a hapless family is besieged by dark and untameable attackers (Mackenthun, 1998, p. 103), prepares Americans to accept the American national colonial discourse; this makes it a reactionary movie.

Mackenthun points out though that some popular movies do "empathize" with clearly anti-colonial monsters (1998, p. 105), and so are progressive, because they depict the apocalyptic destruction of the normal colonial life.

By appropriating Wood's formula, authors like Mackenthun demonstrate its utility. One reason the formula is so useful is that it demonstrates how the politics of horror films depend just as much on the resolution of crisis as they do on the monster's identity. For example, often Christianity appears in reactionary films not because the monster is "Christian" but because of Christianity's meaning in the American lexicon (Wood, 2003, pp. 170-171). For

example, In *The Haunting in Connecticut* Sara calls Reverend Popescu because he is the only character with exorcism expertise. Sara's action towards the ghosts illustrates that American normality, at least in that film, is a Christian one.

Despite the strength of Freudian approaches to horror, and Wood's formula in particular, they suffer from at least two weaknesses: an inability to account for how social relations affect horror viewing, and a political essentialism that makes film analysis difficult. Firstly, since scary films are "mass produced products of popular culture," theorists need to address them as cultural artefacts, and not unproblematic expressions of a collective subconscious (Prince, 2004, p. 119). According to Prince, the basic fault with the psychological model of horror is that by relying on the repressive mechanism to analyse horror, it fails to relate the individual to the collective (2004, p. 120). In effect, psychological theories extend the neuroses of the individual to society. If individual authors fail to explain how they make that extension, the theory risks anthropomorphism: "anthropomorphism, in the social sciences, consists of attributing human faculties to a collectivity. Will, memory, consciousness and even the unconscious are faculties that only belong to distinct living Beings. Society is not a person [;] it cannot have a psychology, nor can it have a will or a memory. Only its members dispose of such things." (Belanger, 1998, p. 16) (My Translation).

Wood, for example, uses the concepts of basic and surplus repression to explain why people share a collective subconscious. He contends that the basic repression of certain instincts is necessary for humans to live together, while the repression of other instincts, like bisexuality, is arbitrary (Prince, 2004, p. 120). If all Americans repress certain aspects of their psyche, then it is possible to see horrific material as the return of those aspects. Prince argues though that "there is no human reality outside of society," (Prince, 2004, p. 119), so the idea of a

basic instinct is problematic. A perfect society would align its ideology such that only basic repression occurred, and so return to a pre-cultural, pre-ideological state. Of course, anthropologists have long since demonstrated that as long as humans have been so, they have lived in groups, which means that there is no forum for basic instincts outside of social life. So, as a way of explaining how people share the horrific experience, the repression mechanism is problematic.

Linnie Blake, a theorist working at the intersection of psychoanalytic and cultural theories, attempts to overcome this problem. The basic aim of her book, *The Wounds of Nations*, is to demonstrate how horror films around the world address traumatic events. Horror films, she argues, are unique pop-culture documents because rather than following nationalist narratives, they tend to display trauma from alternative points of view (Blake, 2008, p. 5). Blake's ontology is different from Wood's Freudian one: "While [*The Wounds of Nations*] engages with the psychoanalytically informed debates concerning the formation and representation of individual gendered subjectivity, my approach is a broadly cultural one." (Blake, 2008, p. 5) Blake identifies national identity, instead of the national subconscious, as the unifying factor for viewers: "the nation remains the social, cultural, and economic construct that is the single most important determinant of cultural identity." (Blake, 2008, p. 8). According to Blake, horror viewing is a collective experience because all Americans are subject to the same national narratives. When filmmakers portray events from a counter-hegemonic point of view, they reveal the horrific aspects of American history.

Dale Bailey takes a similar approach, applying it specifically to haunted house movies. He explains how "the haunted house seems like nothing less than a symbol of America and the American mind, of all the ghosts that haunt us, from the dark legacy of slavery to the failed

war in Vietnam.” (1999, p. 114). Accordingly, he sees the Haunted House “formula” as a tool for articulating and critiquing a complicated and tension-ridden American subjectivity. The house, a “malign entity”, “forces the family to confront their fault lines.” (Bailey, 1999, p. 6). Similar to other psychological theorists of horror, Bailey relies on the house as a “double” of the good house; it is a “subversive space” (1999, p. 13) that “serves as an ironic symbol for all that has gone fatally awry in the American experiment.” (1999, p. 9). Bailey should be understood in Linnie Blake’s trauma studies framework. For Bailey, the haunted house tale re-examines national narratives of the American dream and addresses the trauma wrought upon Americans by the practices those narratives justify: good authors, he writes, use the haunted house to address the “clash between American ideals and realities.” (Bailey, 1999, p. 6).

Blake and Bailey, even if the former tries to avoid it, both succumb to the anthropomorphist trap of Freudian theory. When Blake states, “I will argue that horror cinema’s generic codes enable us, both as critics and as audience members, to address not only the desires and quandaries and anxieties of the psychological unconscious, but those of the political unconscious that underpins them [.]” (Blake, 2008, p. 6) she makes the same error as Wood. While we can certainly identify national narratives of trauma, it is difficult to verify that all subjects internalize one national identity in their consciousness, and repress the counter-identity in their subconscious. Whether applied to sexual or national identity, the collective subconscious remains an insufficient concept for explaining how viewers make sense of horror films.

As soon as the repressive mechanism is rendered problematic, Wood’s formula for classifying individual movies ceases to function. The problem with these categories is that

they rely on an essentialist definition of politics, where one issue, one element is assumed to be at stake in all films. In Wood's case, this was sexuality, in Blake's, recent national traumas, like the 9/11 events, for example. Progressive films would be films that transcend hegemonic sexuality or the prevailing view of national trauma, while reactionary ones would reinforce such things. Without these hegemonies however, there is no way to orient the analysis: against what do films react? This weakness also reveals another one. Power is not always reducible to questions of progressive and conservative. Indeed, that opposition supposes a total politics: existence becomes reducible to one key element around which all political struggles occur. Without this totalitarian view of the political, embodied in the repressive mechanism, Wood's formula is unsustainable.

To remain viable, any horror theory must, without the repressive mechanism, explain how viewers make sense of horror films and how that sense-making affects politics. Cultural theorists make some progress in that direction. For them, culture and language, rather than the psyche, are the main sites of horror. If people do not share a "political subconscious", they certainly share languages: "Language centres individuals in a social space." (Prince, 2004, p. 121). In other words, we cannot verify that different people in a society have the same Subjectivity or identity. We can, however, demonstrate that they speak the same language, and thus share linguistic categories and resulting practices. These common categories and practices in turn shape power relations.

Cultural Perspectives on Horror: Boundaries, Order and Ontological Horror

For cultural theorists, like Prince, Creed, and Santilli horror is an effect of external cultural, rather than internal psychic structures; horror movies are, for them, documents that help

construct conceptual categories in American culture. Stephen Prince, building on the work of Mary Douglas and Edmund Leach, explores horror from an anthropological perspective:

“Both Douglas and Leach see the task of language and society, of culture, as one of creating distinctions by projecting categories on an unbounded natural world, such that human order may emerge.” (2004, p. 120). Throughout history, cultures have created a series concepts and frameworks to make sense of the world. The horrific, whatever eludes classification by those frameworks (Prince, 2004, p. 120), is part of the cultural disorder (Prince, 2004, p. 121).

In effect, horror films illustrate this order-disorder relationship: “the horror film may be regarded as a visualization of the dialectic between linguistic and socially imposed systems of order, and the breakdown of those systems through their own internal contradictions.” (Prince, 2004, p. 122). Prince goes further to indicate that the horror film, in presenting the breakdown of culture as the loss of humanity, ultimately reaffirms the order-disorder relationship (Prince, 2004, p. 129). In this sense, horror film viewing is a kind of ritual that reinforces the taboos of American culture: “Horror films may be regarded as a compulsive symbolic exchange in which members of a social order, of a class or subgroup, nervously affirm the importance of their cultural inheritance (Prince, 2004, p. 128).

For cultural theorists, the political effects of the horrific ritual depend on which cultural boundaries are reinforced in particular horror movies. Barbara Creed, using a framework for the abject from Julia Kristeva’s work, explains how horror movies “abject” the feminine to construct a patriarchal culture (1986, p. 48). They involve monsters who have threatening feminine characteristics, particularly those of the undifferentiated, pre-oedipal mother (Creed, 1986, p. 47). The Kristevan theory of abjection explains that every Subject moves from the “maternal” realm of authority to the “paternal” realm of law (Creed, 1986, pp. 50-

51). But Creed adapts Kristeva psychoanalytic theory to discourse analysis. In Creed's view, the abjection of the feminine in the horror films constructs patriarchal gender roles by equating certain forms of femininity with monstrosity (1986, p. 70). The horror film is thus one of many "patriarchal" signifying rituals (Creed, 1986, p. 65).

This act of destroying or expelling the monstrous feminine is an instance of reactionary politics, where the monstrous is destroyed in favour of the status quo. Creed's work, however, fundamentally expands Wood's perspective, because it demonstrates how the political effects of horror can be articulated without the repressive mechanism. The powerful feminine is not repressed, but cast out. In *Alien*, Ripley destroys the Alien and reaffirms a patriarchal cultural order (Creed, 1986, pp. 69-70). Notice here that instead of seeing the monster as the repressed in a patriarchal Subjectivity, the monster, taken as femininity, is one undesirable category of an American patriarchal culture. This explanation is compelling, because it uses cultural figures, images, and symbols to orient film analysis. Film analysis can be oriented around the specific cultural categories that appear in each case, rather than by a general, hegemonic essence.

Paul Santilli also sees horror as a cultural effect. He approaches it, however, from an ontological rather than aesthetic point of view, and locates horror in the materiality of existence. According to Santilli, who builds on Emmanuel Levinas' work, "[h]orror refers to an experience of those aspects of the real that are not yet slotted into any cultural schema. It is an anxiety about the instability and contingency of the world itself." (2007, p. 184). Santilli shares with Prince the view that horror is a confrontation with the "outside" of culture, but he shifts the experience of horror to the forefront. For Santilli, the horrific

experience, not the horrific entity, is most important (Santilli, 2007, pp. 179-180). The horrific experience indicates the incapacity to make sense of the world.

Santilli's ontological definition of horror is useful because it helps explain why some "in-between" entities are benign. Ghosts on film, even though they are interstitial beings, are often benign presences. In *Ghost Town* (Koepp, 2008), for example, the main character gains the ability to see ghosts, and tries to help them fulfill their unfinished business. The film is far from horrific. This underscores the need to pay more attention to the *experience* of horror than the horrific entity. Things are not intrinsically horrific, as Prince and Creed might suggest, but rather, become horrific when frameworks for understanding them break down. When the dead return in spectral form—being of varying degrees, invisible, weightless or ephemeral—they are clearly understandable in a Christian-metaphysical framework as those with unfinished business.

While Prince and Creed both insist that horror movies reinforce existing cultural structures, Paul Santilli is more optimistic, because he sees in the breakdown of culture an opportunity for social change. "Modern scientific culture has had few regions in its categorical schemes for the acknowledgment of that which cannot fit into those schemes. In fact, modern culture, from its onset in the 17th century, has aspired to enmesh without remainder all of being within its conceptual nets." (Santilli, 2007, p. 186). If horror is the breakdown of the cultural matrix, then it is sometimes a way out of a totalitarian modernity. At least one example comes to mind here. In *The Others*, the viewer believes that the family's house is haunted. The main twist of the film though, is that all of the members of the family are ghosts. The "ghosts" that horrified us throughout the course of the film were really the living occupants of the house (Amenábar, 2001). In the first place, this film's ending illustrates how a popular

film can reverse the taboo ritual, and force the viewer to adopt a post-modern ethics of recognition. In the end, what's normally "horrific", that is, the ghostly double, has to be accepted as normal. After all, having seen the film, the viewer already accepted the ghosts as human for more than half of the movie.

The Limits of Cultural Definitions of Horror: Explaining the Social-situatedness of Haunted House Films

I adopt a cultural definition of horror, and see haunted house films as texts that deal with the breakdown of experiential schemas. Until now, I have presented haunted house films themselves, with little attention—aside from the discussion of horror—to the practice of movie-watching. Yet, understanding how film viewing works for the audience is integral to grasping the politics of horror. A weakness of the ontological definition of horror is that it only explains why the text is horrifying; by ignoring the social-situatedness of the text, it cannot explain how horror resonates more broadly in people's perception, or how it might interfere with other, seemingly unrelated social phenomena. Without the focus on context, and without an *a priori* definition of political essence, it is necessary to reconstruct a view of the political, and a view of the social life of which haunted house movies are a part.

After a look at my method, I start this task by appropriating Peter Sloterdijk's "spherology" to situate haunted house films in the "foam", which is Sloterdijk's term for the collection of fluid and loosely connected spaces that makes up contemporary existence. Through this "spherology" I offer a definition of contemporary American politics as "space design", or the

ability to determine what space looks like, and who and what can enter it in what fashion. Next, in the same chapter, I return to Paul Santilli's definition of horror with ritual theory: by suspending existential spaces, horror becomes part of a "liminal ritual", which reworks the social "foam." In this way, haunted house film viewing can be seen as a ritual that reconstructs American domestic space. With this approach, a political reading of haunted house films involves explaining exactly how each one constructs the American domestic space, and the repercussions of that reworking on power relations in the home and in other American spaces. If domestic space is reworked in contemporary American haunted house movies, how does that affect American politics? Based on a qualitative analysis of some of the most popular haunted house movies since 2005—*The Amityville Horror*, *The Haunting in Connecticut*, *Paranormal Activity* and *Insidious*—I argue that haunted house film viewing contributes to the "domestication" of American space, where, through romantic and tragic narratives respectively, women are figured as "security moms" and men as "sovereign fathers." Furthermore, this same domestication paternalistically construes State authority as parental power. In the first chapter, I present my method. In the second, I develop a political spherology of horror films to situate the films socially. In the third chapter, I discuss the masculinity crisis discourse's role in specific haunted house films. In Chapter Four, I show how each movie uses a romantic or tragic narrative to construct the "security mom" and "paternal sovereign" figures.

1. Methodology

This chapter deals with how I did my research, that is, it answers some important questions about the data, its provenance, its analysis and my approach to it. I begin with a discussion of

the general aim of my method, which is generally to survey fictional social space. Next, I describe the specific data-gathering techniques I used: specifically, I describe my ethnographic direct-observation approach to film analysis. After that, I give my rationale for my method of choosing the studied cases, namely, the importance and difficulty in assessing the cultural salience of certain films. Finally, I discuss the theoretical strengths, weaknesses, and limits of this method in the areas of film analysis, as well as the particular challenges I encountered while using it, particularly the inability to determine the relative importance of some scenes without quantitative data, and the need for a qualitative analysis of audience behaviour.

1.1 Surveying Filmic Social Space

My work is motivated by the desire to understand the spatial-political stakes of American haunted house films on the domestic sphere. Broadly speaking, it responds to the question: how do haunted house films, as cultural artefacts, help construct American domestic spaces, and how does this construction affect the variety of power relations operating around the home, relations like territory, gender, and the State? The research itself began with a much broader question, what is scary in haunted house films, and how does that fear affect people's perception of domestic space? This question, because of its open-ended nature, necessitated an inductive approach. The project started with an intuition, an idea that there might be something political going on in haunted house movies. For this reason, my general stance was one of openness to the films; I had to be receptive to the material, without losing the political thread. For this reason, I adopted an ethnographic method, through which I would document the films as social scenarios, involving the interplay of actors and space,

and power therein. My aim was to determine in which power relations the films situated themselves. That is, to which power relations was each film relevant?

This led me to a first conclusion, that ghosts were obviously the perpetrators of fear. In consequence, I began to situate the work around haunting, interrogating the ghosts to figure out why they were scary to viewers. This was the first difficulty in the project: many of the ghosts in the films defy definition until they are contextualized in something. That is, many of the ghosts could be interpreted from a variety of different perspectives, particularly in the case of *Paranormal Activity*, whose “entity” remains invisible for the entire film. So I turned towards theories on haunting to understand if ghosts were *a priori* political, with the hope of developing a political definition of haunting. I ended up with two main theoretical trajectories, one philosophical, the other cultural, neither of which gave me a satisfactory answer. I was led by Derrida’s hauntology down a dead end, asking questions about the “inheritance” of the films that could not be answered, simply because I had not yet situated the films socially or historically. By cultural studies, I was asked to situate ghosts in the “collective memory” and determine what each represented. The problem with these two orientations is that they rely on a common model of ghosts; entities who have clearly returned from the past to finish the unfinished. But some of the ghosts in the films deviated from this model, so neither theory was able to explain them.

Rather, I needed a theory of haunting that could explain a variety of types of haunting, which is why I turned towards the phenomenology of horror. I should note that the project adopts a phenomenological framework, but as for method, I aim to forward a plausibly general theory of haunted house films, not simply an account of my own experience of them. What is important for this chapter is that the phenomenology of horror demanded a re-orientation of

my method. Instead of focusing on the scary entities themselves, I would have to focus on the context of haunting, that is, the domestic scenes that the supernatural phenomena disrupt. Thus I turned towards the living characters, and asked a series of implicit questions: who were the characters, what did they do and say, how did they behave, and most importantly, how did the ghosts affect them?

Gathering and Analysing the Data: A Direct Observation Method

My data-gathering technique changed in response to the shift from the ghosts to their context; whereas I had originally planned to mark the scary scenes in the film, and only focus on these scenes, this proved to be a prematurely narrow focus. Instead, I took a step back and adopted an approach inspired by ethnographic direct observation. In this method, the researcher progressively narrows the focus of the observation, aiming at first to capture a large picture of the social scenario, and moving to the most relevant details as these become apparent: “les observations, qui sont au départ très larges, se concentreront progressivement sur les acteurs, les situations, ou les processus les plus cruciaux dans la situation à l’étude. Un processus d’observation efficace, qui ne veut pas rester en superficie, doit s’accompagner dès le départ d’une analyse de données, qui en oriente la collecte ultérieure.” (LaPerrière, 2009, p. 324). This was the guiding principle of my efforts to gather data from the films. In the first viewing, I took rough notes, mainly to record some of my first impressions. Next, I watched the films and wrote scene-by-scene summaries for each; that stage was the “large” one, where I was looking for any recurring themes or areas of emphasis. A few turned up. Amongst them was an emphasis on the father and mother figures. Thus I oriented my third film-viewing around these figures. I constructed a chart with a column for the mother, father,

and children, and as I watched the films, I documented what each of these characters did, said, and how they were portrayed in each scene.

After I had collected data on the mother, father, and children, I found that the children did not figure as predominantly as their parents. Consequently, I narrowed my focus to the mother and father. In order to begin establishing an argument, I compared the data for mother and father across themes, to determine the common features of these characters. The first common point in this light was the problematization of the father's authority, which is covered in the first Chapter. Of course, following the direct observation method, the focus on paternal authority required me to watch the movies again, to gather the specific examples that I would need to make my arguments. I ran into a roadblock, however, at this stage of the analysis. When I tried to analyse the problematization of the father's authority with the original political framework I had set up in the proposal, I found that it was insufficient; it simply could not give an answer to how the films politicized paternal authority. So I researched the problematization of fatherhood, which is how I found about the masculinity crisis discourse. Approaching the fall of the father in that light allowed me to make sense of what I had pulled out of the films, by socially and historically situating the material. I treated the mother figure in the same way, except that this time I was aware of the need to determine the political stakes of the mother figure *before* focusing on specific examples in the film.

