

Cinema is a Haunted House

by

Murray Leeder

B.A. (Honours) English, University of Calgary

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Abstract

This thesis is a consideration of self-reflexivity in ghost films, holding that film is inherently and essentially a ghostly medium, a record of life now revived in a spectral form and exhibited in a location analogous to a haunted house. It proposes a conceptualization of cinema's essence as dialectical poles reflecting film's scientific/material dimension and its spiritual/evanescent dimension, proposing that these poles are always in tension. It especially examines haunted house films in which this tension is particularly foregrounded, first analyzing *The Legend of Hell House* as an exemplary case of scientism and Spiritualism clashing in a haunted setting before turning to *The Entity*, a narrative of ghostly cinema's impact of its viewer. These two arguments are drawn together in a final chapter on *Poltergeist*. This thesis proposes a new conceptualization of the "essence" of cinema while seeking to inaugurate a new theoretical approach particularly to ghost films.

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“This house has many hearts,” says Tangina Barrons in *Poltergeist*. It is likewise with this thesis, which is haunted by many helpful voices. My thanks to the Carleton Film Studies faculty, especially Chris Faulkner, Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, Mark Langer, Charles O’Brien and George McKnight, who collectively translated to a very productive couple of years of my life, and to Malek Khouri for pointing me here. To André Loiselle, indefatigable advisor and firm but gentle taskmaster who forever made sure I kept order in this House of Meaning. André, you’re my own personal Emeric Belasco. To my fellow inmates, Amy Ratelle, Jeremy Maron, Sonya Poweska, Joe Lipsett, Angie Chiang, Matt Croombs, Matt MacKinnon, Steve Rifkin and Tim Rayne, for misery loves company. And most especially to Rachel E. Beattie, the heart that glows the brightest of all.

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Introduction:

“Not life but its shadow”

After the Russian essayist and playwright Maxim Gorky watched the Lumière Brothers programme of short films at Nizhni-Novgorod in 1896, he published his intense and fascinating reaction in *Nizhegorodski listok*, beginning “Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows” (407).¹ His famous essay materializes all of the tensions typically surrounding new media as they manifested for the cinema, while simultaneously painting a captivating image of what it must have been like to see moving images for the first time. Gorky wrote:

If only you knew how strange it is to be there. It is a world without sound, without colour. Everything there – the earth, the trees, the people, the water and the air – is dipped in monotonous gray. Gray rays of the sun across the gray sky, gray eyes in gray faces, and the leaves of the trees are ashen gray. It is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless spectre (Gorky 407).

Gorky’s description of his experience is predominated by two emotions: terror and depression. Even the Lumières’ little realist episodes each become horror films in Gorky’s descriptions, be it the train that threatens to “[turn] you into a rippled sack full of lacerated flesh and splintered bones” (408), the people walking through a gray and silent world, or the card players laughing noiselessly and playing their game unto infinity. The fundamental language of film is unknown to Gorky and thus many of its features are a cause of unease. That film presents a world that is silent and colourless, the ability of

¹ So translated by “Leda Swan” in Jay Leyda’s *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*. Tom Ruffles notes that other versions exist, some with less overtly supernatural overtones (238). However, Leyda’s remains the standard and most accessible translation.

characters (and, most terrifyingly, the train) to enter from outside of the frame and leave it, the fact that a life-size street may be compressed to fit onto the screen or that people might be equivalently shrunk – all of these are causes for grave unease in Gorky. He is uncertain of the boundaries of film and reality (Tsivian 147), writing that when the gardener gets sprayed in the face “you imagine the spray will reach you, and you want to shield yourself” (408). For Gorky, film requires a highly mystical language to characterize, and he imagines film as the phantasmal product of an evil magician: “Curses and ghosts, the evil spirits that have cast entire cities into eternal sleep, come to mind and you feel as though Merlin’s vicious trick is being enacted before you. He dwarfed the people in corresponding proportion . . . under this guise he shoved his grotesque creation into the dark room of a restaurant” (408).

Gorky the novelist was, as Ian Christie writes, “quick to see how suggestive the film image could be. We don’t have to regard him as an objective reporter” (Christie 15). However, this thesis is not a journalistic account of people’s real reactions to film but a theoretical one devoted to film’s ghostliness², a conception best articulated through Gorky’s florid descriptions. The image of film as shadow is appropriate: it is indeed the shadow of light projected through celluloid. At points Gorky pushes this metaphor to its logical conclusion, with both shadow and film representing death, or particularly, survival after death. Several times he imagine film as a location of punishment: “The gray silhouettes of the people, as though condemned to eternal silence and cruelly

² The word “ghost” is one with numerous semantic possibilities. My general feeling, however, is that the term ghost suggests something that combines properties of substantiality and insubstantiality, presence and absence, especially including that which has died and is now returned.

punished by being deprived of all the colours of life” (407). Unnerved by the card game depicted in one of Lumière brothers’ shorts, he writes: “[the players] laugh until their sides split but not a sound is heard. It seems as if these people have died and their shadows have been condemned to play cards in silence unto eternity” (408). Gorky recognizes the ghostliness of film, a record of actual events but now figured only as “a life deprived of words and shorn of the living spectrum of colours” (407) and regards the figures therein as ghosts, inhabiting a state analogous to death and a most unpleasant afterlife at that. Even on his first viewing, Gorky seems to have further identified the *repetitive* properties of film, specifically invoking the Tantalus and Sisyphus myths of condemned sinners doomed to repeat tasks endlessly but never quite fulfilling them. Film as ghost, yes, but in particular film as a storehouse for the unhappy dead. In a subsequent essay, Gorky engages with the movie theatre itself as a mystical locale. “A strange life is being enacted before you, it’s real alive, bustling . . . And suddenly it vanishes. There’s just a piece of white cloth in a wide, black frame, and it doesn’t look as if there had been anything on it at all . . . it gives you a strange uneasy feeling” (Tsivian 149).

Gorky’s essay proves remarkably prescient on a number of counts. He muses that “I do not yet see the scientific importance of Lumière’s invention, but, no doubt, it is there, and it could probably be applied to the general ends of science, that is, of bettering man’s life and the developing of his mind” (408-9), anticipating debates on the “proper” function for cinema. Additionally, as he facetiously muses on the cinema’s potential for screen pornography, writing “For example, they will show a picture titles: ‘As She Undresses’ or ‘Madam at Her Bath’ or ‘A Woman in Stockings’” (409). Gorky foresees

the importance depictions of the female body (or in fact the body in general) will have in the cinema. Gorky's dark response to early cinema represents an ideal starting place for my thesis. Why? My project is to explore the self-reflexive potential of ghost films, and Gorky's conception of film itself as a ghost – with the movie theatre as a kind of haunted house – demonstrates that this was a consideration since the earliest days of cinema. Furthermore, Gorky's nods to other such issues as film's relationship to science and gender help me set out central concerns of this thesis.

What is absent from Gorky's account, however, is any overt recognition of film as technology. For all of the vivid details he relates, he never mentions the projector, even though it was probably very much in evidence at the screening. His otherworldly account of cinema excludes the material portion of the cinematic apparatus; Gorky is far more interested in film's mystical, immaterial qualities, and in his articulation of cinema as an uncanny netherworld, he enacts a disavowal of film's technological and material aspects – the same brand of disavowal that causes theatres to exclude the projector from the audience's view. But film *is* technology too, and the early audiences' reactions were heavily slanted towards regarding it as a technological advance and a tribute to human ingenuity and science more than Gorky's reaction of terror and unease (Tsivian xix). Tom Gunning writes that photograph's reception was divided between trumpeting of its ability to fix absolute truth and a sense of unease at its uncanny ability of doubling, with the photograph itself defined by its simultaneous ability to create “a parallel world of phantasmic doubles alongside the concrete world of the senses verified by positivism” (Gunning 1995, 43) – the same is true of cinema. Some of cinema's roots lie with the

scientific investigations of pioneers like Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey. J.E. Whitby wrote in 1900 that “the invention of the cinematograph . . . would to a great extent revolutionize the world of teaching. . . though originally offered to the public only as a toy, an amusement for an idle hour, in the form of a superior magic-lantern combining motion with pictorial effect” (Harding 21) and emphasizes in particular the medium’s value to medicine. Famed scientist Sir Ray Lankester wrote in 1911 that “[cinema] can give to large gatherings of people, with the greatest ease and absolute truthfulness, a real view of microscopic life, and enable everyone to have a true conception of what the micrologist and biologist are actually studying” (Christie 105).