1.2 Choosing the Cases

My choice of cases derives from two assumptions I make in my theoretical framework: (1) since films are mass media, they are more powerful when they are more popular, that is, they are watched by a large audience, and (2) for the film ritual to work, each movie should be set

in the United States. It also derives from the topic itself, that is, each case should be a “contemporary haunted house film”. Based on these restrictions, I chose four films. I could have chosen more, but I limited it to four because of the work’s time and length constraints. Furthermore, my claims are also limited to films that follow those criteria; that is, I do not make any pretensions to understanding all haunted house or horror films. Rather, my work refers only to ones released during and after 2005, set in the United States. I had originally intended to survey from 2000 to 2010, but this proved to be too many cases to analyse. Also, I wanted to make sure I included *Paranormal Activity*, because, having made over \$ 100 million at the U.S. box office, it is one of the most culturally salient haunted movies of all time. So I adjusted my time frame to include the most popular films from 2005 to the time I started the research in 2011.

The process for choosing the most popular was partly intuitive and partly statistical. In the first place, there were films that I had seen before I started the project, and that I thought pretty scary haunting movies. This was the case for *The Amityville Horror* and *Paranormal Activity*. I had those films in my mind when devising a theoretically consistent way to choose the other cases. At first I thought that I would use the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) ratings to find the most popular films; I figured that box office earnings were not a fair reflection of a film’s popularity, since it could, theoretically, be a sleeper, or in the reverse case, like *Snakes on a Plane*, have large first-week earnings but ultimately fall out of cultural circulation. Some films might even be viewed primarily or significantly by non-theatrical audiences.² But, I later learned that box office earnings need not be limited to opening day, but could encompass a film’s entire run. In this case, films that ran for more

² For a look at the Australian Case, see *Taking on the Box Office*

than a week or two—and made a lot of money—were seen by a lot of people. This debate was ultimately unnecessary, since the top-earners were also the same films to appear on the IMDB lists of “best horror movies”, and generally garnered ratings of over five out of ten. I have included a table on the next page to illustrate the box office earnings.

Film	Year	Nominal Box Office Earnings (Current USD)³	Consumer Price Index (CPI)⁴	Real Box Office Earnings (1984-82 USD)⁵
Paranormal Activity	2007	107,917,283	207.34	52,048,463
The Amityville Horror	2005	65,233,369	195.3	33,401,623
Haunting in Connecticut	2009	55,325,526	214.53	25,789,179
Insidious	2010	53,991,137	218.056	24,760,216
The Uninvited	2009	28,573,173	214.53	13,318,964
An American Haunting	2005	16,298,046	195.3	8,345,134

³ Nominal Box Office Earnings Data retrieved from the Internet Movie Database (IMDB)

⁴ CPI-u Data retrieved from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics
<ftp://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/cpi/cpiiai.txt> The base year is the period from 1982-1984

⁵ Real Earnings are calculated by a) dividing the average CPI in the given year by the base year (1982-1984) value of 100 and b) dividing the nominal earnings by the value obtained in a).

The Messengers	2007	14,713,321	207.34	7,096,229
The Skeptic	2009	6,223	214.53	2,901
Death of a Ghost Hunter	2007	3,490	207.34	1,683

Table 1 U.S. Box Office Earnings for Haunted House Films released in theatres from 2005 to 2010⁶

1.3 Strengths, Weaknesses, and Limits of my Method

The strengths, weaknesses, and limits of my method generally relate to its inductive and ethnographic nature. In terms of strengths, the method allowed me to recuperate some of the most important political themes in the films, without making recourse to an *a priori* explanation of which textual aspects would be political. This same strength, however, turned out to be a weakness, because the method did not work with the original framework political framework I set out, namely, Wood's formula for the politics of horror. It was thus difficult to orient the analysis, which forced me to double-back on the work several times. Finally, the principle limit of the method is that it relies on a theoretical, rather than empirical justification for viewer behaviour; if the project were larger, I would include a qualitative study of viewer perception, which would help support the main assumption of the method, mainly, that my interpretation of the films is, because of the common experience of horror, similar to others.

As I mentioned earlier, my research question dictated an inductive method, whose main purpose was to survey the films. In this light, the ethnographic approach was effective, because it allowed me to maintain the broad scope necessary to identify the most prevalent

⁶ And for which earnings data were available.

elements of the films, even when those elements were disparate. For example, if I had assumed that a certain element would appear in the films, for example, colonial property relations, I would have only found it in only one film: *The Amityville Horror*. Using a more inductive approach, however, I was able to account not only for colonial property relations, but also depictions of fatherhood. This broad view is what enabled me to eventually make links between elements that would have been widely disparate and likely unworkable in a deductive framework. While being ultimately productive, the method was at times frustrating, since it was at odds with the quasi-Freudian political definition that I set up in the theoretical framework. For Wood's formula to work, the researcher must assume a normality that will be under investigation. After writing an early draft of the theoretical framework, I had suspected the problems this would cause, but I believed that by identifying the "normality" in a given film, I would be able to also determine how that film shifted the normal: did it violate it or reaffirm it? The drawback of this approach is that without the Freudian concept of repression as an external criterion for evaluating the normal, the analysis is apolitical, and the film loses its link with its social context. I was thus faced with a choice: either change the method, or change the theory. Seeing as how I wanted to distance myself from Freudian approaches, I ultimately decided to discard Wood's formula for explaining the political. For me, this underscored the importance of thinking through how the method flows from the theory.

Another weakness of the method relates to qualitative aspects of the project, and the assumption of equal weight in filmic elements. While analysing the data, I assumed that a two-second scene was just as important as ten-second scene. Of course, I try to mitigate this by situating the political in the overall narrative arc of the film. A quantitative analysis

however, would have allowed me to count how many times certain elements appeared, and at which moments of the films. Perhaps this would have given a clearer picture of the importance of some of the elements, but it too is problematic: who is to say something is more important because it appears more frequently? Still, some quantitative support would have made shed some light on each scene's relative importance. That suggests another limit of the project, namely, I can only theoretically justify why certain elements are more important than others. It might be the case that viewers ignore a two-second section, while they focus on longer sections.

The issue of viewer perception is largely due to the epistemic limits of ethnography and observation itself, namely, I can never be free of cultural and social dispositions: I am positioned socially and culturally, and so is the data. I am well aware of this, and make no pretensions to objectivity. That being said, I do argue that my theory is to some extent generally explicative, in the sense that my main point relies on the idea that other viewers would react to the films in a reasonably similar way that I would. I support that assumption with the phenomenological definition of horror; once again, as long as people are scared by a horror film, they are all experiencing a rupture in their existential dwelling spaces, or spheres. But this support is not as extensive as I would like it to be. Ultimately, I would have liked to include direct observation, interviews, and surveys of audiences to support this point empirically.

2. A Political Spherology of Haunted House Films

After having discussed method, I turn now to the political resonance or significance of this representation of the American home: how are haunted house films political? Answering this

question means analysing cultural life from a spatial perspective; we need to locate the haunted house film, and determine who watches it, where, and which aspects of life it affects. Where do haunted house movies fit specifically in social life? To what extent do they affect people's perception? How are these affects political? If we accept the premise that film, and the haunted house genre specifically, is a space-design tool in the "war of the foams," then movie theatres and living rooms become ritualistic spaces for viewers, through which conceptions of domestic space are constructed. These rituals are political because they determine the nature of authority in the American home. I start with an overview of Peter Sloterdijk's "spherological" theory of social life that sees contemporary politics as a "war of the foam". Next, I turn to film's unique place in this politics. After that, I discuss Haunted House movies specifically. Finally, I develop a political definition of haunted films, based on the idea of "politics as space-design."

2.1 The "War of the Foam" and Politics as Space-Design

If there is a unique quality of Peter Sloterdijk's thought, it is his "spatialization" of social theory, his commitment to uncovering the fundamental architecture of modernity. Jean-Pierre Couture has argued that Sloterdijk provides a *pharmakon* for modernity, a way forward in light of the pathological theorization of the "individual", constantly in need of securitization (2009, p. 158). Spherology is animated in part by an underlying principle of togetherness, which, in the form of the "dyadic structure", reveals a potentially emancipatory counter-narrative to the modern fiction of the isolated, abstract, singular human (Couture, 2009, p. 159). But aside from the meta-therapeutic potential of spherology, it also has certain usefulness as a spatially-attentive way of approaching social activity. For our purposes, it offers an experientially grounded way to explore the social effects of horror-film viewing.

Spherology is necessary here because it allows us to explore those films from a spatial perspective, and determine the political stakes based on how and where the movies are screened, how they shape people's perception, and to what areas of social life they are relevant. In other words, with spherology, the material in the films becomes grounded. This is a way to deal with both the drawbacks of the Freudian perspective, which relies on precarious anthropologically underpinnings, and the purely cultural perspective, which tends to understate the importance of audience perception in interpreting the text.

Sloterdijk's spherology culminates in a diagnosis of modern social life: it is lived, experienced, and perceived in a series of "foams", comprised of loosely connected yet fundamentally isolated spaces. This is the product of what Couture points out as Sloterdijk's aim to explore the "poorly exploited" spatial-existential consequences of Martin Heidegger's phenomenology (2011, p. 2). To understand this description of society, one must start with the smallest spaces, and move to the largest. In Sloterdijk's view, humans are distinguishable from other animals because we alone are "creators of the interior"; human existence is one of radical separation from the "outside" or environment (2011, p. 46). The smallest interior spaces are inhabited by people and their doubles: the daemon, soul, or in contemporary times, the Self. Sloterdijk describes the Christian Genesis myth as an explicitation of this fact, whereby breathing life into an empty shell, God creates a "bipolar" space where he and Adam live in divine ecstasy (Sloterdijk, 2011, p. 42). He insists that this bipolar tendency is a fundamental human force, a "power to belong together", which he calls "solidarity." (Sloterdijk, 2011, p. 45).

In this light, history is the "transference" of the "biurnal" sphere, the smallest unit with two inhabitants, over larger and larger groups of people, from the intimacy of the household, to

the belonging of the nation, to the expanse of the empire (Sloterdijk, 2011, pp. 56-58). But, as Couture indicates, this transference has a political dimension; the task of classical politics has always been to reproduce the State, which, in light of the increasing size of human groups, served as a kind of “metaphorical mother” who could guarantee the social existence of the “citizens” (2011, p. 5). But contemporary social life is one where “classical politics” is no longer possible, because the insulating “orbs”—nations, empires, and grand philosophical systems— are no longer viable:

When everything has become the centre, there is no longer any valid center; when everything is transmitting, the allegedly central transmitter is lost in the tangle of messages. We see how and why the age of the one, the greatest all-encompassing circle of unity and its bowed exegetes has irrevocably passed. The guiding principle of the polyspheric world we inhabit is no longer the orb, but rather *foam*. In foam worlds, the individual bubbles are not absorbed into a single, integrative hyper-orb, as in the metaphysical conception of the world, but rather drawn together to form irregular hills. What is being confusedly proclaimed in all media as *the* globalization of the world is, in morphological terms, the universalized war of foams.” (Sloterdijk, 2011, p. 71).

In this light, social life is the aggregation of foamy structures that rise and fall as time progresses. The thrust of Sloterdijk’s argument is that politics is the war of the foams, this struggle over the growing and bursting social conglomerates. Indeed, his spherology is a “political amorphy” that tries to understand the shifting forms of contemporary “solidary” spaces (Sloterdijk, 2011, p. 71).

If, as Sloterdijk argues, people are becoming increasingly isolated in their “egospheres”—individualized dwelling spaces explicitated in the apartment (Sloterdijk, 2005, p. 504)—contemporary politics is the art of assembling these egospheres into foams. In other words, if politics is a war of terrain, power is space-design. To illustrate, Sloterdijk describes how the French revolutionaries of 1789 created the new republic not through their texts, but through converting the buildings of the Ancien Régime to republican spaces, complete with statues devoted to liberty and massive public spectacles to simulate the French “People” (Sloterdijk, 2005, pp. 539-543). Thus politics happens through space, because it is only through space-design that people can be brought together into foam; by assembling multiple microspheres together, the politician creates a group, which might be more or less precarious depending on the frequency of its coming together.

Power in this foam operates on the basis of hierarchy and exclusion. Speaking to the relationship between God and Adam, Sloterdijk announces, “If this strong relationship inevitably seems asymmetrical in theological tradition—characterized by a powerful leaning towards God’s side—it is primarily because, aside from his engagement with Adam, his co-subject, God is always assigned the indivisible burden of cosmogonic responsibilities (Sloterdijk, 2011, p. 43).” By being master and creator of the universe, God had a presence that surpassed that of the human, the particular. The human in this case was blessed by God’s radiance, but at the price of being forever under his thrall. So it was impossible for a bipolar relationship between God and humans to ever be egalitarian, even if it was symbiotic.

This same dynamic is at work in contemporary political structures, if perhaps a bit more tenuously. The foam is precarious, and spontaneous, being somewhere between the total isolation of the “archipelago” and the complete unity of the “masses” (Sloterdijk, 2005, p.

535). But if the foam persists, it is held in place by the production of a “phonotope”, which for Sloterdijk is the common “tuning” through which a group asserts its togetherness (Sloterdijk, 2005, pp. 336-337). Hence Sloterdijk’s exploration of stadiums; in the stadium the “directors of consensus” use a kind of “phonotopic synthesis” to direct the crowd (Sloterdijk, 2005, p. 54). Of course, this kind of asymmetrical production of sound is directly related to power relations, the privileged being those who are able to direct the phonotope.⁷ In a sense, the privileged speaker is a kind of god who elicits a general hymn from the audience. This limited access to the phonotope means that foams are not necessary egalitarian or anarchical structures, even when entered voluntarily, because membership or inclusion in foam is subject to different power relations, which are often unequal. Take the example of a Presidential inauguration ceremony or Question Period in parliament. People can attend, and perhaps, for a few minutes, resonate with their fellow spheres. But this resonance is governed by a stringent set of rules that determine who can speak and when—in a sense, the phonotopological characteristics of the foam.

2.2 The Domestic Space: “Sphere” and Foam

Santilli’s suggestion that the horrific is an experience of unbounded space sheds light on the need to address order and disorder in spatial terms. The horrific breakdown of sense amounts to a *nausea*, a disorientation in space, or loss of space altogether (Santilli, 2007, p. 182).

Taboo has a specific cultural space, just as those dead who return have specific cultural concepts, like ghost, zombie, and wraith. But the truly horrific is the breakdown of cultural

⁷ Richard Sennett raises this same point in his exploration of the Athenian democracy’s reliance on the voice as a political tool. See *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*

spaces. How then, can we read texts on the basis of the horrific? What we can see in those texts is the breakdown of spheres, the incapacity of cultural and linguistic spaces to orient people in the world.

While “body-horror” movies like *Saw* and *Hostel* feature the bodily space, haunted house movies deal directly with the domestic space. The domestic space has two dimensions. The two meanings of the word “house” hint at this: the house is the physical shelter for existence but it is also a family, a blood-line. As has been pointed out elsewhere, Edgar Allen Poe, expertly exploited this word in the “The Fall of the House of Usher,” a title whose ambiguity demonstrates the unity of two seemingly disparate definitions. The domestic space is thus both territorial and temporal. In the first case, the domestic space is a protected territory that incubates its inhabitants. This incubation gives rise to the second form of space: a perpetuation through time. Robert Harrison, influenced like Sloterdijk by Heidegger, indicates that “To be at home mean[s] to be at home meant to reside with the blessing sphere of the sacred fire, in and through which the dead maintained a presence among the living,” and “the retrieval and perpetuation by which humankind creates a memory and opens its future take place primarily within the human house.” (2003, pp. 38-39).

Peter Sloterdijk offers a concrete description of how this domestic space functions in everyday life; in essence, it is a foamy space like any other. In the sense that the house creates a particular time and space that orient peoples’ existence, it is a *logement* or “dwelling”, which is the base from which humans make sense of the world: “In light of a semio-ontological analysis, the lodging appears as a redundancy generator or *habitus* machine, of which the mission is to separate into familiar and non-familiar the mass of signals ‘venus au monde’ and candidates for signification.” (Sloterdijk, 2005, p. 461). The

world, then, if it is a series of spheres as Sloterdijk suggests, is ordered based on lodgings or habitation machines. Indeed, this is what Sloterdijk means when he writes, “the house is the place where the habitual and the un-habitual [unusual] establish themselves.” (my translation) (Sloterdijk, 2005, p. 471).

By introducing a separated space, the house sorts the internal as the usual, the everyday, and the familiar. This is true from a physical perspective, in that only familiar people and things are permitted to enter the domestic space, and from a temporal perspective, because of the nature of identity. The house categorizes the world based on the temporal signifier of the family, which carries with it a name, a heritage, and a future. These separations, territorial and temporal, together constitute what Sloterdijk calls a “micro-sphere” that is, “an immune system of psychical space.” (Sloterdijk, 2005, p. 9). The house then, as a symbolic “habitation machine” creates a domestic microsphere that allows for the perpetuation of the people existing within it.

It is important to note, however, that given the bursting of human “monospheres”, the house, if it could previously be imagined as a unified space, is now foamy. Far from being the one-roomed houses of former times, the contemporary suburban house unites the family in a series of precariously strewn together egospheres that flit in and out under one roof. Since each person is the inhabitant of an individual microsphere, the house, the family, is a foamy collection of these people. When they come together for dinner, or in the living room, they temporarily assemble. But this assembly, like the gathering of the French “people” is directed by a certain amount of space-design, which we will see, happens in the American phonotope.

2.3 Hollywood Movies and Haunted House Films: Elements of the American Phonotope

Since houses, domestic spaces, are foamy structures, they are subject to power in the form of space-design; one place this space-design happens is wherever movies are viewed. For Sloterdijk, cultural activity creates a phonotope, and as such, helps distinguish one group from another:

Modern audiovisual mass culture is an almost perfect reconstitution of the primitive phonotope—with the small difference that the former has constituted, for the coexistence of men with their peers in a world that progressively lost its security, the need to evolve—into an immune system that helped the group perpetually regenerate its deeply specific tonality. (My translation) (Sloterdijk, 2005, p. 335)

Hollywood films then, are part of the contemporary American phonotope. It is important here to grasp the complexity of this notion; at the same time that access to the phonotope happens in and with a small foamy group—the film audience—in the theatre or living-room, it also works on constructing psychically other kinds of foam. For example, war movies might work on constituting national American foam, while movies about houses, help constitute the relatively small foams of the American family and neighbourhood.

If houses are foams, then haunted houses are domestic foams in the process of breaking down or bursting in the presence of ghosts. In horror “not only do the standard symbolic forms by which we orient ourselves in the world melt down, but our very consciousness of being a distinct self collapses. In this existential experience, we feel the presence of pure being without the safety net of cultural constructs to sort out subjects and objects.” (Santilli,

2007, p. 181). In this case, the cultural construct at stake is the domestic foam. In this first place, the domestic space can no longer protect its family from the elements. Secondly, it can no longer guarantee a temporal existence. The haunted house film is unique because this breakdown is caused by ghosts.

Ghosts usually appear in anxious spaces, so their presence in the house is another indicator that Santilli's definition of horror is applicable to haunting. Ghosts, in the sense that they return, could be intrinsically horrific because they threaten the normal sense of temporal order, whose unique presence, in between the dead and the unborn, the house is meant to guarantee. But, as I indicated earlier, the mere presence of the ghost on film is not enough to horrify, which means that some ghosts on film are horrific and others are not. Maria Del Pilar Blanco offers the beginnings of an explanation of why. For her, ghosts are "a collision of temporalities or spaces." (Del Pilar Blanco, 2012, p. 1). These collisions "evoke the experience of perceiving specific locations," which themselves are beset by "crisis of perception." (Del Pilar Blanco, 2012, p. 9). In other words, ghosts are authors' attempts to express the worries and sensations they have when perceiving a given space. They speak to present and overt "imagination, doubt and anticipation (Del Pilar Blanco, 2012, p. 4). This doubt, anticipation, and imagination that is haunting, reflects the continual inability of the domestic foam to sustain itself.