As early as December, 1896, V.E. Johnson rhapsodizes of the new medium’s real potential in an article called “The Kinematograph from a Scientific Point of View,” in which he, like Whitby, decry cinema’s exclusive association with entertainment:

The Kinematograph having literally at its birth been dragged into the service of the omnipotent music hall . . . its scientific value is likely to be obscured, if not temporarily lost – a misfortune which every earnest worker in science should, I think, do his utmost to avert . . . In meteorology, isolated photographs of a storm or storm clouds, or the results of a whirlwind, are held in high esteem, but how much more valuable would be a series showing such a storm of whirlwind in action? . . . In medicine, the peculiar habits and characteristics engendered by obscure diseases can now be faithfully recorded and placed on one side for future comparison, and mutual happy guidance . . . Medicine in all its branches has, or will shortly have, three very powerful assistants in the x-ray, the Kimematograph, and the photo-chromosome (Harding 25).

More than simply endorsing the scientific value of cinema, Johnson displays a late-Victorian zeal for the machine itself. He writes that “Photographs of machinery at rest in all its diversified branches are of the very greatest value both in business and in the education of the student – how much more so will be photographs? (sic?) – faithfully

representing its wonderful and oftentimes complicated movements?" (25). In mentioning cinema alongside the x-ray and photo-chroscope, he implicitly inscribes its true value at the level of technology.

My point in emphasizing these two visions of early cinema, Gorky's and those of Johnson and his ilk, is not to say that these were the only ways people reacted to the medium, or even the most important, but that they illuminate a central duality that I propose is always present within cinema itself: it is always on one hand ghostly and on the other scientific. It is a flexible, liminal medium that can span a range of functions and subjects, ranging from a faithful tool of the physical sciences to a mediumistic tool for communion with the dead. I shall shortly explore the Nineteenth Century Spiritualists as a movement that anticipated cinema, but for the moment I will quote Paul Coates's evocative statement that "both film and the spiritualist materialize the dead" (Coates 121, qtd. in Ruffles 7). The versatile word "medium" provides a suitable metaphor, that of a corporeal, material base endowed with "spirit."

The work of this thesis is to examine the relationship between the two poles, of which I think ghost films provide a particularly useful example, though it is hardly exclusive to them. In fact, it would logically follow that this tension is present in all films, though exploring the dynamics of such a relationship would be well beyond the scope of this assignment. I will demonstrate over the course of this thesis that the essence of cinema exists in the split between these ghostly and scientific poles, and that certainly it is most pertinently foregrounded in ghost films that allegorize the divide and its resulting tension. What I have in mind here is not a rigid Cartesian binary but a dialectic

where the interaction and parallelism between each half is the determining factor of cinema itself; cinema exists in the field of tension between these poles, which are in a constant state of collapse. Put differently, cinema never exists wholly in the realm of science nor that of spirit, but exists on the juncture between the two.

A distinct but related binary to that of science and the spiritual is that of technology and magic. Clearly these binaries are *not* identical, as the first might crudely be said to involve ostensibly opposing worldviews and the second to involve the application of those worldviews to the practical (or impractical) purposes, but I think that in spite of their differences they may be productively allied for my intentions. Certainly, both sets of binaries identically collapse in/as the cinema, and may only be separated conceptually – a true “ghost in the machine,” film’s technological base is energized by its “magical” workings. A third set of binaries which I will give less emphasis for the moment both builds on these sets distinctions and strips them down to their essential bases – materiality/evanescence. This binary articulates basic dimensions present in cinema, which is material and physical in the corporeality of the apparatus (and, significantly, in the spectator’s body) and evanescent and abstract in its “traceless” imagery and its lack of consistent definition (film, after all, is a medium that is *always* in motion, virtually impossible to pin down – furthermore, its most physical form, as film stock, is thoroughly out of sight and mind for the audience for whom cinema is designed). The material/evanescent binary, which shall become prominent in my third chapter, is arguably the most fundamental of all, with film’s materiality underlying both its usefulness as a tool of science (that which might fix objective reality) and its status as

technology, and its evanescent dimension as a vaporous, untouchable, indeterminate medium facilitating its status as magical or spiritual.