In the case of horrific ghosts, this bursting becomes violent space is reconfigured in way unforeseen in American culture. Ghosts with unfinished business already have a place within the modern "theotope," which offers a "semiological key" for understanding "manifestations of the beyond." (Sloterdijk, 2005, p. 321). People understand that fictive ghosts are the result of the dead not being able to "move-on" to the afterlife because of unfinished business; such

ghosts do not speak to worries, anxieties, or imaginations, because they have a well-functioning cultural sphere of understanding. Horrific ghosts, on the other hand, appear at the margins of cultural spheres, where the process of symbolic sorting breaks down. Thus, when ghosts haunt houses, what they do is present the house with something it is unable to process. In this sense, horrific haunted houses are domestic foams under-construction in the face of some deep ontological threat emanating from the world, and received in the American phonotope.

By viewing haunted house films, people enter a liminal ritualistic space that reinstates the domestic foam after its disintegration. Victor Turner offers one of the most convincing theories of ritual, which relies on a distinction between two kinds of space: liminal and liminoid. He offers a definition of the liminal:

In order to live, to breathe, and to generate novelty, human beings have had to create—by structural means—spaces and times in the calendar, or in the cultural cycles of their most cherished groups which cannot be captured in the classificatory nets of their quotidian, routinized spheres of action. These liminal areas of time and space—rituals, carnivals, dramas, and latterly films—are open to the play of thought, feeling, and will; in them are generated new models, often fantastic, some of which may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jural models that control the centers of society's ongoing life. (1966, p. vii)

The liminal space can be seen as built-in interruption and suspension of regular social activities, its response to “sociocultural necessity”; it offers “ways to make the [social

structure] work without too much friction” (Turner V. , 1982, pp. 53-54). The liminoid space, on the other hand, is similarly one where regular social constraints are suspended. In it, however, people are “[free] to transcend social structural limitations” and “performance can take place,” (Turner V. , 1966, pp. 37,41). This space is more obviously open to play: the re-assembling of “factors of culture,” or the “making free with social heritage.” (Turner V. , 1982, pp. 40, 52). Turner’s distinction ultimately hinges on ritual’s relationship with social structures. For him, liminal activities relate directly too, and are embedded in the “total social process” (1982, p. 54), while liminoid activities develop “along the margins” of social structure (1982, p. 54).

While horror movie-watching seems to oscillate between liminoid and liminal qualities, it is generally too symbolically rigid to be considered a liminoid space. On the one hand, being voluntary entertainment, movie-watching would seem to have the practical qualities of a liminoid activity. Furthermore, play occurs at all three stages of the document, in production, content and reception. Writers create stories out of cultural meaning, cinematographers manipulate angles to construct an aesthetic, and directors have a hand in the overall make-up of the film. We have also already discussed how the content of horror films is in *limen*, in that horror is the breakdown of cultural frameworks. On the other hand, even if horror movies do suspend normal cultural frameworks at the moment of horror, they cease to be liminoid for the audience when they resolve the crisis, because at that time, they prescribe a collective solution to horror. Furthermore, movies, far from ghosting the margins of social structure, are a fundamental part of popular culture.

Having the qualities of a liminal ritual, horror movie-watching creates a space wherein the text becomes a sounding board for contemporary cultural structures, like the house. In

haunted house movies, after the domestic sphere has been fragmented, ruptured, or violated, the crisis must be resolved. When the spectator finishes watching the movie, she leaves the liminal space with her perception slightly changed. This is not to claim that one film can drastically alter a person's perception, but rather, a multitude of films with the same types of resolutions can over time build new cultural frameworks of perception towards existing cultural formations, like the domestic space. For this reason, the resolutions of the haunted house films become extremely important, because they determine the political effects of the liminal ritual.

Turner's definition of ritual demonstrates the screen's political effects. I mentioned earlier how foams are structured by power, and the film-viewing space is no different. Firstly, people who cannot afford movie tickets, who do not understand English, or who do not have enough leisure time to watch movies, are excluded from movie-watching.⁸ More importantly, however, the relationship between the screen and the spectator is asymmetrical. While some authors, like Axelson (2011), have suggested that different spectators perceive films differently, that successful horror movies create a horrific experience suggests these spectators experience the material onscreen in the same way—as a violation of their shared existential frameworks. In this sense, for those who subscribe to the ideal of dwelling in the nuclear family house (likely still a majority in the United States), the American phonotope functions by a liminal ritual, which while violating the supposed insulation of the House as domestic sphere, attempts to re-instate it. This is consistent with Turner's assertion that “Liminal phenomena tend to be ultimately eufunctional even when seemingly ‘inversive’ for

⁸ The MPAA reports that 58% of moviegoers in 2013 were Caucasian. See *Theatrical Market Statistics, 2011*.

the working of the social structure, ways of making it work without too much friction.”

(Turner V. , 1966, p. 54).

2.4 Reading Haunted House Films as Ritual Objects in the American Phonotope

Social life, if we are to accept Sloterdijk’s view, is lived in and amongst a collection of foamy structures. Each of us is embedded in a cascade of bubbles. When we look at Haunted House films, we do not simply absorb them; for a brief moment, as horror takes us, our position in the foam becomes terribly explicit, and the disorientation of naked existence leaves us open to the reintegration films provide. Haunted house films, as ritual objects, provide both horror and resolution. They first disorient us, and then reposition us. In doing so, they are intrinsically political. Power, in this view, becomes control over the phonotope, over the ritual objects that draw out the contours of social space. We have to read haunted house films as such, as elements of space design in the war of the foams. This leads to a practical question: what is in the American phonotope? What is the “soundscape” of American culture? The haunted house ritual is a product of the phonotope, and thus, is dependent on its generalized and widespread orientation. In effect, by surveying the phonotope as it manifests itself in haunted house films, we can determine the specific political effects of those films.

3. Surveying Haunted House Films as Ritual Elements of the American Phonotope: Assaults on the Patriarchal Household and the Masculinity Crisis Discourse

In this chapter, we turn towards the central problematic presented in contemporary haunted house films. If, as we discussed in the previous chapter, haunted house films are ritual elements of the American phonotope, then a survey of their key themes should establish the stakes of the ritual. That is, it should contextualize the ritual and illuminate the specific aspects of the domestic space with which the films and American culture in general are concerned. In the case of haunted house films, the domestic space is first and foremost figured as a patriarchal space: authority and interest in the family are organized around male figures. But more importantly, the ghosts in the films, typically rival males and corrupt females, render that authority problematic. In terms of the American phonotope, this problem seems to be part of a masculinity crisis discourse that denounces, particularly in the form of the mythopoetic men's movement, the violent legacy of traditional masculinity and the "emasculating" effects of second-wave feminism. For these reasons, the haunted house film ritual needs to be understood as an attempt to reconstruct the domestic space around the dual problematic. The chapter starts with an exploration of male authority and threats to that authority in the film, particularly the male rival and corrupt mother. Next, I show how this dual threat is part of the masculinity crisis discourse dominating American culture, and how we must read the films as rituals attempting to resolve that crisis.

3.1 Threats to the Patriarchal Domestic Space: Male Authority, Male Rivality and the Archaic Mother in Contemporary Haunted House Films

The contours of the domestic space, as we discussed earlier, are two-dimensional: they first separate an interior from environment, which then produces a history—the possibility of separation in time. Power exercises itself on two fronts then, a spatial one, where it designates territory, and a temporal one, where it uses that territory to reproduce itself. Who

exactly has the power in the fictive houses? The domestic sphere, at least as portrayed in popular haunted house films, is a patriarchy, oriented around and for the male. In the films surveyed, the domestic space is primarily constructed around paternal authority, and the proper domestic history is a history of paternal lineage, with meaning and value being passed from Father to Son.

The territorial integrity of the domestic sphere depends on the ability of the Father figure to maintain authority over the family, and to define crisis and its solutions. Firstly, the Father-figure, by virtue of specialized knowledge—financial, rational, spiritual or some combination of three—is the main decision-maker in the family. This is the case for decisions involving moving from house to house, or courses of action for responding to crises. The authority also extends to the power of naming the haunting, which means accepting that it is actually occurring and thereby validating the experiences of the other characters, namely the children and Mother figures. As Barbara Creed points out about horror films, this often involves abjection or casting out the feminine, which, often taking the form of the archaic mother, poses an intrinsic threat to the “law of the father.” The threat to the father, however, need not always be the feminine. In some cases, as is made evident in the movies, the threat to the father can be competing male or father figures that would disrupt his authority. Where the threat is feminine, it tends to corrupt the domestic sphere’s capacity to transmit heritage from Father to Son. In this case, we could see the ghosts’ role as rendering problematic patriarchy, and thus establishing the movies as ritual objects of domestic space.

Perhaps more important than authority for the political consequences of the films, the threats to the domestic sphere—the abnormal—are defined in male terms, such that their very presence threatens patriarchal authority, both in its capacity to define and exercise authority

over the domestic space, and in its capacity to establish a patriarchal line. The ghosts tend to challenge paternal authority over the family by taking two forms: the “archaic mother”, whose presence calls into question the father’s legitimate dominion over the domestic sphere, and the “archaic rival,” a kind of threatening male other whose threat comes not in the form of a challenge to the father’s legitimacy, but rather, as a usurper to the father’s sexual and authoritarian monopoly over the home. These two types of figures oscillate between what Julia Kristeva calls “excremental” and “menstrual” threat:

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. ((1982, p. 71) cited in (Creed, 1986)).

Interestingly, the monster is a double of the good parent, either Father or Mother, which makes it an “excremental threat” whose presence speaks to what must be cast out in order for the domestic order to continue. This echoes Iris Marion Young’s insistence that culturally, “[g]ood men can only appear in their goodness if we assume that lurking outside the warm familial walls are aggressors, the ‘bad’ men who wish to attack them.” (2003, p. 224). On the other hand, the same doubles present a “menstrual threat” because they problematize the Father’s legitimacy in the domestic sphere, and his ability to create a male-centred domestic history.

3.1.1 Authority and Threat in *Insidious*

Insidious is the story of two parents' struggle to protect their son Dalton—who falls into a coma near the beginning of the movie—from a series of supernatural entities. After spending months caring for Dalton, his mother Renai begins to see and hear strange things around the house. She is eventually attacked by a ghost, which prompts the family to move out of the ostensibly haunted building. Things do not improve, however, in the new house. On the contrary, the haunting intensifies, and Renai calls a Priest, her mother-in-law, and a team of paranormal investigators including a medium, to combat the haunting. The medium, Elise, discovers that it is Dalton and not the house that is haunted. She tells the family that he is not really in coma, but rather, has left his body by way of “astral projection,” a kind of transcendental state he enters in his sleep. After conducting a failed séance to bring Dalton back from the realm of the Dead—“the further”—to which he has traveled, Elise suggests that Josh, Dalton's father, is the only one capable of saving him. At this point, Josh's mother, Lorraine, explains that Josh can save Dalton only because he too has the ability to astral project, and that she had to enlist Elise's help to save him, like Dalton, in the past. They convince Josh to astral project, and he brings Dalton back from the Further, but not before succumbing to a ghost who steals his body. The ghost kills Elise, and the movie ends (Wan, 2010).

One of the most obvious displays of patriarchal authority in the film is when Josh judges Elise's diagnosis of the haunting. Another example of the naming and decision-making authority in the film comes later, after the medium Elise tells Josh and Renai that a malign entity is waiting for the link between Dalton and his body to weaken. After enough time, Elise tells Renai and Josh, the entity will be able to steal Dalton's body. Renai asks, “Is there

anything we can do to bring Dalton back?” Elise says that there is something they can do, but that it “is a little unorthodox” and she would need their “complete trust.” (Wan, 2010)

At this moment, Josh objects, “no no no, sorry, this has gone too far.” Renai interjects, “Josh you said you’d give her a chance.” Josh says, “I did give her a chance, but we can’t have someone come into our home and tell us that the reason our son is in a coma is because his soul has floated off in other dimension.” Josh intones the second part of the sentence with sarcasm. The conversation goes on, and Josh says he brought Elise in merely to offer some comfort to Renai. When Renai argues with Josh, he says, “how does the voice of reason become the bad guy here?” and Renai shouts back, “you don’t believe me!” After claiming that the paranormal team is “dangerous” and “exploitative,” Josh throws out Elise and the other members as Renai looks on helplessly. Later, Josh visits Dalton in his room, and tenderly looks on his son. He asks him, “Did you go somewhere Buddy? No, you’re right here.” Josh breaks down in tears. As he looks around the room, he notices that some of Dalton’s drawings, from before the coma, illustrate the boy flying around the house, and some even depict the same malign figure Elise saw when she visited Dalton’s room. At this moment, Josh realizes that Elise was telling the truth, and tells Renai that they can go ahead with whatever Elise had planned (Wan, 2010).

This sequence demonstrates that Josh’s authority on the séance is supreme. In contrast to the some of the other films, where the spiritual authority is male, Elise possesses a privileged knowledge of the supernatural. Her authority, however, is ultimately limited by Josh’s “voice of reason,” which is the rationalistic male authority of the domestic sphere. The séance is not allowed to proceed until Josh sees Dalton’s drawings, providing evidence for Elise’s opinion

and validating from a rationalistic perspective. Only after this cross-examination of Elise's testimony does Josh consent to the ritual (Wan, 2010).

The film also demonstrates Josh's authority when Renai is attacked by a ghost in her bedroom. Earlier that night, Josh comes home late to find Renai waiting for him on the front porch. Renai asks Josh where he has been, and accuses him of avoiding their troubles. Josh insists that he is dealing with the situation in his "own fucking way", which is apparently staying at work late. Then, to convince him of the haunting's seriousness, Renai shows Josh the bloody sheets from Dalton's bed. Later that night, Renai has a nightmare about the house. When she awakens, we find her alone in bed. A figure stirs outside the window and Renai weakly calls for Josh, but the camera shows him snoring on the couch, clearly out of range of Renai's voice. Renai calls for him again, as a spectre, a male thug with a scarred face, wearing a leather jacket and hair greased back, enters the bedroom. The thug lunges across Renai's bed as she retreats to a corner, and emits—instead of a husky, deep voice, which is what we expect to hear—a high-pitched shriek as it attacks. Josh finally reaches the room, and flicks on the light to find Renai sobbing in the corner. Renai says, "You have to believe, me, he was right there. Please believe me!" Josh says "I do, I just don't know what you want me to do." Renai answers, "I want to leave, please, I want to leave this house. I can't spend another night here, please!" Josh sighs, as Renai continues, "Please, help me!" She throws herself into Josh's arms as he says, "Ok Ok, we're gone." (Wan, 2010).

The first important aspect of this scene is the display of Josh's authority as protector and decision-maker. Josh is the hero in this scene: instead of attempting to fend off the ghost herself, Renai is rendered helpless by the thug. According to Iris Marion Young, this is typical of an oft-neglected "masculinist conception of protection" that is a more "benign"

form of patriarchy (Young, 2003, p. 224). According to Young, “[t]he gallantly masculine man faces the world’s difficulties and dangers in order to shield women from harm. The role of this courageous, responsible, virtuous and ‘good’ man is that of a protector.” In this scene, Josh plays the role of the “good” protector, and defends Renai against one of his threatening, excremental doubles, the “bad man.” While he consoles Renai, the camera takes a high-angle shot of Josh, slightly elevated above Renai and protectively holding her hands .

As Young points out, this protection comes at the cost of submitting authority to men. In the “masculinist logic”, the woman cedes “decision-making authority” and “critical distance” to the male protector. In the heated moment of crisis, Renai is distraught and deeply disturbed by her encounter with the ghost, which, to the viewer and the character, was clearly present and visible in the room. Yet, in a patriarchal turn, Renai, and the viewer both wait for Josh’s “rational” opinion on the encounter. In the first place, Renai must hear Josh say he believes her before the encounter is permitted to move the narrative forward; she looks to him to acknowledge the horror of what took place. In the second place, Renai begs Josh to move the family out of the house. Josh, sighing in a moment of hesitation, eventually agrees (Wan, 2010). On the surface, this appears to be the exercise of “normal” marital consensus, but in effect it is a deferral to Josh’s authority. Being the father and symbolic and practical head of the family, Josh is the person who ultimately decides when the family can leave the house.

That this scene operates by the logic of masculinist protection contributes largely to the film’s defining the domestic sphere as a patriarchal space, because it is coupled with the aforementioned logic of protection and with a sexist logic of threat. The ghostly attacker’s sexual aggression is only briefly hinted at in this scene. He attacks Renai in the bedroom, on her bed, while Josh is away, and his outstretched hands grope ominously toward her (Wan,

2010). These hints, however, are made explicit in a latter scene with the same ghost. After Elise's séance breaks down, the ghosts infiltrate the previously safe space of the séance room. The ghost goes straight for Renai, pins her against the wall, and opens his mouth to reveal a long tongue, which he extends threateningly toward her (Wan, 2010). The rape overtones in the scene are strong, which makes explicit what was only hinted in the previous appearance of the ghost: the masculinist threat is a generalized male assailant, whose goal seems to be to violently subvert the Father's sexual authority over the mother, thereby usurping the latter's sexual dominion over the patriarchal domestic sphere. Again, this is an example of an external threat, one which threatens patriarchy from outside, because the thug is Josh's corrupted Double, a masculine figure whose sexuality is not the benign, protective one of the patriarchal man, but the menacing, shadowy threat of a corrupt masculinity. In this case the thug competes with Josh over legitimate masculinity in the domestic sphere. From a patriarchal perspective, the rapist is not a threat to the mother's sexuality, as it should be, but rather, a threat to the Father's power over the mother's body. When Josh visits the further, he ultimately vanquishes the Tough, and casts him back into the darkness.

Another example of a masculine-defined threat comes in the form of the alarm scene, which is in the first half of the movie when the haunting starts to intensify. While they sit in bed talking, Josh and Renai are startled by the sound of the alarm system ringing. Josh jumps out of bed and tells Renai to take Cali and Foster, and go into Dalton's room. In that moment when an external threat comes up against the house, Josh is the protector. He alone must secure the perimeter while the mother protects the means of his reproduction. Striking about the scene is Josh's inability to find the intruder. After he resets the alarm, it goes off two more times. He makes his way slowly throughout the darkened living room and kitchen on

the first floor, the once familiar layout having become alien. The alarm goes off a third time, and Josh returns to find the door chain swinging and door hanging open—whatever got in, got out (Wan, 2010). The scene demonstrates Josh's inability to control the territory, because he was incapable of controlling the space, and unable to identify the intruder.

A similar dynamic occurs when Josh must protect Dalton against another double in the film, the demonic entity. The demon is a male figure with a forked tongue and hooved feet. Of course, it relies on many of the classic interstitial representations: animal-human, man-woman, child-adult. Josh confronts the demon in the further, when he finds Dalton shackled to a pillar. Josh tells Dalton, "none of this is real," once again attempting to exercise his rational power (Wan, 2010). Again, the demon is a kind of generalized male assailant, a "bad man" who wants to use Dalton's body for his own purposes. Interestingly, the demon lives in what looks like a lushly decorated loft apartment, where he has a toy-making workshop, perhaps to lure children. Music—the same music Renai hears when she sees a spectral boy dancing in her living room—plays while he sharpens his claws. That other boy, a kind of double for Dalton, literally dances to the demon's tune, which demonstrates he is under the demon's thrall; the demon is a collector of children. The reference here seems to be one to child abduction and sexual violence, which is a powerful "bad" in Western culture. Josh's role, as the benign male authority, is to save Dalton from this bad man, and return him to the rational and safe world of Josh's patriarchy.

Even though the demon sometimes represents this external masculine threat, as it does in the rescue scene or the scene where Elise finds him hovering above Dalton's bed, at other times he embodies an internal, feminine, threat. In one scene, Renai is startled to find a bloody handprint underneath Dalton's legs on his sheets. This bloody bed sheet, an unnatural and

troublesome presence for a boy, is an invasion of femininity in the vulnerable body of the son figure, and as such, is taken to be a serious sign of trouble by Renai (Wan, 2010).

The handprint illustrates how entities need not be exclusively internal or external threats, but can be both. In this case, the blood represents the possibility of Dalton's feminization, and his incapacity to carry on the Josh's line to the next generation. Vivian Sobchack insists that it is child figures who ultimately call the domestic sphere into question, as they are at the centre of disruptions of paternity (Sobchack, 1986, p. 17). She writes "if patriarchy is willfully destroyed by its children, no 'tradition' will mark the future with the past and present, and if paternity is willfully denied by a patriarchy which destroys its children, then the future will not be 'conceived.'" (Sobchack, 1986, p. 17). But Sobchack, in limiting herself to films where a demonic child kills its parents or an enraged father tries to kill his children, misses the fact that it is often an external force, a competing spectral patriarchy or matriarchy, which threatens to destroy the father or the son. In *Insidious*, the demonic father covets Dalton. The child figure thus becomes the object of struggle between the ghosts and living characters.

When facing the archaic mother, Josh, the father, also takes on the role of the child. In a key scene after the séance, the paranormal team, Lorraine, Josh and Renai gather in the family's living room. Elise tells Lorraine to tell Josh why the haunting is happening. Lorraine explains to Josh that when he was a child, he too could astral project. She had to call Elise, the viewer learns, because Josh was lured away from the living world by a threatening ghostly woman. The woman, as illustrated in a series of mock photos, got "closer and closer" to Josh as he got older (Wan, 2010). This ghostly woman is shown at the beginning of the film, and in Josh's dreams throughout.

For Josh, the ghostly woman is a monstrous mother, whose goal is to lure him away from his body so that she can steal it. This “archaic mother” is a representation of sexual difference, which according to Creed, illustrates the undifferentiated unity of the child with the mother (Creed, 1986, p. 62). While representing the male’s undeniably female origin, she also calls forth the Self’s possible dissolution into the undifferentiated order of things (Creed, 1986, pp. 62-63). In the case of *Insidious* she doubles Lorraine, whose proper role in the patriarchal sphere is to raise Josh to become a patriarch.

In a sense, Josh enters a struggle to maintain his patriarchal male identity against a feminine threat: “We can see abjection at work in the horror text where the child struggles to break free from the mother, representative of the archaic maternal figure, in a context in which the father is invariably absent. In these films, the maternal figure is constructed as the monstrous feminine.” (Creed, 1986, p. 50). Josh’s father is tellingly absent from the story, which opens up the field for a corrupt father and mother, the archaic ghost, to steal him away. In the end of the film, the patriarchal domestic sphere is shattered, as Josh’s body is literally taken over by the monstrous mother and his paternal future is utterly destroyed. While Josh does regain Dalton from the Further, his sacrifice is futile because the child is left with a “feminized” father, who, rather than being the protective masculine presence oriented towards the future, is a corrupt, horrific return of the past.

These examples illustrate how authority and threat in *Insidious* are figured in patriarchal terms. Encounters with the horrific are governed by Josh, and so he ultimately decides to recognize or ignore the haunting. Furthermore, whether the threatening entities are external-internal or masculine-feminine, all of them pose a threat to Josh’s interests and authority, particularly where his sexual dominion and his ability to carry on his line are concerned.

3.1.2 Authority and Threat in the *Haunting in Connecticut*

Unlike the Father figure in *Insidious*, which is primarily embodied in Josh and Dalton, male authority and protection is dispersed amongst three characters in *The Haunting in Connecticut* (Cornwell, 2009) Peter, Matt, and Reverend Popescu. As the film progresses, Peter goes from good father to bad double, and which point the family turns towards the surrogate father, Popescu, for leadership. There at least three notable scenes of male authority in the film: the first is the house rental sequence, the second is the discovery of Aickman's workshop and the aftermath, and the third is the scene where Popescu diagnoses the haunting.

The Haunting in Connecticut, like *Insidious*, also features a sick son, Matt. The movie tells his story, as well as that of his family's struggle to hold together through the parallel crises of cancer and haunting. When the long drives from their out-of-state house to Connecticut for cancer treatment begin to take a toll on Matt and his mother Sara, the latter convinces her husband Peter to rent a house closer to the hospital. Sara moves in with her two sons and her nieces Wendy and Mary, who agree to help Sara tend to the house. Peter visits them on weekends, but continues his work in construction during the week (Cornwell, 2009).

When Sara rents the house, she learns it has "a bit of a history." Later in the movie, we find out that the house used to be a funeral home. Moreover, the funeral home was run by a man, Aickman, who conducted "psychical research"; he was a "necromancer" who used the stolen bodies of local townspeople to amplify the spirit-channeling powers of his assistant and medium, Jonah (Cornwell, 2009). Matt is troubled by visions of this history, and as the plot goes on, is attacked by the ghosts of Aickman's victims. With the help of his cousin Wendy,

Matt eventually confronts the problem, and the two discover the houses' hidden past. Once this happens, Matt seeks the counsel of a friend, Reverend Popescu, whom he first met during a chemotherapy session. Popescu exorcises Jonah's trapped spirit only to find out that it's not Jonah who attacks Matt, but rather the Ghosts of the townspeople, whose bodies Aickman hid in the walls of the house. Matt, who was hospitalized by some of the wounds supernaturally-inflicted on him, returns to the house to burn it down and free the trapped spirits. With Sara's help he succeeds in his mission, and he is miraculously cured of his cancer (Cornwell, 2009).

The first instance of male authority is the house-rental scene, where Sara suggests the family should move closer to the hospital. In an early sequence, Sara and Matt make an over-night drive from the hospital to their house: they get home at breakfast time. On the way, Matt tells Sara to pull over so that he can vomit, because the chemotherapy has made him nauseous (Cornwell, 2009). When they finally arrive at home, Sara makes breakfast for the rest of the family and Matt goes to bed. Peter, the patriarch, comes downstairs and asks Sara why the trip took so long. Sara says, "Do you want me to tell you how many times we stopped so he could throw up?" They banter back and forth about the situation, and Sara asks if they can move closer to the hospital. Peter tells her money is tight, especially since they have taken in their nieces, Wendy and Mary. At first he says, "Every penny we have is sunk in the business," but he eventually concedes and tells Sara, "you're right, let's just do it, let's get a house closer to the hospital." Sara answers, "But what are we going to do? How are we going to afford it?" Peter says, "I can come up on weekends, get a second mortgage on our second mortgage." Sara asks, offhandedly, "We're going to make it through this right?" Peter replies, "Definitely." (Cornwell, 2009). This scene demonstrates Sara's deferral to Peter's

authority both on financial matters, and the establishment of a new home for the family. Even after Sara coherently argues for the new house, she immediately cedes ground to Peter on financial matters, acting as if she knew nothing about the family's finances. Only Peter can tell Sara how he will make the financing of a second home possible, and in the end, he is the one who offers reassurance. This pattern is repeated a few times throughout the movie; in a very classic patriarchal division of labour, Sara is responsible for caring for Matt while he is treated, while Peter is responsible for financing the treatments.

A second instance of male authority is in a sequence where Peter learns that the house was formerly a funeral home; in this scene, Peter has a privileged knowledge of the house. After finding their way into a usually-sealed room in the basement, Matt tells Billy to get up on the undertaker's worktable. In a trancelike state, Matt spins the table around and around. As the table turns, he has a vision of coffins being unloaded in the workshop. He spins the table faster and faster. When it becomes too fast for Billy, Billy begins to yell at Matt to stop. Peter, hearing the shouting from outside, runs down into the basement and asks what happened. He looks around the room, and examines the tools, clearly distraught. When he picks up a bladed device, he looks down the end of it, and a knowing look dawns on his face, "now we know why the rent was so cheap." He storms out of the basement to confront Sara (Cornwell, 2009). The scene changes and we see Peter walking her outside by the arm:

"What did you know and when did you know it... Jesus!"

"Know what?"

"What this place was? Aren't you the one who says we can't live on lies?"

"That was before, when you were a drunk and a liar."

“But I’m not anymore.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry Peter, and I should’ve told you.” (Cornwell, 2009)

The first remarkable thing about this sequence is Peter’s knowledge about the workshop. It seems that Peter has an insight, one unavailable to Sara, about the workshop and its purpose. Perhaps this insight comes from the fact that he is a tradesperson, or simply because he is a man. Whatever the source of his privileged knowledge, Peter is the authority on the house, so he unlocks the secret of the sealed room, even though Sara knows about the house’s history before him.

The sequence is remarkable not only for how the dialogue reveals Peter’s privileged knowledge, but also for how its cinematography frames him as an authority figure. Right from when he pulls Sara outside by the arm, Peter takes the position of a stern father confronting a child: not treating Sara as an equal, but scolding her for concealing the history of the house. The editing takes a shot-reverse-shot pattern⁹ that depicts Peter from a low angle, and Sara from a high one, which is usually considered to be a way of establishing one character’s relative power or large stature, both figuratively and literally (Turner G. , 1994, p. 126). When Sara talks, the camera looks down on her from over Peter’s left shoulder, making him appear to be a moral judge of Sara’s actions. As a reformed alcoholic, Peter takes the moral high ground in the scene, and Sara eventually apologizes to him for concealing the history of the house.

It is Peter’s authority in this sequence that essentially establishes the rules of the new house, and the chosen course of action for addressing its history.

⁹ The shot/reverse-shot pattern is a classic cinematographic technique. An initial shot looking directly at a speaking character is followed with a shot of the second interlocutor from over the first’s shoulder.

Moreover, the sequence also highlights Peter's role in this point of the plot, where he remains the good father and protector, whose benign dominance protects the family against the evil history of the house. In the minutes following Peter's scolding of Sara, he takes his seat in the middle of the dinner table. Before instructing the family to hold hands and pray, an action which triggers a vision sequence for Matt, Peter gives the family a pep talk, during which he tells them that the haunted home is "just a house", despite its unsavoury history. He finishes by inciting them to pull together "like a team." (Cornwell, 2009). Peter's words once again demonstrate his leadership role. With a measured nonchalance, he explains to them that there's nothing wrong with the house, and that they have nothing to fear, thereby delegitimizing Matt and Sara's odd experiences in the days before. Peter restores, with only a few words, the rational father-dominated order of the household. Note that Sara, the parent present most of the time and the one dealing with most of Matt's crises, ostensibly does not have the authority to speak as the head of the family, and is silent in this scene.

In a third display of male authority, it is not Peter—he has fallen from the position of benign protector by this point of the film—but rather Reverend Nicholas Popescu who takes charge of the haunting. After Peter gets home drunk one night and smashes the light bulbs, the family turns to Popescu, who has the expertise and authority to deal with the spiritual world outside of Peter's comprehension or awareness, to deal with the haunting. In a sense, Popescu shores up a slipping patriarchy. After experiencing the weird electric occurrences in the house, Sara calls Popescu to investigate, and he explains to her the rules of haunting, indicating that iron repels evil, and that emotion-filled deaths can leave traces. Again, the haunting occurrences are put under the protection and verification of a male authority figure, which has the sole power to validate the other characters' experience of the ghosts.

As it was in *Insidious*, the ghosts in *The Haunting in Connecticut* usually threaten male authority or intrinsically threaten male identity. There are three types of ghosts in the *Haunting in Connecticut*: Aickman, the former owner of the funeral home, Jonah, who is his assistant, and the ghosts of people whose bodies were stolen to be used in Aickman's necromancy rituals. In this case Aickman is the archaic rival to both Sara and Peter. We know nothing about Jonah's parents in the story, but if he lived in the funeral home with Aickman, he was likely runaway or orphan. Aickman, it seems, took Jonah in as a kind of surrogate son. Their relationship, however, appears troubled in the flashbacks. In the first place, Jonah seemed unhappy at having to sell his services as a medium. In one key scene, Matt has a flashback where he sees Jonah hastily packing things into a sack, presumably to run away. We hear Aickman's harsh voice calling, "Son! Jonah!" When Matt looks onto the first floor after Jonah runs past him, he sees a large, dark hand grab Jonah by the scalp and pull him into the basement (Cornwell, 2009). This scene is important on two fronts. Firstly, it tells us that Aickman was overly domineering and abusive, which is why Jonah tried to run away. But the ambiguity in the scene also suggests that Aickman's ghost is keeping Jonah's spirit prisoner as well.

Aickman, it seems, has a not so benign authority over his surrogate son Jonah. Furthermore, we can infer that this authority is meant to extend to Matt as well. Early in the film, Sara states that "you feel like something's pulling them from the other side, and in our case, it was." The movie features a struggle over Matt's body and soul, made explicit when the doctor's off-screen voice says, "basically, we're waging war in Matt's body." (Cornwell, 2009). At a point near the climax of the film, Matt wakes up to find his body covered in arcane Latin phrases, the same kind that were shown earlier as part of Aickman's

necromancy. Aickman, as the story goes, would carve those incantations onto stolen corpses to bind their souls to the bodies, and amplify Jonah's power. But Jonah's power was ultimately subject to Aickman, whose séances gained him great fame as a spiritist (Cornwell, 2009). The appearance of these same signs on Matt's body tells us explicitly that Aickman's ghost wants to sacrifice Matt the same way he did all those other bodies. On the side of the living, is the domestic sphere headed by Peter and looked over by Sara. On the other side is the corrupt domestic sphere, presided by Aickman and the tortured souls. The haunted threat here is to Matt's place in the patriarchy. If he lives, he continues to occupy the gentle yet firm domestic sphere of Peter's dominance, waiting until it is his turn to occupy the seat of power. If he dies, he is cast into the corrupted sphere where he, along with all of the rest of Aickman's victims, is doomed to serve Aickman for all eternity. In this way, Aickman is a kind of archaic rival to Peter; he would steal Matt's body and soul for his own dark designs, rather than letting Matt carry forward Peter's heritage.

The second instance of male threat lies in the nature of Aickman's dominance over Jonah, which is at times juxtaposed to Matt. After Wendy and Matt do some research at the library, they find out Aickman used Jonah to contact the dead during séances. Spiritists, including "Harvard Professors" and other celebrities of the time, would come not only to talk with the dead, but also to observe another, more visible supernatural phenomenon: Aickman was famously able to make Jonah produce "ectoplasm", a "supernatural substance" that would "ooze from the medium's orifices." In a flashback to one such a séance, a group of adults sit at a round table, their hands linked with Jonah's. Jonah begins to shake, as Aickman looks on. One of the group members, a woman, gazes hungrily at Jonah. After a few more seconds, Jonah opens his mouth to disgorge a wailing, dripping, and grotesque mass of spirits from

his mouth, while Aickman smiles, clearly pleased. At the same time, in the present of the film world, Reverend Popescu holds up Matt's head, as if the living boy were about to vomit ghosts too. The mass, now stretched far out of Jonah's throat, ignites and engulfs the room in flames (Cornwell, 2009). The scene ends.

This sequence is extremely important because it sets Aickman as a corrupt father and mother. When Aickman causes Jonah to abject the disgusting mass, he forces him to take on a symbolically feminine role, albeit a corrupt one: he makes Jonah birth the materialized souls of the dead. Whereas Aickman's "normal" role as a traditional father or mother would be to guarantee his children's healthy sexual development, he instead produces an inverted patriarchy where the living son brings the dead into the world. We also hear a little girl's voice calling, "Mommy" from within the Mass before it leaves Jonah (Cornwell, 2009), which might suggest that Jonah is an inverted mother who also gives birth to other inverted women. Aickman is paradoxically Jonah's pimp and midwife, arranging séances in which the boy's body is twisted to nefarious ends. Moreover, because Matt is in turn the living vessel for the flashback, he too is part of the struggle. His precarious position as a witness to Jonah's suffering makes him the vessel of the same corrupt patriarchy. In a sense, just as Jonah symbolically births a corrupted patriarchy, Matt is made vulnerable to the same corruption.

These three sequences demonstrate that the film portrays a struggle between two patriarchies, a corrupt one and a benign one. While Peter (before his fall), Reverend Popescu, and Matt are guardians of the good order, Aickman and his ghosts are advocates of the bad, as they seek to corrupt Peter's wholesome dominance. Significantly, they are times rival males, and other times corrupt mothers, which means that they take on the characteristics of both

external and internal threat. While Aickman as a bad father threatens the patriarchy with male violence from without, he also, when he dominates Jonah, represents the sexual difference—figured he as corrupt childbirth—that threatens patriarchy from within.

3.1.3 Authority and Threat in *The Amityville Horror*

The Amityville Horror is a remake of the seventies pulp classic. The story runs with some of the themes only hinted at in the original, and reassembles them into a classic and unambiguous haunted house tale. George and Kathy Lutz, a young couple from New York, are in the market for a new house. To keep within their budget, they purchase a colonial mansion that presents, in George's words, "the deal of a lifetime. Unfortunately, as they learn from the real-estate agent, the house has a dark history: Donny Defeo, a young man in his early twenties, shot while they slept his brothers, sister, and parents. Perturbed but determined, the Lutzes move in anyway, deciding that the deal is too good a bargain to pass up. Despite some happy times in the first days after they move in, things soon turn sour for Kathy and George. Their relationship with one another begins to deteriorate, and George drifts away from his stepchildren. Kathy's daughter, Chelsea, begins to withdraw into what seems to be her fantasy world, where she speaks with her imaginary friend Jodie—who turns out to be the ghost of the Defeo's daughter. Kathy's sons, Billy and Michael, grow unruly and hostile towards George, who himself becomes increasingly irritable, violent and sick. Kathy starts to suspect something is amiss when she witnesses several odd happenings in the house. She eventually seeks the help of a priest, Father LeCavalier, but he is ultimately driven out of the house by the evil he finds inside (Douglas, 2005).

Kathy, now on her own in the fight to hold her family together, goes to the town library to research the house's history. She finds out that the house used to belong to a man named Reverend Ketchem, who used the house as a "sanctuary for diabolically possessed Indians." Ketchem was infamous for torturing and killing aboriginal people in his "sanctuary". She returns to Father LeCavalier, who tells her that Ketchem conducted an occult ritual to preserve his soul in the house for all eternity. Kathy goes back to the house to get her kids, but George, gun in hand, tries to stop them. He is now possessed by Ketchem, who tries to prevent Kathy and the children from leaving. After eventually knocking George unconscious and putting him in the speed boat, Kathy and her children escape on the lake. He wakes up no longer possessed by Ketchem (Douglas, 2005).

Evident throughout the film is the same paternal authority and threat as the other two films. The first example of paternal authority is when George and Kathy Lutz go looking for a new home. When they drive out to Long Island to look at some properties, George tells Kathy that the houses there are out of their price range, and that they should wait until "the business is going good" before buying a new house. But Kathy points out an ad in the newspaper anyway, for "112 Oceanview". They drive up the house's long driveway to the front, where a real-estate agent waits to meet them. Kathy is excited by the sight of the house, and George tells her to "stay cool." She runs up to the Real Estate agent and George shouts after her, "Kathy," before letting out an exasperated sigh (Douglas, 2005).

In that sequence, George is the authority in both the real-estate search and the purchase of the house itself. From the minute they start looking for houses George is the "rational" parent, who, with his financial savvy, determines which houses they can afford. He only agrees to see the Oceanview house when Kathy shows him it is extraordinarily cheap. Once they get to

the house, his rationality is again contrasted with Kathy's. George, the cool, clever negotiator, tries to keep Kathy from expressing her "irrational" excitement about the house. Later, once inside, George again demonstrates his expert status. Raising his arms at the house around him he says, "This is a mistake," the agent replies, "how's that?" "Your ad in the paper, it's gotta be a misprint. Look, I'm a contractor and I know what a place like this should cost. If this is a true, then it's the deal of a lifetime." The agent says, "And what is wrong with that." When George says he is a contractor and the house is the "deal of a lifetime," (Douglas, 2005) he refers to his social capital, which puts him on a level playing field with the real-estate agent. Kathy, on the other hand, is excluded from the exchange. This continues to the end of the tour, when Kathy convinces George to buy the house. George, still in the position of authority, agrees. As they walk out of the house, he says to the agent, "So I gotta ask, what's the catch?" (Douglas, 2005) Again, by virtue of his business knowledge, George enters an expert exchange with the real-estate agent.