It seems instinctive that magic and technology are oppositional concepts, one answering to the laws of science while the other answers to no laws but its own, but again film (a machine for the production of magic if ever there was one, and “Merlin’s vicious trick” to Gorky) provides a significant challenge to that binary. Even V.E. Johnson, who rhapsodizes of cinema’s scientific function, nevertheless closes his article with a metaphor emphasizing cinema’s “magical” powers:

When king Roderick first visited the necromantic tower of Toledo – or at least so runs legendary history – he beheld on the linen cloth taken by him from the coffer the painted figures of men on horseback of fierce demeanour; anon the picture became animated, and there at length appeared a depiction upon its magic surface a great field of battle with Christians and Moslems engaged in deadly conflict, accompanied with the clash of arms, the braying of trumpets, the neighing of horses. Can the imagination conceive that which the mind of science cannot execute? (Harding 25).

This combination, even blurring, of technology and “magic” was a major feature of early cinema: Thomas Edison, the inventor of the kinoscope, was dubbed “the Wizard of Menlo Park” and George Méliès made films as an extension of his highly developed magic act, where he used “the latest technology (such as focused electric light and elaborate stage machinery) to produce apparent miracles” (Gunning 1994, 116). Gorky’s figuration of Merlin as the auteur of cinema prefigures the Cinema of Attractions period, in which the spectacle of the medium itself predominated in the audience’s interest; just as the magician may become a filmmaker, so too is the filmmaker inherently a magician, a dark magician in Gorky’s rhetoric. The magic show blends technology and

mysticism, always using one in the service of the other, turning technological advancement into a spectacle of its own.³

Film's own ancestors, such as the camera obscura, the magic lantern, the stroboscope and zoetrope, were a group of technological toys principally employed to envision the fantastic.⁴ Many of these technologies were unified in the "phantasmagoria," the shows in the early Nineteenth Century that were almost exclusively devoted to depictions of the supernatural, especially ghosts, and which so anticipated early cinema. The practitioners of the phantasmagoria justified their actions with the teaching of scientific ideals: "Producers of phantasmagoria often claimed, somewhat disingenuously, that the new entertainment would serve the cause of public enlightenment . . . Ancient superstitions would be eradicated when everyone realized that so-called apparitions were in fact only optical illusions" (Castle 143). But this scientific purpose was hampered by the illusionists' desire to conceal their techniques: "The illusion was apparently so convincing that surprised audience members sometimes tried to fend off moving 'phantoms' with their hands or fled the room in terror . . . the spectral technology of the phantasmagoria mysteriously recreated the emotional aura of the supernatural" (Castle 144). Gunning writes that "Méliès' theatre is inconceivable without a widespread decline in belief in the marvelous, providing a fundamental rationalist context. The magic theatre

³ We should be careful not to conflate the magicians and Spiritualists; the two groups often butted heads, with magicians like John Maskelyne and Harry Houdini doubling as debunkers who exposed the Spiritualists' techniques by replicating them on stage. However, Erik Barnouw notes that the magazine *Mahatma* billed itself as "the only paper in the United States devoted to the interests of magicians, spiritualists, mesmerists, etc." and the British magazine *The Magician* sported a similar label. "The rival groups were apparently so close in their interests that they could be served by the same trade press" (109).

⁴ I bow to the research of Tom Ruffles in Chapter 2 of *Ghost Images: Cinema of the Afterlife* and Terry Castle's work on the phantasmagoria, Chapter 9 of *The Female Thermometer*. See also Linda Badley (39-41).

laboured to make visible that which it was impossible to believe” (Gunning 1994, 117). Even the master inventor Edison had his own interest in the supernatural, his last years consumed by his desire to create a machine to contact the dead (Sconce 81-3). We see again that technology and magic, conceptual opposites, are intertwined in practice.