Even after the family moves in, and the ghosts put strain on the family's relationships, George paradoxically makes increasing recourse to his authority. This is particularly noticeable when the Lutzes go out for dinner and leave Lisa, a hired baby-sitter, to look after the kids. First, after smoking a pipe in the bathroom, Lisa tells Billy and Michael about the house's sordid history, which their parents had previously hid from them. To illustrate her point and pique the boys' fearful curiosity, she leads them up to Chelsea's room, and tells them that it used to belong to Jodie, whose Brother shot her in the closet. Billy, clearly disturbed by what he has heard, lashes out at Lisa, and dares her to shut herself in the closet, in exchange for his "Kiss poster". Even though Chelsea warns Lisa not to go in to the closet, Lisa ignores her and steps in anyway, pulling the door behind her and turning on the light.

After a few seconds, the single bulb begins to flicker. Lisa, now visibly scared, tries to open the door, and shouts for Billy to let her out. The ghostly Jodie, pale with a bullet hole in her forehead, appears at the back of the closet, and bears down on Lisa, as the latter tries to claw her way out. Jodie flashes toward the closet door as the lights continue to flicker, and revealing her forehead, she grabs Lisa's finger and jams it in the bullet wound left there the night of the murder. The scene changes and we see Lisa being taken out on a gurney while the Lutzes ask her what happened. She tells them she saw Jodie, but that the Defeos' daughter was "supposed to be dead." (Douglas, 2005).

After the paramedics leave, Kathy and George confront the kids to find out what happened and discipline them if necessary. Chelsea, Billy and Michael sit on the stairs, while Kathy and George stand in front of them. Kathy asks Chelsea what happened, but before she gets an answer, George becomes irritated and says, "Oh stop it Kathy, whatever you're doing, it's not working. From now on I'm going to be doing the disciplining around here." He then tells the kids to "wipe that stupid look off your faces and go to bed." But Kathy follows them too, presumably to comfort them and assuage their now-obvious fear of George (Douglas, 2005). This scene is remarkable because it demonstrates Kathy's subordinate position as a parent and George supreme authority on child-rearing at this point of the film. He lets Kathy do things "her way" only until things become critical, at which point he takes over.

George also demonstrates his authority when Kathy pleads with him to move the family out of the house. By that point of the film, Kathy has realized that the haunting has created a rift in the family; she knows that George is being affected by the house, and she wants to leave. She approaches George in the kitchen, and tells him that things are not right. She expresses her worries about their relationship, and how she thinks they should move out. She says,

“Let’s just go George.” George keeps silent, but when she asks him again, he says to her, “When did you get so fucking stupid?” Kathy, taken aback, gazes back at him. He continues, “Every penny we have is sunk into this place. You wanted this house, well now, you got it!” (Douglas, 2005). Even when Kathy realizes that the haunting is tearing apart her family, she defers to George, because in that family, only he can give the family to permission to leave. Of course, later in the film, Kathy eventually usurps this authority and removes the family from the house, but not without resistance.

Unlike in *Insidious* and the *Haunting in Connecticut*, patriarchal authority in the *Amityville Horror* is presented as a fall. George’s turn towards strict measures seems to be the result of his gradual possession by Ketchem. What we have to realize though, is that George’s authority always had the potential to become violent and aggressive. It remained benign as long as Kathy and the kids respected it. As soon as George was questioned, however, he clamped down. Whether or not the filmmakers intended it, the nature of George’s aggression is ambiguous. It is not clear whether he becomes more aggressive as a result of the haunting, or rather that he was simply never challenged until they moved into the house. George’s justification for exercising his authority, mainly the family’s financial situation, doesn’t change from the beginning of the movie to the end. Since that’s the case, we have to assume that his domineering personality was only hidden under the surface. It simply boiled over when George was put under stress.

Like in the other two films in the sample, the family is threatened by a dual threat, comprised of rival masculinity and defiant femininity. Firstly, the main villain, Reverend Ketchem, is a rival patriarch to George. Not only does he threaten George’s authority over the domestic

sphere, but he also tries to establish a corrupt patrimony in order to reproduce himself.

Secondly, two feminine threats, Jodie and Lisa, disrupt George's ability to establish his line.

Reverend Jeremiah Ketchem is the ghost at the root of the house's violence and haunting, and the other ghosts seem to be under his thrall. The aboriginal ghosts that only appear a few times in the movie are his victims: like the townspeople's spirits in *The Haunting in Connecticut*, these are tortured souls, imprisoned in four walls to sustain the Reverend's power. Ketchem's dominance also extends to Jodie, who in one scene appears on the ceiling held tightly in large, mottled arms that grasp her torso and muffle her mouth. Interestingly enough, this brief struggle is only visible only to viewers, which suggests it is for their eyes alone. Similarly, in another scene at the end of the film, she's pulled into the basement by Ketchem (Douglas, 2005). In this sense, all of the ghosts in the house serve the corrupted man of the cloth, whose purpose is to destroy the Lutzes like he destroyed the Defeos before them. In this sense, he is George's double: instead of reproducing his line in the living way, Ketchem sustains himself through death. Here the parallel works through a series of parallels: Ketchem-George, torture-sex, children-ghosts. The juxtaposition culminates at the climax of the movie, where George, being led by Ketchem through the secret chamber in the basement, encounters Ketchem's ghost, who slits his own throat to baptize himself in blood and solidify his link with George.

That the ritual is a bloody one points to Ketchem's sexual ambiguity; while he is a clear male rival to George, he is also an archaic mother, whose menstrual threat consumes George. Of course, Ketchem is a monstrous version of the feminine, as the blood does not naturally leave his body, but is forced out of him by the aid of a phallic knife.

In this way, Ketchem is a good example of the archaic mother: masculine and feminine, powerful, and problematic (Creed, 1986, p. 68). While Ketchem's appearance could be a product of his time, his clothing and mannerisms hint to the ambiguity. His fingers are thin, pale, and bony, perhaps a phallic effect. At the same time, they are adorned with multiple jewelled rings. George's hands, which are the focus of multiple shots in the movie, are thick and strong, and rough—he is a carpenter, and wears only one his wedding band, which is in this case a symbol of benign traditional masculinity contrasted with Ketchem's perverse, feminine opulence. At play in this scene are two dominating forces that struggle over control of the family. George's domestic sphere serves his interests; he protects his family and they in return reproduce his line. Ketchem is the corrupt version of that American dream: he wants to capture each resident's soul so he can exist forever.

There are two other, more explicit feminine threats in the movie: Jodie and Lisa. Jodie's main role in the film is as Chelsea's friend. While at first this seems to be a benign relationship driven by Jodie's loneliness, it soon becomes clear that Jodie is doing Ketchem's bidding. First of all, Chelsea tells Kathy that Ketchem makes Jodie, "do bad things. Then, after Chelsea climbs up to the roof and tries to jump off, she tells Kathy that Jodie told her to do it, so that Chelsea could reunite with her dead father (Douglas, 2005). In this way, she threatens George's patriarchal authority. By pointing out that George is a step-father, Jodie questions his legitimacy as the leader of the domestic sphere. Of course, this would only serve Ketchem's purpose, because Chelsea would not "go to heaven", but would rather, remain in the house with the other ghosts.

In another key scene, when Kathy wakes up George in the middle of the night to have sex, Jodie threatens his sexuality more literally by disrupting his satisfaction. Kathy tells George,

who lay underneath her, to be quiet as she straddles him. When George looks up at her, he is startled by Jodie, who hangs herself at the foot of the bed just over Kathy's right shoulder (Douglas, 2005). The scene is important on two fronts. Firstly, Jodie's presence is a threat to George's sexual monopoly in the domestic sphere, because her untimely and disturbing display disavows George's enjoyment of Kathy's body. This is a stark contrast to an earlier scene, before the haunting, when Kathy dances for George's camera as he takes a home video; in that scene, George is able to enjoy, even to film, Kathy as she moves. Secondly, the scene disrupts George's chance to establish his own biological line, because instead of being able to father his own children, George is stuck being a stepfather. Jodie's role here is to prevent George from claiming his right to heirs.

Lisa, the baby-sitter, is also a clearly sexualized threat to the Lutz's patriarchal order. She smokes pot, wears a belly-top, and has a crush on Gene Simmons that seems to revolve around his longue tongue. Interestingly enough, her sexual power is a threat to both George and Ketchem. Chelsea states that Jodie does not like Lisa. By making the boys aware of the haunting, Jodie drives the narrative to its resolution, which ends in the family eluding Ketchem's grasp. Her presence also threatens George's patriarchy, because it hinders patriarchal sexual development by preventing him from being the initiator of his own sex life. Billy is much younger than Lisa, and so rather than being a sexually experienced, dominant male, Billy is clearly at a disadvantage towards her. Though there is no physical contact between the two, the sexual tension is established in a key scene in Billy's bedroom, where Lisa lays on his bed and asks him if he "frenches." (Douglas, 2005). Her posture and suggestive comments about Gene Simmons' tongue suggest that she has begun the process of taking away Billy's innocence that ends with the revealing of the house's history.

Through these scenes, the Amityville Horror paints a paradoxical picture of patriarchal authority. On the one hand, George seems to have authority in the family. On the other, he is threatened by Ketchum, Jodie, and Lisa, all of who call into question George's position as symbolic and biological head of the family.

3.1.4 Authority and Threat in *Paranormal Activity*

Paranormal Activity is an outlier film, because its "found film" style sets apart from other films surveyed. That being said, it is undeniably the most popular haunted house movie of the 2000s so far. Shot as if it were a home video, *Paranormal Activity* is the story of a young couple, Katie and Micah, who are troubled by strange occurrences in their California home. The film opens with Micah testing out his new video camera, which he has bought to record the events going on in the house. At first Katie disapproves of the camera, but she soon accepts to be filmed to learn more about the phenomena. Every night, Micah sets the camera up in the bedroom, at the foot of the bed, so he can monitor the disturbances around Katie (Peli, 2007).

One night, the camera captures the door moving on its own. This prompts Katie to call a psychic, Dr. Friedrichs who, after touring the house, suggests that Katie might be haunted by a demon and advises she call his colleague Dr. Averies, a renowned demonologist. Micah asks Friedrichs why not ask the entity what it wants. Friedrichs tells him that it likely wants Katie and that communicating with it will only provoke it. Friedrichs leaves and the couple continue to hear noises and record strange happenings. Defying Friedrichs warning, Micah gets an Ouija board and sets it up in the living room. When Katie finds out, she gets angry at Micah and sets off an argument that lasts the next couple of days (Peli, 2007).

Reviewing the camera footage from the night of the argument, Micah finds that the entity has traced a message on the Ouija board. Despite Katie's anger, he tries to interpret the message, and comes up with what appear to be several women's names, including "Diane." Later in the film, we learn that this woman, Diane, was a previous victim of the demon; she was badly injured in an exorcism, in which priests tried to free her from the entity's grasp. Micah's next plan is to lay down talcum powder, so that they might track the entity's movement. That night, Micah and Katie hear noises, and turn on the light to find footprints—or claw prints—in the powder. The prints lead to the attic, and Micah investigates only to find a half-burnt photo, which Katie tells him is of her in front of her childhood home. She says that the photo shouldn't exist anymore, and that it is "impossible" that it would be in the attic (Peli, 2007).

As the disturbances escalate in frequency and intensity, Katie tells Micah that she is calling Dr. Averies. Micah's plan, she says, has failed. When she calls the demonologist, however, she learns he is out of town. Micah says they can take care of things on their own, but when they are awakened at night by loud banging and knocking on the bedroom door, they decide to call Dr. Friedrichs for help. When he arrives at the house, he tells them that he cannot stay, because the malevolent presence is overwhelming. Once again, they decide to carry on without help. A few nights later, Katie is dragged from her bed. After a tense day of waiting, this prompts them to consider leaving the house for hotel. Katie suddenly changes her mind though, and begs Micah to let them stay at the house. That night, Katie gets out of bed and wanders downstairs. She begins to scream, and Micah rushes to investigate. The viewer hears him scream when he gets to the first floor, but he is abruptly silenced. Off screen, something hurls Micah's body at the camera, and Katie shuffles into the room. She stoops

down to the body, and then approaches the camera and grimaces into it (Peli, 2007). The film ends.

Despite director Oren Peli's unorthodox found footage approach to the haunted house story, *Paranormal Activity* retains a patriarchal domestic sphere, with a focus on male authority and threat. In the other films, the paternal history was mostly evident in the narrative, and was usually revealed through dialogue. In this case, however, because of the film's aesthetic and because Micah and Katie are childless, Micah's sexual monopoly is primarily exercised through the camera itself, which is a kind of voyeuristic device that he uses to record Katie's every move. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey argues that the erotic pleasure of the male look structures cinematic form (1999, p. 843). While Mulvey's Freudian suppositions are sometimes at odds with my own approach, her concept of the "gaze" is nevertheless valuable in understanding certain manifestations of male authority in horror films.

According to Mulvey, cinema form is dominated by a male gaze that sees women as objects to be looked at; in *Paranormal Activity*, Micah exercises his authority primarily through this device:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which [sic] is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey, 1999, p. 837).

The film is constructed directly through Micah's authoritarian gaze. Katie draws the line at him filming their sex, but aside from that he films her against her will in a number of scenes, notably while they are arguing over the Ouija board. This suggests that Micah's eye, his authority, is fixed on Katie's role as his partner, both sexual and otherwise. In a sense, this voyeurism parallels what Stuart Joy identifies as the theme of the entire *Paranormal* franchise: the uncertainty of male authority in the home (Joy, 2011, pp. 3-4).

Micah's authority also manifests in more explicit ways, like his treatment of Katie's fears and the possibility of aid. As Joy points out, Micah responds to the haunting by attempting to "solve" Katie's hysteria (Joy, 2011, p. 4). He agrees only reluctantly to hear Dr. Friedrich's, and puts off the call to Dr. Averies long enough for the situation to be unsalvageable. This is of course all despite Katie's repeated pleas for him to change his attitude. As Joy indicates, "Micah is shown to be deeply threatened by his inability to control the events within the confines of the Master bedroom and more widely, his own house." (Joy, 2011, p. 4).

Regardless of his "inability" Micah effectively exercises authority over the courses of action. This is also evident when he defies Katie and brings in the Ouija board.

The threat in *Paranormal Activity* is primarily an archaic rival. Throughout the movie, the entity is known simply as "the demon" or "it"; the viewer gets none of the overt paternal masculinity of Ketchum or Aickman here. But other aspects of the haunting, like the setting, make it clear that the threat is a rival to Micah's sexual monopoly. Many of the most memorable haunted events occur in the bedroom, with the camera looking on. This set-up suggests number of things about the haunting. Joy, referring to Andrew Britton's work, suggests the following about the *Paranormal* series:

As the films progress, paranormal events become increasingly localised within the master bedroom. According to Britton, the Freudian-feminist melodrama cycle is noteworthy for the representation of the marital bedroom. Significantly, then, the intimacy and privacy of the bedroom is signalled to be the site of unequal power relations and the assertion of masculine dominance. (Joy, 2011, p. 3)

The bedroom, which Micah monitors throughout the film, is under his control—or at least, he would like it to be. The haunted events usually involve the demon standing near Katie, breathing in her ear, or slamming the door shut. In the extreme cases, the demon lifts up the bed sheets over her waist, and eventually drags her out the door into the darkness beyond. These scenes construct the haunting as a vaguely sexual struggle over Katie between Micah and the demon. The demon is assumed to be just to the left of Katie, while Micah sleeps to her right. In this sense, it is Micah's archaic double. In terms of the gaze, the demon is invisible to the camera, and in its ultimate act of victory, it lures Katie out of Micah's camera lens to the first floor (Peli, 2007). It pulls Katie out of Micah's gaze, disrupting his sexual monopoly and his surveillance.

Like the supernatural entities in the other three films, the demon in *Paranormal Activity* is also, if less obviously, feminine. If the demon represents an external male threat, one that seeks to fight with Micah over Katie's body, it also is an internal, feminine threat, as the possibility of usurpation comes from Katie herself. Indeed, for the demon to "have" Katie means two things. In the first place, it means to possess her merely as an object for its own enjoyment, which makes it Micah's rival. At the same time, however, it seeks to occupy Katie's social position as Micah's partner, bringing with it a power beyond Katie's own.

Even as it destroys Katie, it gives her the power to overthrow Micah's dominance, which, from this point of view, makes it a threat to patriarchy.

That the houses were patriarchal is important, because it establishes the particularity of haunted house films: as phonotopic elements, they deal with the waning of patriarchy. In the four films, the horrific ritual works with the premise that a loss of male authority and virility in the domestic space is brought about by the onslaught by bad men and worse women. This is made evident by the father's control over the family, and the nature of threat, which is primarily a threat to the father's interests. When a struggle ensues, it is a struggle for that authority, for the ability to reproduce a particular "house". Ghosts were the main challengers: as corrupted fathers and archaic mothers, they vied for the father's authority and threatened the transmission of heritage from father to son.

3.2 The Domestic Ritual: Domestic Neopoiesis and the "Masculinity Crisis" Discourse in Haunted House Films

This result, if unsurprising, is highly significant, because it shows how the films take a stance on American masculinity, particularly as it manifests in the domestic space. Vivian Sobchack, borrowing from Robin Wood, points out that horror and science fiction films have consistently responded to the "crisis" besetting "American bourgeois" patriarchy since the 1960s (Sobchack, 1986, pp. 7-8). Sobchack indicates that American "mythology can no longer resolve the social contradictions exposed by experience" and that the "[family itself has been exposed] as a set of signifying and significant practices." (Sobchack, 1986, p. 9). If the films do seem to figure a waning patriarchy, they do so in a very precise manner,

fingering violent masculinity and unbridled femininity as saboteurs of the American man's simple dream to start a family and live out a happy life at its head. In this way, the films echo the "discourse of masculine crisis", the widespread, "almost common-sense" approach to men that sees them "facing some nihilistic future, degraded, threatened and marginalized by a combination of women's 'successful' liberation and wider social and economic transformation." (Whitehead, 2002, p. 51). Dupuis-Déri suggests that this discourse has become a "common-ground" for public and intellectual discussions of masculinity in general (Dupuis-Déri, 2012, p. 89).

By referring to this discourse, the films synthesize waning patriarchy with masculinity, such that "threatened" masculinity is portrayed as the only one; this synthesis is important, because it sets up threatened masculinity as the principle around which domestic foam is constructed. The films set up a kind of masculinity on guard, which is a fundamentally reactionary form of sexuality. When the films portray masculinity in this way, they set up a tension around the father figure. The more he asserts his authority, the less capable he becomes of controlling the domestic space. Consequently, the fate of that precarious patriarchy in haunted house films should be read as comment on threatened masculinity, particularly because the way manhood is negotiated in response to both a violent masculinity and the so-called emasculating effects feminism, determines the political effects of the film ritual.

3.2.1 The Men's Movement and the Masculinity Crisis Discourse

Before we proceed to that link, however, it will be useful to give an overview of the men's movement and the key problematic it addresses. Broadly speaking, the "men's movement" is a series of popular and intellectual movements and discourses, appearing in United States, Britain and Australia in the mid-1970s, which see modern men as being threatened, particularly by feminism. Stephen Whitehead names six such discourses in North America: the Conservative perspective, the Men's Rights perspective, the Spiritual perspective, the Socialist-Feminist perspective, the Group-specific perspective, and the Profeminist perspective (2002, pp. 65-66). Fidelma Ashe simplifies these categories and describes three broad manifestations of the movement: conservative, liberationist, and mythopoetic men's groups (Ashe, 2005, pp. 56-69). Uniting these various discourses is an overarching discourse about the crisis state of an "absolute" masculinity:

The idea of a 'crisis of masculinity' speaks of masculinity in the singular; usually white, heterosexual and ethnocentric. Moreover, the masculinity posited is ahistorical and absolute, with men perceived as an homogenous group lacking class, ethnic, sexual, or racial differentiations. Men are, paradoxically, understood to be somehow simultaneously powerful and threatening, yet also rendered powerless by external (often feminist) forces. (Whitehead, 2002, p. 55).