Taking Up the Ghost

The ghost is perhaps the most flexible and pervasive of all supernatural archetypes, with a presence in practically every documented society and folklore. Film pioneers swiftly recognized cinema’s potential to depict ghosts, with George Méliès utilizing double exposures and other spectral tricks in service of his phantasmagoric shorts. Perhaps Méliès and his audiences recognized the similarity between ghosts and film. Paul Coates suggests that “If in some countries it is still customary to describe the screening of a film as a séance, this surely reflects the degree to which the form is steeped in the ideology of nineteenth-century spiritualism” (Coates 121, qtd. in Ruffles 7).

Depictions of screen ghosts are countless and diverse, fractured into a variety of sub-generic traditions. The comic ghost film encompasses works like *Blithe Spirit* (1945), *The Ghost Breakers* (1940) and *Ghostbusters* (1984), while the (often overlapping) romantic ghost tradition covers films as diverse as *Portrait of Jennie* (1948) and *Ghost* (1990), both of these strains often working to some degree to normalize the supernatural. I will not discuss these works in my thesis in any detail, not because I consider them unimportant or uninteresting, but because my principal present interest lies in the uncanny potential of cinema, that which gains unease from being both like and unlike reality. I will use the haunted house as my central metaphor and restrict my primary focus

to films of that sub-genre, for the cinematic apparatus resembles a haunted house more closely than other kinds of ghost films because, as Gorky recognized, the setup of the film-going experience so resolutely resembles that of a haunted house.

Horror-themed ghost films are not inevitably haunted house films. *Ringu* (1998) and *The Ring* (2002) are examples of ghost films where space is less important. I will briefly outline what I consider to be the relevant characteristics particular to the haunted house story, especially as it applies especially to cinema. Its history in print is long and venerable, including Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables*, both of which follow the convention of attributing the house's status as haunted to terrible events in the past. Noël Carroll refers to haunting narrative as "a narrative of renewal, predicated upon restaging an altogether unsavory past" (98). Poe's story concerns the Usher family, Hawthorn's the curséd Pyncheon family, and indeed haunting narratives generally have a familial character, with either the past events or the present ones, or both, involving a family. The haunted house is often a remote location, either physically or metaphysically. The Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* (1981) is cut off from the rest of the world by distance and weather, and *The Others* (2001) reveals its mist-shrouded manor house to exist in a limbo between our world and the afterlife. However, even when the house is in a completely unremarkable location, it is generally understood that the haunted house is a place that tests the conventional laws of reality.

Space is important to haunted house films, which take place within narrow geographic confines and exploit claustrophobia as a source of tension, while

simultaneously testing the location's physical cohesion via ghosts' ability to walk through walls and to appear and vanish without a trace (akin to the ability of characters in film to freely enter and leave the frame). Time also plays a curious role in haunted house films, which so often defy the linear flow of history, as they are routinely based on the continuing resonance of past events, often taking place in a location preserved from the ravages of time. Occasionally, as in *Haunted* (1995) and *The Grudge* (2004), characters will witness traumatic past events replayed before their eyes. As Barry Brummett notes (253), this tendency towards de-temporalization often extends to the level of character, with Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) in *The Shining* conflated with the caretaker of many years prior, and Eleanor (Julie Harris) in *The Haunting* (1963) with the "companion" who hanged herself decades before.

One of the features that distinguishes ghost films from other varieties of horror films is the comparative absence of the *abject*. Katherine A. Fowkes speaks of the lack of abjection in the comic ghost film (58-9), and I believe her point largely carries over to the horror variant as well. Admittedly, haunted house films occasionally take on an abject character in the haunting, but by and large they are distinguished by the *tracelessness* of their supernatural events. Ghosts are immaculate and immaterial, coming and going while leaving no more real trace of their presence than film has on the screen onto which it is projected. This lack of abjection becomes strikingly less the case in the late 1970's and early 80's, as I shall explore in my chapter on *Poltergeist* (1982). Even in recent decades, though, it remains the case that the ghost film tends to "quiet horror" far more frequently than other branches of the horror genre.

Strongly linked with this tracelessness is the impression that ghost narratives typically work within Tzvetan Todorov's mode of the fantastic, where the reality of the supernatural is uncertain and that uncertainty drives the narrative. Indeed, Todorov cites many ghost narratives in establishing his constellation of the fantastic, such as *The Turn of the Screw*, and notes British author M.R. James, one of the greatest specialists in ghost stories, and his assertion that a ghost story should have "a loophole for a natural explanation, but I might add that this hole should be small enough to be unusable" (Todorov 26). When this uncertainty is overthrown, we move into one of the neighbouring genres, either the "marvelous," where the supernatural is unassailably a fact of the fictional world, or the "uncanny,"⁵ where the supernatural is revealed to have naturalistic origins. Many ghost narratives ultimately choose one option or the other (though there are examples like *The Haunting* where the ambiguity is preserved through the end), but the mode of the fantastic is that which dominates the genre. This brand of "in betweenness" further helps link ghostliness and the setting of the haunted house with cinema, forever strung between ghostly and material.

The most revered haunted house films are probably Robert Wise's *The Haunting*, Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961) and Lewis Allen's *The Uninvited* (1944), alongside perhaps *The Shining*. Yet none of these central works will receive an intricate analysis in my thesis. Why? My analysis will concern films which foreground the tension I have delineated, between the ghostly and the scientific. Specifically, then, I have chosen films that involve scientific or pseudo-scientific investigation into supernatural occurrences.

⁵ Todorov notes that "there is not an entire coincidence between Freud's use of the term and our own" (47) . . . quite an understatement.

This describes *The Haunting*, surely, but, masterpiece though Wise's film is, I regard it as less interesting to my purposes than some other, perhaps lesser films. It does not incorporate technology into its diegesis the way the films I will look at do: Dr. Markway's (Richard Johnson) research techniques seem to be more observational than experimental, and, as Tom Ruffles notes, he is curiously devoid of research equipment, even the tape recorders standard to this sort of investigation (174). *The Haunting* lacks credible advocates for materialism,⁶ with the most skeptical characters, Luke Sannerson (Russ Tamblyn) and Grace Markway (Lois Maxwell), devalued by the narrative. In short, the dynamic I wish to explore, the tension between the ghostly and the material, while palpable in *The Haunting* is less evident than in some other haunted house films, and therefore *The Haunting* is less useful to my thesis.

Let me now speak to gender. When I started research towards this project, I did not intend gender in the haunted house to be a prime concern. But as it became increasingly evident that the scientific/technological is frequently gendered male and the spiritual or ghostly is gendered female within social conception and the diegeses of individual films, I realized that it would need a primary place in my analysis, for these gender binaries are also implicit within the cinematic apparatus that the haunted house represents. This will require establishing that the binary of masculine and feminine exists within cinema alongside that of the technological and ghostly. It is further of note that audience surrogate figures are typically gendered female, a topic I shall deal with in time.

⁶ I use the term here to as the philosophy that all material is reducible to physical matter (hopefully with the accompanying register of the material base of the cinematic apparatus), not the philosophy trumpeting the acquisition of worldly goods as the purpose of life (though Luke certainly is a "materialist" in both senses).

Now, before moving onto close analysis of individual films, I will first offer some further theorization of film's ghostly nature, and then follow with a theoretical-historical survey of the interrelation of ghosts and technologies such as the telegraph, the photograph and film, which I hope will help clarify my approach while laying out a framework that will be useful in successive chapters.

Never Quite Dead Enough: Cinematic Uncanny/Uncanny Cinema

Gorky was amazed by film's ability to, as Tom Gunning writes, "create an uncanny parallel universe resembling ours but with marked deficiencies" (intro to Tsivian xix). "Uncanny" is exactly right – in describing film as life's shadow, Gorky acknowledges that film's strangeness comes from its inexact similarity to life and therefore being both familiar and unfamiliar, suiting Freud's definition of the uncanny as "the class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (229). Haunted houses are among the examples Freud uses to help formulate his definition, noting that "some language in use today can only render the German expression 'an *unheimlich*⁷ house' by 'a *haunted* house'" (245).