Masculinity seems to be the razor's edge that the men's movement walks, positing an ideal somewhere between "hardness" and "softness". Indeed, Michael Messner makes a similar point when he suggests that this ideal combination has become a hegemonic masculinity. While describing Arnold Schwarzenegger's adoption of that masculinity and his success in California gubernatorial elections, he states:

Taken together, Schwarzenegger's films of the 1990s display a masculinity that oscillates between his more recognizable hard-guy image and an image of self-mocking vulnerability, compassion, and care, especially care for kids (e.g., *Kindergarten Cop*, 1990; *Jingle All the Way*, 1996). I call this emergent hybrid masculinity "The Kindergarten Commando." (2007, p. 467).

Thus there is dialectic at play, between a dominant masculinity that seeks to combine violence and compassion in just proportions, and the crisis of masculinity in general, which represents most men's failure to adopt that masculinity. I give two examples below to illustrate the problematic as it appears in the "mythopoetic" and "liberationist" circles of the movement.

The mythopoetic faction of the men's movement regards the plight of the contemporary man as one of psychological, spiritual, and emotional isolation. To "rediscover" the "essence" of masculinity, men return to an "ancient" pattern of socialization, one in which fathers teach their sons the fundamental archetypes of ideal manhood (Ashe, 2005, pp. 69-71). Like other examples of the crisis discourse, the mythopoetic one addresses masculinity with a dual critique; it sets itself against modern capitalism and its deeply alienating version of masculinity, as well as the "emasculating" feminism that the same system has produced. Bonnett describes how the mythopoetic men's movement mobilizes a re-worked colonial imagery of indigenous peoples (Bonnett, 1996, p. 281) to foreground that critique:

Thus "natural" landscapes are seen to be in harmony with "natural" gender relations. As with Thoreau, the implied critique of the urban is also a critique of feminization, which is, in turn, elided with modernity and change. In other words, the urge to get out of the city and plunge

into the woods may be read as an attempt to escape from the unsettling, feminizing environment of contemporary society; an environment that produces the “soft male,” the “nice boy” rather than the “hairy man”. (Bonnett, 1996, p. 283)

Colonial imagery is only one way to mobilize that critique, although returning to an imagined golden age often plays a role too. Clinton Jesser’s tellingly-titled *Fierce and Tender Men* also embodies this perspective, albeit in Jungian terms borrowed from men’s movement guru Robert Bly. Summarizing the key sides of the “essential” male personality laid out in “Iron John”¹⁰, Jesser describes the “King” figure: “The King stewards a domain, a realm. He brings order. He draws on spiritual energy, creates a sense of mission, and gives generously. The distorted King uses people for his own power, or he acts helplessly when action is needed.” (Jesser, 1996, p. 102). In this brief passage we have the idealized man, as well as his corrupted double. This king figure presents the paradox of masculine power, in that the king should embody “hard” characteristics, like a will to success and order, and “soft” characteristics, like stewardship, generosity and spirituality and passivity. The crisis or “corrupt” version of this form is the king who slides too far to either extreme, either perpetrating violence to selfish ends, or becoming too compassionate and “helpless.”

In this sense, the corrupted king represents the “modern” man, who, being devoid of masculine feeling, finds himself either too violent or too passive. Ashe also assesses the material in “Iron John” this way: “[Bly] argues that overexposure to feminine values can leave men with a wounded image of manhood. Young men’s wounded image of manhood, Bly claims, has manifested itself in both popular culture and politics which portray men in

¹⁰ “Iron John: A book about Men” is another foundational text of the mythopoetic men’s movement; it is a study of the Grimm Brothers’ fairytale of the same name. Bly, using a pastiche of Freudian and Jungian psychology and folklore, reads the text as a handbook for men.

negative ways. The father, he claims, is rejected, imagined as a ‘demonic figure’ or ‘the subject of ridicule.’” (Ashe, 2005, p. 72) Once again, the problem of violent or helpless men at the two extremes of a failing masculinity lies at the heart of the masculinity crisis.

In another passage, Jesser describes the ideal man’s relationship with his mother: “In his journey of recovery, a man may go through certain noticeable stages: a) a break from his mother or other women on whom he had grown dependent, such as for approval, or for whom he needs to do good works or on whom he depends to absorb or explore his feelings; b) the discovery of a male-mother—another man who cares about him; c) an engagement with his own external biological father, saying goodbye to him, and the bringing forth of his own internal father, often in the company of other men.” (Jesser, 1996, p. 101) In this passage another figure emerges, albeit in a different guise: the archaic mother. Jesser imagines the mother as an important figure, but no doubt one that needs to be transcended and set apart for the “fully developed” male. This of course follows Kristeva’s description of the psychological function of the realm of the mother; the man must exit the realm of feminine power for the one of male power. Again, we see this problematic of the “essential man”: he must be compassionate, but still differentiate himself from the realm of feminine power that the mother represents.

Roger Horrocks also writes about the dual problematic of masculinity, even if he does so from a more liberationist or pro-feminist perspective. According to Ashe, the liberationist movement is generally “concentrates on exposing the negative effects of men’s roles, rejects feminism, and seeks to preserve men’s traditional rights. Horrocks explicitly addresses the masculinity crisis, locating it as the product of a masculinity that destroys men’s lives: “The main thesis of this book can be expressed as a simple paradox: patriarchal masculinity

cripples men. Manhood as we know it in our society requires such a self-destructive identity, a deeply masochistic self-denial, a shrinkage of the self, a turning away from whole areas of life, that the man who obeys the demands of masculinity has become only half-human.” (Horrocks, 1994, p. 25). Later in the chapter, in a problematic similar to that of the mythopoetic movement, Horrocks writes that violent men are violent because they are out of touch with their own masculinity, and are thus performing the one set out by a patriarchal society (Horrocks, 1994, p. 31). In regards to femininity, Horrocks writes that women exert a certain power that “frightens” men:

Psychologically we can connect the idea of women’s power with several things: first, the importance of mothering in early childhood in our culture; secondly, the greater emotional awareness that women seem to show; thirdly, female sexuality and reproductive ability are perceived by many men as enviable and frightening. Fourthly, and most importantly, women remind men of their own internal feminine identity, which many men feel compelled to crush and punish. (Horrocks, 1994, p. 183)

Once again, Horrocks points to a hegemonic masculinity in crisis because it has failed to strike a balance between compassion and violence, obviously being consumed by the latter, while living in fear of what are seen as “feminine” essential traits. While Horrocks distances himself from the gender essentialism that marks the popular texts of the men’s movement (1994, p. 183), he shares the view of a masculinity in crisis because of its destructive adoption of a violent model; that is, men once again find themselves facing the difficulty of adopting appropriate feminine traits while distancing themselves from violent masculinities.

3.2.2 Haunted House Films and the Men's Movement: Staging the Masculinity Crisis

If we admit that this problematic is at the heart of the men's movement, it becomes clear that haunted house films have at their cores the same crisis of masculinity as the men's movement. We already discussed how the ghosts in the film, archaic rivals and mother, tended to disrupt the father's authority and sexual monopoly. But when we return once again to directly address the ghosts, a clearer picture of the way they resonate with the "crisis" of masculinity begins to emerge. The ghosts essentially oscillated between corrupted patriarchs and mothers, the first using their children to their own ends, instead of nurturing them, and the second emasculating their sons.

Reverend Jeremiah Ketchem, Ramsey Aickman, the Entity in *Paranormal*, the Demon and Archaic Mother, and the Demon figure in *Insidious* all resonate with the themes of the men's movement. The Aickman character is interesting, because he sets up what seems to be one of the more convincing dynamics of corrupt masculinity, one that stages the drama of men being torn asunder by a violent and domineering masculinity, and castrating femininity. As we discussed earlier, Aickman acts as a mother and father for Jonah, which suggests that he already embodies both masculine and feminine roles. But he becomes even more problematic compared with Peter. Peter himself is a somewhat paradoxical character. On the one hand, he controls the family, which was made evident in several scenes I pointed out earlier. On the other hand, his alcoholism and absent style of parenting suggest that in some way, he is unfit for a nurturing role. Thus his son, Matt, struggles with two kinds of corrupt fathers: Peter, who could slip back into his old, essentially violent ways with a bit of alcohol, and Aickman, the archaic mother and rival who threatens to cut off the male line by stripping Matt of his

inheritance and forcing him to serve as a ghostly guardian. Added to this is a worried mother who Matt attempts to shrug off when she cares for him. What we have is the story of a teen boy who can't seem to find his way, between an absent or violent father, a ghostly archaic patriarch or matriarch that would dominate him, and a sometimes overbearing mother.

Because of the "found footage" style of *Paranormal Activity*, the problematic in this film is not as obvious, although it clearly exists. The house's crisis in this movie, as I described earlier, takes the form of an "entity" that threatens to steal away Micah's girlfriend Katie. There is something ambivalent about the entity. The way it breathes in Katie's ear and stands near her while she sleeps makes it seem almost like a stalker; it "wants" Katie we are told. In this sense, it seems to be a kind of Machiavellian male force, one that manipulates Micah and Katie until Micah is killed. But it is equally tired to feminine power, as it fully possesses Katie in the last minutes of the movie, synthesizing the aggressive male with a feminine power, which, as it gazes at the audience with a horrific grin, seems to strike at the heart of suburban fear: masculinity in crisis.

Josh's situation is similar to the other male characters, in that he's threatened with losing ownership of his line. He, like the other characters, is at risk because of a harmful masculinity, one that has presumably stolen his father from him, and left him open to the threat of the archaic mother. At the same time, he risks losing his son to those same forces. The demon, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, seems to be a representative of a dark male sexuality; he seems vaguely paedophilic, since he keeps Dalton shackled to a post in his lair, ostensibly in preparation for the moment when he will enter Dalton's body and use it to bring pain and suffering to the living. While contending with this "bad father", Josh also has to outrun the archaic mother, who too would use Dalton's body to enter the world of the living.

Here we have a situation where a father tries to protect his son, the future of masculinity, from a dual assault of violent masculinity and assertive femininity. Some of the other ghosts in the film can be seen as representations of the same dynamic: the women who guns down the 1950s family is a kind of destructive female power—perhaps she is supposed to be a feminist—that brings down the post-war nuclear family. The rapist ghost is another violent masculinity, the aggressive, violent man of the hyper-macho. Interestingly enough, Josh ultimately defeats the aggressive masculinities, but falls to the archaic mother.

Ketchem, for his part represents paternal colonialism, the gendered political project that reduces relations between colonizers and indigenous people to one between stern parents and delinquent children. According to Baldry and Cuneen, colonialism and patriarchy are not simply related; colonialism, according to the authors, is one consequence, amongst others (the hierarchical State, Religion) of a European white male-centric “ideological paradigm”. (Baldry & Cuneen, 2011, p. 7). Other authors (Smith, 2003) also point to the patriarchal dimensions of colonialism. *The Amityville Horror* is remarkable in this light because it renders the link between colonialism and patriarchy explicit. As *Amityville Horror* progresses, George Lutz’s authority becomes increasingly arbitrary and violent. Steadily possessed by Ketchem, George’s behaviour gradually escalates to that of Donny Defeo; in a sense both male family members are doomed to re-enact Ketchem’s torture and slaughter of indigenous peoples in the basement. In one scene, where he realizes he has killed the family dog, George falls to his knees in agony, and moans helplessly up at the sky (Douglas, 2005). This scene dramatizes the masculinity crisis quite nicely; perhaps George was too nice, or had too troubled a relationship with his father (a possibility to which he hints at the dinner table scene when he says that his father taught him about discipline). Regardless, he finds

himself caught helpless between a dark colonial past and the demands of his wife and her children. And George is not even the children's biological father (Douglas, 2005), which is a way for the filmmakers to cast doubt on George's virility. In consequence, George finds himself in an ontic crisis, facing the dark side of masculinity on one side and the difficulties of raising another man's children on the other.

As such, this discourse is set in the American home, suggesting that as far as the domestic foam goes, the prime concern, deserved or undeserved, Americans have about finding dwelling space is figuring out a way to move forward in the wake of a violent patriarchal legacy, while also finding a masculine-enough role for the father. The task thus remains to evaluate the consequences of that discourse's mobilization in the haunting ritual, specifically on the level of foam. In this sense, the films actually present solutions, or at very least resolutions to the masculinity crisis, and effectively remake the domestic foam in light of its real or imagined problematization by male violence and feminism's gains. From a spherological point of view, the films render masculinity—as an organizing principle of American domestic foam—problematic in light of gendered violence and feminism.

4. How Haunted House Films Use Romance and Tragedy for Domestic Poiesis – The Security Mom, the Paternal Sovereign, and the Domestication of American Space

If haunted house films remake the domestic sphere in the wake of a male authority crisis, then we need to interrogate the films on the basis of how they resolve that crisis. By positing a view of what happens to the domestic sphere when male authority fails, each film forwards

a design for the domestic foam, a blueprint for how it could be arranged. We could thus see the haunted house ritual as a poiesis of domestic foam. This happens in two ways: the romantic and tragic modes. In the romantic mode, the crisis is ultimately resolved in a positive fashion, as the living characters, through some willful action, secure the family. In this mode, poiesis happens through a suggestion of how the domestic foam should be re-arranged to remain viable. Thus the horror is resolved by the assertion of a new foam design. Contrarily, the tragic mode uses a negative style of poiesis, in which a new domestic space emerges *de facto*, in opposition to the one presented in the film. In this case, by setting up the father's failure as inevitable based on his actions as well as the nature of the entities, the film makes a judgement on the character of the father and how he could act differently to overcome the inevitable challenges that face him.

When analysing the films in this light, a clear picture emerges of what is proposed in response to the breaking of masculinity and the resulting destruction of the American family. The romantic mode, while sometimes offering the picture of a heroic son, ultimately focuses on the emergence of a heroic "security mom," who, in protecting the children from the collapse of the domestic sphere, saves the patriarchal future of the household. In the other case, the tragic mode, the films define a "sovereign father", who in a sense transcends the flaws of the "real" fathers explicitly displayed in the films. Together these two figures suggest that the domestic neo-poiesis is conservative: it tries to reconstruct a new version of the traditional American home, one where women are portrayed solely as mothers, and where fathers are portrayed as sovereigns. In doing so, it not only seeks to subordinate women in the home and restores fathers to leader status; at the same time, it construes all

American space, especially political space, as domestic, such that authority outside of the home is imagined as benign paternal power.

4.1 Romantic Poiesis and “Security Moms:” Remaking the Domestic Foam for the Mother

The “security mom” is a “neoliberal subject” (Grewal, 2006, p. 27) that appeared in the United States after 9-11 during the 2004 presidential elections. Michelle Malkin, a prominent conservative pundit in the U.S., wrote a column called the “security mom manifesto”, in which she describes herself as one of these mothers. The thrust of Malkin’s article is that the two Presidential candidates running in that elections, Bush and Kerry, should gear their campaigns toward mothers, who, after 9-11 had turned from “soccer moms” into “security moms”:

I am what this year's election pollsters call a ‘security mom.’ I'm married with two young children. I own a gun. And I vote. ... I want a president who is of one mind, not two, about what must be done to protect our freedom and our borders. ...What I want is a commander in chief who will stop pandering to political correctness and *People* magazine editors, and start pandering to me....Nothing matters more to me right now than the safety of my home and the survival of my homeland. I believe in the right to defend myself, and in America's right to defend itself against its enemies. I am a citizen of the United States, not the United Nations. ... (Malkin, 2004)

Writing about the security mom as a discursive subject, Inderpal Grewal points out that the wrong response was to ask whether or not the security mom “actually” existed (Grewal,

2006, p. 27). Regardless of whether or not there are many people like Malkin in the United States, the security mom is important because of the political ramifications of what it articulates, namely “the virulent nationalism in which home is joined to homeland and motherhood is about protection by the state [*sic*] [and] the articulation of a nationalist motherhood project.” (Grewal, 2006, p. 25). From this point of view, women’s role is defined strictly as motherhood, where their function becomes to produce “soldiers and patriots,” (Grewal, 2006, pp. 28-29), which are highly gendered figures. Moreover, if we read Malkin’s manifesto carefully, we see that even when she refers to “schoolchildren”, Malkin has boys in mind; both examples of “real life” security moms who have had sons die:

Security moms are women such as Grace Godshalk, who lost her 35-year-old son, Bill, when the World Trade Center's south tower collapsed on Sept. 11. Godshalk is on the board of the 9/11 Families for a Secure America, which lobbies for secure borders. She has made it her "lifetime job to put an end to terrorism so no one else ever has to live this nightmare."

Security moms are women such as Bonnie Eggle, a Michigan schoolteacher who lost her 28-year-old son, Kris, a National Park Service ranger who was gunned down by a drug smuggler at the U.S.-Mexico border in August 2002.

In sum, the security mom plays an important social function; she secures her home and the spaces she frequents to protect her children from the “dark forces” threatening the United States.

The Haunting in Connecticut and *The Amityville Horror* feature “security moms” who play a pivotal role in restoring the domestic sphere after masculine authority has been compromised. By rescuing their husbands or sons from corrupt patriarchy, Sara and Kathy restore a masculine-centred domestic sphere. Contrary to Renai and Katie, who remain generally passive throughout the crises in their homes, Sara and Kathy play an active role in saving their families from the haunted threats.

Both the *Haunting in Connecticut* and *The Amityville Horror* follow the romantic mode of crisis resolution, because at a certain point in the narrative, the crisis becomes a kind of adventure, which is, according to Northrop Frye’s famous typology of myths, the defining feature of romance (2000 (1957), p. 186). More often than not, Romance also features a quest, through which a hero vanquishes an enemy in a central clash (Frye, 2000 (1957), p. 187). Thus, the romantic mode of poesis in haunted house films seems to be one where one or more members of the family take on a heroic role, and through their actions succeed in resolving the masculinity crisis in the domestic sphere. Frye says this of romance: “In every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance, where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains the threats to their ascendancy.” (Frye, 2000 (1957), p. 187). It makes sense then, to see the heroic restoration of the domestic sphere as a moral commentary, one that claims what *should* be done about the “masculinity crisis”. Again, this coincides with Turner’s description of the liminal rituals as being “eufunctional.”

Aside from Sara’s (from *The Haunting in Connecticut*) lack of character traits outside of her motherhood, she fulfills the security mom mandate during the film’s most important conflict, when she saves Matt’s life. According to Northrop Frye, romantic narratives tend to be

loosely based around a four-stage quest, in which the protagonist embarks on a transformative journey. The four stages are *agon*, *pathos*, *sparagmos* and *anagnorisis*. It is the *pathos*, the central conflict, and the *sparagmos* or the “tearing to pieces”—the phase where the hero disappears—that most concern us here (Frye, 2000 (1957), pp. 187-192). Despite Matt being the official male hero in *The Haunting in Connecticut*’s romantic quest, his success depends ultimately on Sara. It is she who retrieves Matt in his moment of *sparagmos*, that moment in the film when the fate of patriarchy is truly uncertain.

Matt’s quest begins when he’s hospitalized for injuring himself. Of course, the viewer knows that Aickman’s ghost inflicted the wounds, even though Sara asks Matt, “What did you do to yourself?” While Matt is in the hospital, he encounters Jonah’s ghost. Showing Matt a flashback, Jonah revisits the séance scene. In previous flashbacks, the camera cuts after the ectoplasm catches fire. This time however, Jonah shows Matt what happened after the explosion. When Jonah opens his eyes, he sees the séance participants and Aickman lying, half-burnt, on the floor around him. He approaches Aickman, who whispers, “They’ll be after you now. Get out.” “They” are presumably the spirits of the dead that Aickman had enlisted to amplify Jonah’s power. Jonah tries to flee, but the spirits shut the doors and windows. Jonah is eventually cornered upstairs, where he tries to hide in the coffin lift. The lift then descends into the crematorium, where Jonah is incinerated alive. This flashback prompts Matt to return to the house (Cornwell, 2009).