Film is uncanny in another sense, that which concerns the difficulty in telling if something is animate or not. Freud approvingly quotes his predecessor Jentsch on "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate" (Freud 226). This uncertainty constitutes the commencement of Gorky's experience of the Lumière programme: "As you gaze on it,

⁷ That is, "unhomely"; gaining its quality of uneasiness from its similarity to but difference from the familial or homely. "The Uncanny" has its own seminal connection to the supernatural cinema, as Freud cites Otto Rank's 1914 work on doubling, in which Rank analyzes *The Student of Prague* (1913).

you see the carriages, buildings and people in various poses, all frozen into immortality . . . you anticipate nothing new for you have seen pictures of Paris streets more than once. But suddenly a strange flicker passes through the screen and the picture stirs into life” (407). Indeed, one of the tensions inherent in the haunted house story, both on and off the screen, is the possibility that inanimate objects may suddenly animate or be manipulated by unseen forces into motion, and more generally that the house itself might be, in some difficult to characterize way, *alive*.

We may conclude that the haunted house serves a workable analogy for cinema itself, that which is of uncertain boundaries and exists in a borderland between life and death, which, for Christian Metz, is defined both by absence and the simultaneous appearance of presence (44), and, within which, apparitions come and go without leaving a trace. A haunted house is a structure of stone and concrete, but that description is not adequate to characterizing its haunted nature; a movie theatre too is a physical space, but one which is granted *spirit* or *magic* by the apparatus’s workings. Thought of only slightly differently, ghosts fulfill reflect Steven Shaviro’s observation (following Maurice Blanchot’s logic) that “the problem of the cinematic spectator is not that the object is lost or missing; it is never quite lost, that it is never quite distant or absent enough” (17). What is a ghost but that which *should* be absent but somehow is not, that which is never quite dead enough?

Tom Gunning writes that “similar [to Gorky], if less eloquent responses to the ghostly aspect of early film *can* be found in the West, but they appear less frequently than the optimistic and progressive claim that through this new technology man has in a sense

triumphed over death” (forward to Tsivian xix). The underlying association of cinema with death remains, whether one conceptualizes cinema as a means of conquering mortality (providing a new form of ghost) or as an uncanny shadow world of ghosts.

Things supernatural and in particular Spiritualism⁸ were common subjects for the trick films that dominated the first, pre-narrative years of cinema. It may fairly be said, in the words of Pamela Thurschwell, that “early cinematic ghosts were created in part because the technology available motivated their production” (26); ghostly subject matter served as appropriate venues to demonstrate trick shots and double-exposures. Méliès produced *A Spiritualist Photographer* in 1903 (what could be more appropriate than the fact that Méliès played the magician himself?) (Gunning 1995 63-64). Karen Beckman discusses an 1898 short called *Photographing a Ghost* by George Albert Smith,⁹ a lighthearted depiction of a spirit photographer trying to take a picture of a ghost that refuses to stay still long enough. Beckman suggests that it “stages a quiet exposure of the inadequacies of the medium of photography in order to assert the supremacy of film in relation to insubstantial matters. As the photographer fails to capture the ghost because of its refusal to stay still, the moving picture delights in the spirit’s mobility, implicitly declaring itself the new master of the insubstantial, ectoplasmic body” (73). Film, this suggests, is in fact the ideal medium for the depiction of ghosts.

⁸ I have decided to capitalize “Spiritualism” whether I am referring generally to a social/religious interest in contacting the dead or specifically to the doctrines of the Spiritualist church.

⁹ Smith was a Spiritualist, a member of the Society for Psychical Research, and as such a curious counterpoint to magician-directors like Méliès. “The way in which he seamlessly moved between the scientific world of study and analysis of the supernatural to the technological world of stage performance and film magic . . . suggests an affinity between these worlds. Many of Smith’s films, such as *The Mesmerist, or Body and Soul* and *Photographing a Ghost*, both from 1898, explore his own fascination with the occult and use dissolves, superimpositions and other trick effects in order to convey these supernatural phenomena” (Abbott 228).