The *agon* begins with Matt approaching the house. Brandishing an axe, he calls out to Wendy, Mary and Billy. Wendy, seeing the axe, shuts and locks the door. Matt smashes through it. This minor conflict leads up to the struggle to come. In this sequence, the viewer is unsure of Matt’s allegiance, which has been ambiguous throughout the film. Has Matt

succumbed to insanity, and been drawn into the world of the dead? The conflict is resolved quickly, when Matt tells Wendy to get out of the house, and instructs her to keep the firefighters from putting out the fire (Cornwell, 2009). The *pathos* is literally Matt's life or death struggle, embodied in his attempt to burn down the house. This scene makes explicit the struggle present in the whole film, between good and bad patriarchy. As he hacks open the walls to reveal piles of corpses, the spirits of the dead—wanting paradoxically to be freed and to fulfill their duty as Aickman's servant-protectors of the house—assault Matt. Matt pours kerosene onto the bodies, and sets the dining room on fire (Cornwell, 2009). This is Matt's triumphant victory against the Aickman's perverse patriarchy: in the past, Jonah's ectoplasm ignited the same room and destroyed the living order. In the present, Matt sets the dead on fire, carrying out Jonah's revenge and restoring the living patriarchy. But even as their bodies, burn the spirits of the dead converge on Matt, who kneels down to be covered by their groping, Latin-inscribed hands.

At that key moment of *sparagmos*, where it looks as if Matt will literally be torn to shreds by the spirits, Sara enters the room to save him. She shields Matt with her body and pulls him to safety under a table, where she awaits the falling of the house with a prayer. In this scene, Matt's victory is once again made uncertain, and the struggle over his body continues (Cornwell, 2009). Sara, the security mom, saves Matt, and helps him in his righteous quest to restore benign masculinity. If this scene, where Matt and Sara sit surrounded by encroaching flames and smoke, is anything like the scenes from the 1980s action movies where the masculine hero—whom the audience thought dead—emerges from the flames to destroy his enemies (Messner, 2007, p. 464), then Matt's symbolic rebirth is only made possible by Sara's presence as a security mom. It is she who shields her son, a future patriarch, father,

and maybe citizen, from the burning house that collapses around them. Furthermore, Sara's particular pose is reminiscent of Christian works of art that illustrate Mary cradling her son Jesus after he enters a three-day *sparagmos*.¹¹ Thus, Sara's character also references the right-wing, Christian aspect of the security mom, which, like the neo-liberal State, sees women limited to the production of some sort of security (Grewal, 2006, p. 29), either divine, national, or domestic.

In *The Haunting in Connecticut*, Sara is portrayed as good mother, one who devotes her time to her son Matt's cancer treatment while her husband Peter goes to work. While Peter is at several points vested with the final authority in the family, a point which I illustrate in earlier chapters, Sara plays a kind of subordinate, second-in-command role during Peter's absence. For example, when Peter cannot help the family find a house, Sara says she made an "executive decision" because she could not stand seeing Matt suffer; even though she makes that decision, she ultimately justifies herself to Peter, signifying his authority. But, Sara's security mom status is most obvious during her two voice-overs, which bookend the film. At the beginning, as she sits in a chair, responding to an unseen interviewer's questions, she says:

Why do good things happen to bad people? That's the real question right?

Why us? I mean, that's really what everybody wants to know. I moved into the house because it's what we so desperately needed at that time. We didn't

¹¹ According to Christian mythology, Jesus' mother Mary cradled his body after it was removed from the cross, and before he rose triumphant on the third day after his death. For Frye, modern narrative (myth) owes its structure to its Classical and Christian heritage (Frye, 2000 (1957), p. 133), a heritage in which Christ's story, no doubt, plays a pivotal role.

ask for this, and we didn't deserve it. The fact is I don't why this happened to us. We're just a regular family like anybody else. (Cornwell, 2009)

Striking about this passage is how Sara's sentences, except for the one about the "house" could be a response to any national disaster. Her sentiment of indignant surprise at her family's desert echoes Conservative responses to 9-11, when people failed to understand how American imperialism could have possibly lead to attacks on the United States. It is here, where despite her Freudian framework, Linnie Blake's assertions gain some weight. The film perhaps *does* reference historical events. But more importantly here is the role of the mother in security. According to Sara, and the security mom in general, the "enemy" can strike at any time, anywhere. In the context of the haunted house film, this enemy is whatever puts pressure on the patriarchal house, that is, whatever causes a failure of the father's authority. Sara's stance is one of normality, of innocence, of a kind of conservative "this is the world we live in" attitude that sets up the rest of her voice-over at the end of the movie:

I don't really care if anybody believes me or not. I know what happened. The doctors and nurses know. My family knows. And my son is alive, and well. That's all that matters. They say that God works in mysterious ways. They just don't tell you how mysterious those ways can be. Consider yourself warned. (Cornwell, 2009)

This second passage makes explicit the Christian overtones of the security mom and her prime concern: guaranteeing the safety of her son. Moreover, her words, typical of the security mom figure, valorize the "real world" knowledge so dear to many conservatives; the

reference to doctors and nurses calls to mind the people who, at least in the conservative frame mind, live in “reality”: soldiers, firefighters, police, paramedics, nurses and doctors, in contrast with those in the “ivory tower”:

The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks shook me out of my Generation X stupor.

Unlike Hollywood and *The New York Times* and the ivory tower, I have not settled back casually into a Sept. 10 way of life. ...We have educated our 4-year-old daughter about Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. She knows that there are bad men in the world trying to kill Americans everywhere. This isn't living in fear. This is living with reality. (Malkin, 2004)

Thus we see how Sara’s world view of the crisis, as well as her general assertion that one should always be vigilant in regards to threat, seems to resonate with Malkin’s conservative view of motherhood.

Though not as obvious as Sara, Kathy Lutz is also a security mom. In *The Amityville Horror*, contrary to the first film, Kathy is the hero; that is, Kathy, not the male characters of the film, embarks on the heroic quest to restore the family. In this film, Kathy is positioned against Reverend Ketchem, who has corrupted her husband and threatens to kill the family and trap their souls in the haunted house. Kathy’s quest begins when she realizes that the haunting has consumed her husband George. She hurries to the library to look up the murders that happened in the house, and discovers that Donny Defeo was possessed. She also learns that the house belonged to Ketchum, who had his “asylum” there. She then rushes to Father LeCavalier, to tell him what she learned. He tells her to get her family out of the house (Douglas, 2005). The *agon* begins with Kathy running into George in the boathouse. She

slips and falls in the water, and George, who is fully possessed at this point, tries to drown her by running the boat propeller, which sucks in her hair and pulls her under water. In an apparent moment of clarity, George shuts off the motor and Kathy pulls herself up onto the dock, brushing aside George's outstretched hand when he tries to help. She then runs up the hill toward the house, shouting the children's names. When Chelsea calls her from the basement, Kathy goes down the stairs and finds four empty coffins, one for her and each of her children. At that moment George, who has followed her to the house, confronts Kathy in the room; he snatches up Chelsea in his arms and says, "I think she misses her Daddy." After a few seconds of tense silence, Kathy says, "Give me back my daughter." (Douglas, 2005). This is one of the moments when Kathy's security mom status is made explicit. Revolting against George and laying down the mantle of obedient wife, she commands him to return *her* child. In contrast with Kathy's efforts to bring George and the kids together early in the film, Kathy demonstrates that when it comes to her children's safety, George is a stranger like anyone else. For some reason, George lets go of Chelsea, and she joins her mother to flee the basement. George reaches into the coffin room to grab a shotgun, which he cocks with one hand (Douglas, 2005).

From here on, Kathy becomes the authority. She tells Billy to help her block George in the basement, while Michael enters from the upper level. Kathy and the kids try to leave from the front door, but it slams shut on them. When the same thing happens in the kitchen, they turn around only to be met by George, who tries to strangle Kathy and roughs up Billy. Kathy gets free of his grasp, however, and they climb the stairs to the upper level, and escape to the roof. George shoots at them through the ceiling. They climb higher and higher on the roof, with George following behind them. When George ascends over the eaves trough,

Michael hits him with a piece of old piping pried from the weathervane, and George falls to the ground below and loses consciousness (Douglas, 2005).

This marks the beginning of the *Pathos*, the culmination of the central conflict of the story. After they climb down from the roof, George awakens and grabs the axe from the woodpile and brandishes it at Billy. He hesitates for a second before he lines up Billy's neck for a killing blow. At that moment, Kathy, who has grabbed the shotgun off screen, cocks it, points it at George's neck, and tells him to "Back the fuck up." George turns around to face her, and pulls the gun barrel to his face. When he screams at Kathy, daring her to pull the trigger, Kathy's nerve wavers, and she lowers the gun. But when George raises the axe to chop Billy, Kathy regains her composure and butts George over the head with the stock of the rifle, knocking him to the ground (Douglas, 2005). This moment is important because it demonstrates the transfer of authority from George to Kathy, while establishing her as the security mom. While in the house George had the gun, Kathy arms herself when George turns against her children.

The next part is the *sparagmos*: George, once again unconscious, has a dream where he remembers times spent with the family. He then envisions himself coming to and killing Kathy when she turns around to tie him up. After that, he really wakes up and shouts at Kathy to kill him before he kills the family. Kathy says "nobody's dying today" and knocks him out again. The four bind George's hands and feet and drag him to the boathouse. Before he can be piled in, he has a seizure while he has visions of past violence. Michael asks why they are taking George with them, and Kathy says she cannot explain but that they have to get him away from the house. George then lays still and they drop him unceremoniously into the boat (Douglas, 2005). In this pivotal moment, when George's status is uncertain, it is

Kathy who saves him from death. Just like how Sara saved Matt, Kathy's role is to protect masculinity when it disappears in the *sparagmos*. Kathy starts the engine and drive out into the lake. George, who is now sitting up in the back of the boat says, "Don't even look at it Kathy. Let's get outta here." (Douglas, 2005) Even though Kathy drives the boat, she ultimately defers to George, setting her back into the subordinate role she had earlier in the film.

In this sense, the movies reconstruct domestic foams in response to two things: violent masculinity and "emasculatation" that have problematized it. In the *Haunting in Connecticut*, there are two heroes: Sara and Matt. While Matt represents a kind of heroic masculinity, Sara's character offers a more substantive vision of how to reconstruct the domestic foam: her devotion to and protection of her son suggest a particular role for the mother in the domestic space. In *The Amityville Horror*, Kathy Lutz is the hero. Once again, in devotion to her children and the family, she descends into the infamous home to save their lives. This vision of the mother is what could be called the "Security Mom": a woman whose unique social function is minding to her children's security. Of course, this social position is paradoxical. While on the one hand, the security mom has a certain authority in the domestic sphere, this is only at moments of crisis, after which—even though she saves the household—the security mom ultimately returns to her subordinate role.

This reveals an aspect of the security mom in both films; deference to male authority. Even while Sara and Kathy have an exceptional power when it comes to protecting their children, this power is ultimately subjected to traditional male authority, like that of the father and that of the clergy. In both films, the mothers save their families in response to knowledge that they gain from a traditional, religious male authority. It is Popescu who tells Sara about the

haunting, and Father LeCavalier who tells Kathy about Ronny Defeo's possession. Even after Kathy researches Ketchum on her own, she still contacts the priest before deciding to retrieve her family from the home. This seems to be indicative of the security mom's paradoxical relationship with masculinity, which perhaps stems from the figure's feminist roots. The security mom is empowered, in the sense that she can act exceptionally (with violence) to defend the domestic space. Her power, however, is limited to this role. Other kinds of feminine power, for example, the power of childless women, are excluded. Thus the security mom finds herself the subordinate counterpart to what is, at least in the two cases I analysed here, a traditional masculinity: the fathers are traditional blue-collar workers, with traditional "male problems", like alcoholism and a propensity to violent child rearing.

These examples demonstrate that the security mom is the response to the crisis of masculinity. And while the term first came up in reference to terrorist attacks, it now appears that the security mom figure is part of the repertoire for dealing with any threat to the domestic space, even when such a threat is an internal collapse of masculinity. Sara and Kathy play subordinate roles to their sons and fathers, respectively; only when the males fail, when they disappear and are torn apart in *sparagmos*, do the security mom step in to protect the family. Their power is limited to an exceptional crisis case. While in *The Haunting in Connecticut* Sara protected her child, in *The Amityville Horror* Kathy protected her husband. The second case demonstrates the completeness of the security mom's role as protector of the family. She becomes a mother even to her lover; just like how Malkin apparently orders her husband to bring his cell phone everywhere (Malkin, 2004). Thus these films, insofar as they portray women as mothers and mothers as security moms, posit a domestic space that is

securitized by the mother. The father has a certain authority, but in exceptional times, when he is absent or failing, it is the mother's duty to gun-up and protect her home and family.

While the "security mom" can be seen as being produced by the intersection of neoliberal governance, right-wing Christian and Feminist views of motherhood, and American geopolitics (Grewal, 2006, p. 29), my purpose here is not to explain how the security mom is produced, but rather how she is an element in a certain kind of space design. If the security mom is the product of seemingly contradictory forces, she helps create a distinct and purified domestic space, one where an authoritarian femininity of surveillance and control replaces a violent masculinity, only to ultimately serve the same forces that created that masculinity.

4.2 The Tragedy of the Father and Rise of the Paternal Sovereign

Alongside the security mom, the two other films, *Paranormal Activity* and *Insidious*, present another figure, the sovereign father. Whereas in the cases with the security mom the domestic space is defined by a heroic restoration, the house run by the sovereign father is defined through the tragic mode. Frye explains tragedy on the basis of two elements: 1) a hero with exceptional potential 2) the righting of a universal order. In the haunted house tragedy, the hero, the real father, has the potential of being an ideal American father. When he falls and is destroyed by ghosts, the film defines the ideal father through negative, because the flawed father is replaced in the audience's perception by one who would survive the masculinity crisis. Furthermore, this ideal father is a kind of sovereign, because he emerges out of the state of exception of the haunted domestic sphere, as the source of nemesis, as the reason *why* the corrupt father *must* fall. Through this "tragedy of sovereignty", *Paranormal*

Activity and *Insidious* juxtapose the sovereign with an idealized paternal male authority, thus constructing domestic foams that feature a return to a strong male authority with its legitimacy based in traditional patriarchal structures. *Paranormal Activity* displays the “non-father”; the childless, wealthy, self-centred yuppie, while *Insidious* is about the “absent father”, one who does not take an active enough role in childcare because of his emotional baggage, and thus leaves the domestic sphere in the hands of the mother.

4.2.1 Haunting as a Tragedy of Sovereignty: Law, Nemesis and Hubris in *Insidious* and *Paranormal Activity*

Of tragedy, Frye says the following:

The tragic hero is very great as compared with us, but there is something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small. This something else may be called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these, but whatever it is the tragic hero is our mediator with it. (2000 (1957), p. 207).

He continues: “[a]s for the something beyond, its names are variable but the form in which it manifests itself is fairly constant. Whether the context is Greek, Christian, or undefined, tragedy seems to lead up to an epiphany of law, of that which is and must be.” (Frye, 2000 (1957), p. 208). With this passage, Frye outlines his poetics of tragedy. The tragic narrative, at least according to him, is the result of an original disruption of order: what follows is the inevitable righting of that order, primarily dramatized as a fall. But what this means is that the tragedy is the tale of an exceptional space, one that is doomed to fade back into the natural order. In this way, we could see all tragedies poetics of exception. Indeed, as Frye

indicates, “As soon as Adam falls, he enters his own created life, which is also the order of nature as we know it.” (2000 (1957), p. 213). All tragedy is thus the birth of an exceptional time and space: “*nemesis* is deeply involved with the movement of time, whether as the missing of a tide in the affairs of men, as a recognition that the time is out of joint, as a sense that time is the devourer of life, the mouth of hell at the previous moment, when the potential passes forever into the actual.” (Frye, 2000 (1957), p. 213)

Even if Frye could not see them, there are political implications to this schema of tragedy, because tragedy defines a domestic space by presenting a corrupted one from which an ideal emerges. The substantive fathers, that is, Micah and Josh, live in an exceptional space, one in which they, by virtue of being male, are in communion with ideal fatherhood, but also living against it. The ghosts here are agents of nemesis: they bring about the dissolution of that exceptional space. Read in this light, the haunting precipitates the destruction of the problematic and exceptional domestic sphere in which the filmic families live.

The films thus define a masculine morality. Whatever actions that separate the men from their ideal cosmic potential are undesirable. In this way, the substantive father presents an imperfect avatar of the ideal father; indeed, we get the feeling the latter is hovering just off screen, unseen and yet hauntingly present in his absence. This is the unique power of the tragic mode of haunting, which, like medieval theologian’s ontological argument for God’s existence, manages to convert the absence of an ideal type into a powerful presence. The tragic narrative of the haunted house then, is one where the male heads of the families come close to accessing the privilege and promise of patriarchy, but who are thwarted in that aim. Given the contours of the exceptional space that they inhabit, these males must fall, destroyed by the nemesis that returns balance to the cosmic order. So, not only are the films

good examples of patriarchal space creation; they are also instructive of how other “tragedies of masculinity” might function. In the tragic foam, the masculinity crisis, the haunting, is the inevitable fate of an exceptional, and ultimately patriarchy-defying space.

In both films, the dual legacy of patriarchy and feminism—in other words, the masculinity crisis—is nemesis. Micah is killed by Katie and Josh is taken over by the archaic mother; Josh and Micah are thus destroyed as particularities. But herein lies the political, for if the men had acted differently, they would have survived. In the language of domesticity, both Micah and Josh have a “divine” destiny within their grasp; they are homeowners, potential family-men—the American dream is just ahead. Micah, without any supernatural powers, is the owner of a suburban palace in San Diego, complete with a pool and a convertible. And the same tragic sentiment even comes into *The Amityville horror*, when for a moment the Lutzes have a colonial mansion within reach; in that sense, the film might move ambiguously between tragedy and romance, if not for the restoration of the family by Kathy’s effort. In Josh’s case, the divine analogy is even more direct; he has the ability to “astral project”, that is, he can leave his body and travel between the worlds of the living and the dead.

Accompanying the potential of the tragic hero is some character flaw or choice that causes him to fall. According to Frye, the “majority” of tragic heroes have “hybris” or hubris: “a proud, passionate, obsessed or soaring mind which brings about a morally intelligible downfall. Such hybris is the normal precipitating agent of catastrophe.” (Frye, 2000 (1957), p. 210) Even though Frye claims that a character that we normally consider tragic, like Socrates in *The Apology*, is not morally flawed in an obvious way, this judgement might stem from Frye’s inability to see those flaws. Regardless, hubris is an important characteristic of tragedy, because it is what prevents the hero from changing his path. It thus

is an important moral moment of the narrative, a moment where the audience thinks “*if only* the father had acted instead...” Thus the tragic form of the haunted house narrative, at least in our sample, involves a father who, facing an application of “natural law”, is destroyed rather than following it: his hubris is his downfall.

Two examples are particularly striking here. Micah is hubristic, because he fails to acknowledge the seriousness of the demon’s threat, and seems to be obsessed with his own ability to vanquish the demon—we will explore this point in the next section. Similarly, Josh’s hubris is his faith in his ability to overcome the archaic mother. In one scene, the last before Josh is possessed by the archaic mother, he faces her in a mirror. As she stares at him, grimacing, Josh says to her, “What do you want from me? What do you want from me? I’m not scared of you; I’m not scared of you anymore. Get away from me. Get the hell away from me! Get away from me! Get away from me! Leave me alone!” (Wan, 2010) The pans around both figures as he says these lines, which creates a certain ambiguity—the viewer is not sure who is living and who is dead. This scene is the culmination of Josh’s life time fears. Presumably without a father, Josh’s abilities as an astral projector were tempered by the presence of this ghastly mother-figure, who got progressively closer to him as he got older. Once Lorraine, his real mother, found out what was going on, she enlisted Elise, who through hypnosis suppressed Josh’s ability to astral project (Wan, 2010). The peaceful years that followed were, in this sense, borrowed time: Josh’s dream life was only made possible through the protection of benevolent feminine power, which, according to the film, seems to be in violation of the natural law governing gender relations. His tragedy is thus one where he either loses his son, or risks the archaic mother. In his moment of hubris, where he believes that is strong enough to repel feminine power, Josh falls.

4.2.2 Reading Tragedy: Two Portraits of the Ideal Father

Paranormal Activity

Micah's hubris, as I mentioned, is over-confidence in his own ability. But we can read further into this and link this over-confidence with his wealth. Micah is a "day-trader"; he works from home, and he tells Katie that the camera, which she describes as being fancy, cost half what he made that day. He also seems to own his house, and the convertible (Peli, 2007). The film sets up a character with a sense of entitlement and power that leads to his downfall. Once again, like in *Insidious* this film judges a character that would attempt to deal with the masculinity crisis without making recourse to traditional masculinity authority, in other words, patriarchy. This is most clear at two moments: in Micah's interactions with the Psychic, and in Micah's hesitation to call Dr. Averages.

When Katie calls a psychic, Dr. Friedrichs, to diagnose the haunting, Josh shows little respect for the man. He plays horror movie music to "make him feel at home," and mocks Friedrichs when he arrives by asking if the psychic could predict traffic conditions. Micah also ignores Friedrichs' warning not to try to communicate with the entity (Peli, 2007). In fact, it is largely Micah's insistence to provoke the demon that leads to its full possession of Katie. It is useful to compare Friedrichs to Elise in *Insidious*, since the two films both feature medium or psychic characters. While in *Insidious* Elise is presented as a powerful but ultimately flawed female authority (she is responsible for the onslaught of the archaic mother, as well as the provision of Josh's exceptional life), Friedrichs is presented as a righteous but slightly weak male authority. By the end of *Insidious*, the viewers has the feeling that even though Elise was powerful, accepting her judgement ultimately led to

Josh's demise. In *Insidious*, the situation is reversed. Had Micah heeded Friedrichs warnings, he might have survived.

When Micah has the option to listen to another male authority, he hesitates. At one point, while he and Katie are fighting, he says, "I'm trying to solve the problem. I didn't bring that thing in the house, you did!" After they review the footage of the entity leaving footprints in the talcum powder, Katie says she's calling Dr. Averies. Micah says, "I'm in control, I'm making progress..." Katie replies, "No no no, you're not having any progress, you're not in control. It is in control, and if you think you are in control, then you're being an idiot. ... You are absolutely powerless." Micah says back, "That's not true at all." When Katie finally calls Dr. Averies, he is out of the office. In a later scene, when Dr. Friedrichs returns, he tells the pair that Averies is out of town, and that he himself cannot help, since demonology is not his area of expertise (Peli, 2007). This scene illustrates that Micah's hubris is in fact what leads to his destruction. If he had agreed to call Dr. Averies after Friedrich's first visit, they couple might have been saved. But because of Micah's insistence on "solving the problem" on his own, he fails to seek help from the proper male authorities until the situation has progressed past a point of no return.

Insidious

Reading this film as a tragedy allows us to organize the plot around some of its central themes and to unify the material we discovered earlier. If the father's fall is his failure to survive the loss of his authority brought on by violent masculinity and empowered femininity, this scenario is figured differently in each of the two films. In other words, each father has a unique hubris, that which brings about his downfall. We discussed Josh's hubris

earlier; his ability to astral project is ultimately what makes his family vulnerable to the haunting. But what is the meaning of this hubris in the broader schema of the masculinity crisis and its social context? In other words, what does that hubris represent? As evidenced by some important elements of the film, “astrals projection” represents the ability to transcend the domestic sphere and occupy other social spaces, which the film stages as fraught with the dangers of the masculinity crisis. Furthermore, because Josh’s travel into the further happens without the guidance of a father or traditional male authority, *Insidious* is a warning against approaching social life without the presence of patriarchy.

Much of the tragedy in *Insidious* revolves around Josh’s absence and the absence of his father. I already mentioned the bloody handprint in an earlier chapter, and how it symbolizes Dalton’s emasculation. The context in which this event occurs is perhaps one of the best examples of how the film stages the tragedy of the absent father. After Renai discovers the bloody sheet, she calls to Josh to let him know what happens. But Josh, who is busy grading papers, misses the call. The camera pans around a classroom full of empty desks, as Josh is eerily lit by his computer screen at the front of the room. He listens to the message from Renai: “Josh where are you? I need you to come home now, please.” This scene seems to throw time out of joint; Josh, in a sense, is already dead. He haunts an empty classroom, teaching to students who aren’t there. Josh pulls up to the house in his SUV, to find Renai on the front porch: “It’s 10:30, you’ve been coming home late every night. In all the years that you’ve worked at that school they’ve never asked you to do that. Why all of a sudden are you staying back late?” Josh answers, “Yeah, you know, I don’t like it either. I was grading tests...what choice do I have? I gotta pay Dalton’s bills”. “Josh, I’m scared. I’m so scared, and...” “I’m scared, he’s my son too.” “You don’t understand, I’m scared for Dalton, I’m

scared of this house. There's something wrong with this place, I can feel it. It's like a sickness. Ever since we moved in everything's just gone wrong." "You think our house is haunted?" "I don't think it I know it. Things move around in here by themselves. I walk into the kitchen at night to get a drink and I can feel eyes on me. I can't be in there alone anymore. I need you, but you're never here. Where are you?" "I told you, I was grading tests." "That's not what I mean. You're not here with me, in this situation. You're just avoiding it." (Wan, 2010)

We have to understand this in the context of Josh's astral projection, because the scene makes the symbolism of Josh's ability explicit. Because Josh justifies his absence with work, there arises a parallel between absence, work, and death. In this first place, we don't know whether Josh's own father left the family or died. In the second place, the aesthetics of the scene when Josh grades the tests (the dull grey-green lighting, the lit-up computer screen), are similar to the aesthetics in the further. In this way, the further, the land of the dead, is for all intents and purposes the broader social world. Even the name, "the further" suggests that the land of the dead, from which threat arises, is the world "out there", beyond the insulated domestic space.

Reading the further in this way sheds light on the role of female authority in the film. In tragic terms, Josh's entire life is one tragic exception made possible by female authority trying to protect him from the archaic mother. Elise's role here is pivotal; it is only through her help that Josh can access the further. She suppresses his ability, which allows him to have a family, and then removes that suppression so he can travel into the further one more time. If we see the further as "the world out there" or the social world of rival threats, emasculation, death, and history, then Elise is the gateway to that world. Josh's connection to

the world is made through one female authority. When Josh dismisses the priest who he finds visiting his home, he begins the line of thinking that ultimately seals his fate. Instead of turning to another male authority for advice, Josh acts on the advice of his mother, his wife, and Elise, who between the three of them convince Josh to go into the further.

In the first place, this judgement of a man's proper relationship with female authority eerily echoes the mythopoetic men's movement in its insistence on breaking a connection with the mother. But more importantly, by setting up the absence of male authority as hubris, the film makes a broader comment. It implies that the social world should only be accessible through male authority; through a present father or a priest. In this way, the absent father theme is in an interesting position, because on the one hand, it refers directly to the masculinity crisis itself, where the absence of masculinity is a problem in the first place, and on the other refers to a response to the crisis. Simply put, the film suggests that if there is a masculinity crisis, if men are emasculated and threatened, this is because they organize the world around female authority. The solution, at least the one that the movie forwards, is a present and powerful father who can structure the son's access to the world.

4.3 Tragedy and the Sovereign Father

Taken together, each of these films, because it presents a tragic longing for a strong male authority, posits a sovereign father, a benign male authority with the capacity to define the contours of the domestic foam. In an article called, *Father Trouble: Staging Sovereignty in Spielberg's War of the Worlds*, Joshua Gunn offers a psycho-political reading of *War of the Worlds*. Gunn's argument is that the film conflates Ray, the father in the story, with the "symbolic father", the ideal Freudian-Lacanian law-giver, and by doing so deceives

audiences into accepting a paternalistic form of governance: “Insofar as *War of the Worlds* is a deliberate attempt to resurface and react to the trauma of September 11, 2001, however, the film is about the dead father not only socially but politically: the film is staging a drama in which Ray’s ability to care for his children is compared to the State’s ability to care for its people. An attention to the plot of *War of the Worlds* in terms of the formal, symbolic function of the father figure as a representative of the Law re-characterizes the focus on the biological father and family unit as an ideologically informed displacement of questions about governance and the State, in effect disguising a soul-deep longing for an effective and forceful leader with the power to destroy any threat to security. *War of the Worlds* collapses the father and the sovereign at the site of affective intimacy.” (2008, p. 15) Thus the film satisfies what Gunn sees as a “soul-deep” desire for the symbolic father, by replacing the State with Ray; when the State fails as the juridical authority, Ray steps up to the plate. Because Gunn’s arguments rely on a “soul-deep” longing for paternal structure, in his view the films become ideological when they replace the State with the father in an explicitly depicted moment of national crisis.

Since haunted house films rely on the masculinity crisis discourse, however, they need not explicitly represent the fall of the State to stage sovereignty. If we see the masculinity crisis discourse, rather than the Oedipus or “primal horde” myths, as being the source of an exceptional separation between the real and ideal fathers, then the state of exception becomes gendered in a more nuanced way. Rather than the sovereign emerging as a response to a generalized societal collapse, as it does in *War of the Worlds*, the paternal sovereign arises out of the dual problematic of masculinity in the domestic space. In this way, the sovereign

becomes intimately linked, perhaps more so than in *War of the Worlds*, with the domestic sphere, particularly with the strong father.

Even if one rejects the Freudian and Lacanian underpinnings of Gunn's theoretical approach, his reading still demonstrates how certain films couple the ideal father with sovereignty to create a sovereign father or in Gunn's words, a "paternal sovereign." In tragic haunted house movies, the "state of exception" is the exceptionally corrupt domestic space; the sovereign father never explicitly emerges, though he haunts the film in his negativity. In this sense, he is the source of law because nemesis, the destruction of the corrupt space, only facilitates his emergence. Paradoxically, the corrupt domestic sphere, as a kind of Other-place, only crystallizes at the very moment the sovereign father emerges, that is, in the final synthesis between Josh and the Archaic Mother in *Insidious* and Katie and the Entity in *Paranormal*. In those scenes, the feminized father and the empowered mother are explicitly joined, while the same scenes also represent the culmination of nemesis and the inevitable destruction of the exceptional father. In this way, each of the two films offers a description of a two-faced ideal authority: the sovereign father, and the "paternal sovereign". While the first one is present in the strong father restoring order after the masculinity crisis, the second one is present in the mere fact of that capacity to restore.

4.4 The Political Stakes of the Security Mom and the Sovereign Father: Domesticating American Space

If haunted house films feature the emergence of security moms and sovereign fathers, then they participate in the "domestication" of American political space, or the reconceptualization of all social space as domestic. In this particular neo-poiesis, the

domestic space becomes the dominant political paradigm, such that all political questions are collapsed into questions about the family, and all authority is figured as a benign, omnipresent force.

While in the films the security mom only arises as an exceptional figure, the same figure, when deployed in real life, is used to make the securitized domestic foam the only legitimate form of spatial organization in the United States. Grewal points out this problem when she says: “For middle-class, mostly white, women, suburbanization is expanding rather than encapsulating, since in security, the state and the private work together to extend biopower into the realm of biopolitics, where self-protection and the mother’s protection of the family become part of governmentality.” While Grewal approaches the security mom in Foucauldian terms, we can translate the theory into spherological ones. To speak of the security mom then is to speak of a force that has individual and collective consequences: in the first place, the security mom can be seen as a disciplinary tool, one that constructs women as mothers in a fundamentally oppressive turn. Secondly, the security mom is a way of organizing the population. As the security mom becomes generalized, the suburb—a collection of radically isolated foams of two to five egospheres, governed by a good father and mother—becomes the primary form of governing, and the United States comes to be conceived of as a collection of neighbourhoods in a larger container, called territory. The dehistoricized, innocent, pacified, nuclear family, becomes, correspondingly, the smallest unit of spatial-political reasoning, such that forms of life fundamentally at odds with the familial foam are omitted from political space; the homeless, the single, the unmarried, the childless, same-sex parents—all of these alternative social groupings fall off the map, along with history itself.

Furthermore, if violent masculinity is associated with colonial patriarchy, pedophilia (both which also seem to allude to the corrupt patriarchy *par excellence*, the Catholic Church), and, as it could be argued in the case of the haunting in Connecticut, fascism¹², then there is a historical aspect of the security mom. By resolving crises through the extension of purified domestic foam, the security mom becomes a depoliticizing force; she simultaneously furls up the gendered violence of certain political projects and excludes forms of empowerment that fall outside the matrix of self-sufficient, parental securitization. Thus, egospheres are only admitted to secure domestic foam if they conform to a strict conception of dwelling, one that excludes histories of domination and the political movements that would resist them.

The political effects of this domestic poiesis deal directly with the American home, but they also deal indirectly with greater-sized foams in American society, particularly in the sense that domestic poiesis underlies the imaginary monosphere of the American State. If the contemporary *ars politica* involves designing a space to create togetherness, then this is most of the time an imaginary endeavour. Even if the “brute force and ethnopoiesis” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres I: Bubbles- Microspherology*, 2011, p. 59) that allowed for the historic construction of nation-states is now problematic, States still attempt to unite people in the language of solidarity. In this case, the family serves as the solidarity metaphor:

Part of our conceptual systems, whether we are liberals, conservatives, or
neither, is a common metaphorical conception of the Nation as Family, with
the government seen as an older male authority figure, typically a father. We

¹² Some of the elements in that film call to mind Nazi fascism and the Holocaust. Amongst other references, Aickman’s name is eerily reminiscent of Adolf Eichmann, infamous Holocaust orchestrator, while his glasses make him look like Heinrich Himmler. Aickman’s dapping with the occult also seems to reference rumours of the same kind in Nazi Germany. Also, Matt’s discovery of the mass grave in his house’s walls also seems to work through cultural representations of Holocaust history, as the half-decomposing bodies of the dead are juxtaposed, while sad music plays, with the portraits of the living.

talk about our *founding fathers*. George Washington was called the “father of his country,” partly because he was seen as the ultimate legitimate head of state, which according to this metaphor is the head of the family, the father. A *patriot* (from the Latin *pater*, “father”) loves his *fatherland*. (Lakoff, 2002, p. 153)

We only need to look to President Barack Obama’s 2013 inauguration speech to confirm Lakoff’s observations:

For the American people can no more meet the demands of today’s world by acting alone than American soldiers could have met the forces of fascism or communism with muskets and militias. No single person can train all the math and science teachers we’ll need to equip our children for the future, or build the roads and networks and research labs that will bring new jobs and businesses to our shores. Now, more than ever, we must do these things together, as one nation and one people...

It is now our generation’s task to carry on what those pioneers began. For our journey is not complete until *our wives, our mothers and daughters* can earn a living equal to their efforts. Our journey is not complete until our gay *brothers* and *sisters* are treated like anyone else under the law -- for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well. Our journey is not complete until no citizen is forced to wait for hours to exercise the right to vote. Our journey is not complete until we find a better way to welcome the striving, hopeful immigrants who still see America

as a land of opportunity -- until bright young students and engineers are enlisted in our workforce rather than expelled from our country. Our journey is not complete until all our *children*, from the streets of Detroit to the hills of Appalachia, to the quiet lanes of Newtown, know that they are cared for and cherished and always safe from harm. (Obama, 2013) (My Emphasis)

These passages demonstrate that the American State articulates politics in the language of family, in which citizens are conflated with “brothers” and “sisters” and Presidents fathers. And if President Obama is a skilled politician, which with two terms under his belt he seems to be, his work in this instance, a moment where much of the American population was caught in one phonotope provided by telecommunications technology, was to create a virtual solidarity. In this sense, houses are containers for an imagined nation that manifests only at exceptional political moments like elections and inaugurations. In the last sentence, Obama summarizes the pastoral end of the American political project: the final realization of an America made up of three utopian domestic spaces: the urban, the rural, and the suburban. These words, the movement from people to family, make explicit the fusion of the national political project with the domestic one.

The problematic nature of the “sovereign father” becomes quite clear here: he creates a patriarchal domesticate foam and justifies the application of State authority. We could see these two effects as applying to different social spaces. In the first space, the domestic foam, the haunted house ritual enables a return to a traditional, patriarchal family, where all women are mothers at the service of their husbands and sons, and all men are benign rulers. At the same time, the security mom and sovereign father plays a role in a larger, virtual space: the

nation. The haunted house ritual has consequences for the virtual national poesis—the imagining of a “people”—because it allows the metaphor to function. The nation cannot be imagined as a paternalistic family if such a family is left problematic—particularly as it is by the masculinity crisis discourse. Similarly, the contours of the national space begin to be influenced by the metaphor, such that the problems with State power, like its monopoly on violence, for example, can be treated as a result of a violent masculine legacy and paradoxically, the “emasculatation” of American men. In this way, the familial aim that “everyone is cared for and cherished and always safe from harm” becomes mobilized as a political one, one that hinges on masculine power, and one that justifies the same kind of benign authority (cared for and cherished) and protective violence (safe from harm) that we saw in the patriarchal house. Thus haunted house films are ultimately adaptation devices that reconstruct the domestic as egospheric foam at the neighbourhood level, and set the stage for virtual foam at the national level.

Conclusion

This work addressed the political significance of contemporary American Haunted House films; that is, it focused on the repercussions those films have on how Americans relate to one another in the domestic space, particularly with respect to power. It was my goal to demonstrate how each film, as part of a cultural ritual, re-shaped the contours of the domestic space after using ghosts to violate it. I showed how if we take a spherological approach, it becomes clear that the domestic space is in fact a domestic “foam”, which is open to constant renegotiation in the face of a generalized politics of space design. In this way, the films are elements of the “phonotope”, the space of cultural production in the United States. I

explained how this phonotope is dominated by a masculinity crisis discourse, and how as a result, the films rely on this discourse when depicting the domestic space. Next, I show how each film responds to the discourse, and thus, how it reconstructs the domestic space in light of that space being rendered problematic by perceptions of male violence and feminine empowerment. By using tragic and romantic narrative modes, the films construct “security moms” and “sovereign fathers”, both of which serve to re-instate patriarchal power in the domestic space, and to create a pastoral, paternalistic conception of power at the national level by figuring it as parental authority.

That these films play an active role in restructuring the domestic space means that they are much more politically flexible than Freudian or even cultural approaches might anticipate. In my approach, the political consequences of the films are largely determined by their narrative content. While I do argue that their status as ritual objects means that they are likely to sustain existing social structures, these structures need not be intrinsically oppressive. Indeed, we can only judge the films by *how* they shift those social structures, not by the simple fact that they shift them. In other words, shifting is not necessarily oppression or emancipation.

This implication is significant because it shows how the research makes headway in what seems like an under-studied area of research: the direct effects of certain types of film on political experience and perception. Many of the Freudian and Cultural approaches investigate how different types of films reflect existing cultural categories, and those same approaches show how films rely on psychic and linguistic mechanisms to function coherently as works of art. What few of the studies do, however, is analyse the performativity of film at the perceptual level, that is, they neglect the power film has of

constructing viewer experience, particularly in a world saturated with visual media. Reality, if it was not before, is increasingly experienced through fiction, and so fiction—alongside political advertising—must play an important role in shaping political experience.

My aim in this work is to explain the effects of films, and not their provenance. That being said, one limit of the work is that it does not explain whose interests the production of these films serves. An analysis of the field of film production would certainly be informative in this area, as it would bring to light the specific interests involved in film production, as well as give a more detailed view of how cultural elements are mobilized to create a ritual. If we do accept the view that these films contribute to a “domestication” of American politics, then more research needs to be done assessing both other fictional representations of the American home, and other non-filmic manifestations of domestication. In the first area, it would be interesting to see an analysis of romantic comedies, with an attention to the interplay of gender and American politics. No doubt much work has been done on gender and comedy, but few works, at least in my experience, grasp the link between gender and the State in this area. In the second area, an extended study of how American political space is conceived in non-filmic areas, like constitutional law, court proceedings, and social movements, would lend empirical weight to the theoretical supposition that the masculinity crisis discourse and the “family metaphor”—as discussed by Lakoff—are hegemonic representations of American domestic and political life.

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