One could suggest that Gorky's particular reactions to film arise from the fact that he and other early audiences were not "socialized" into the reading of film, so that even the most basic cinematic techniques, long since normalized by subsequent generations, were seen as novel or exciting or frightening. Clearly, we do not respond to films today the way Gorky did then. It might follow that the extent to which Gorky emphasizes the silentness and "grayness" of the films he saw might constitute a challenge to reading other films (sound films, colour films) as uncanny or "ghostly." However, I intend to demonstrate that the underpinnings of Gorky's observations transcend his historical moment, that he touched on something inherent to cinema. He was not the only, nor even the first to recognize this: a reporter watching the Lumière program the year before he did wrote that "with this new invention, death will be no longer absolute, final. The people we have seen on the screen will be with us, moving and alive after their deaths" (Shipman 18). Graham Greene spoke of the ghostly quality of film in 1937: "One really begins to feel that the cinema has got a history when it's so full of ghosts. Miss Jean Harlow walking and speaking after death . . . The man is moving on the screen and at the same time he is dead" (qtd. in Ruffles 199).

Various thinkers on cinema have invoked the conception of film as death or ghost. In *The Imaginary Signifier*, Christian Metz states that an actor on film would simply "be her shadow that would be offering [speeches] to me (or she would be offering them in her own absence)" (44), fitting within his larger point describing film as defined by absence, and that "the perceived is not really the object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its *replica* in a new kind of mirror" (45). Peter Wollen has characterized cinema as "an art of

ghosts” (18, qtd. in Ruffles 199), Denis Gifford has called it “the only medium truly to revive the dead” (208, qtd. In Ruffles 200), and Gilberto Perez writes: “The projector, the magic lantern, animates the track of light with its own light, brings the imprint of life to new life on the screen. The images on the screen carry in them something of the world itself, something material, and yet something transposed, transformed into another world: the material ghost,” the last phrase furnishing the title of his tome (28). Jean-Louis Baudry describes the screen as “bordered with black like a letter of condolence” (294).

The image of film as death or ghost is implicit in theories of cinema and time, beginning with Bazin’s comparison of photography to embalming (14). In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes describes the process of being photographed as “a micro-version of death: I am truly becoming a spectre” (14). “In fixing or immobilizing the object,” writes Mary Ann Doane, “transforming the subject of its portraiture into dead matter, photography is always haunted by death and historicity” (Doane 1990, 223). The photograph is the fundamental unit of cinema, rolling by at twenty-four frames per second, and appearance of movement or animation in a medium of stillness makes it qualify as all the more ghostly, where the spectres move. Barthes’s characterization of the photograph as “*that-has-been*,” an image of death,¹⁰ seems to suggest that we should characterize cinema as “*that-has-been . . . and now is again*,” which is to say, a ghost.

While surely films are no longer so uneasy as they were for Gorky, these aspects of film are still present – a director can simply choose to emphasize or de-emphasize

¹⁰ *The Others* plays on the association with photography and death, invoking the occult Nineteenth Century practice of taking pictures of the dead in an attempt to preserve the soul through photography. The film ultimately reveals that those whom we believe to be the living protagonists are in fact ghosts, with the entire film a parallel record of their deceased souls.

them. The fact that we have normalized the way films are *supposed* to look provides an even greater potential for reading individual films as uncanny if they violate this supposition. The introduction of sound and colour to film offer uncanny potential all their own. The classic self-reflexive use of colour in depicting the supernatural is probably in William Castle's *13 Ghosts* (1960). Here the "Master of Gimmicks" unveiled "Illusion-O," whereby the ghosts appeared in a special blend of red and blue (the rest of the film is in austere black and white). The audience was given "ghost viewers," strips of red and blue that allowed them to choose to look through the red and reveal the ghosts and look through the blue and hide them. In *13 Ghosts*, the ghosts are not merely coloured, they are cinematic *colour* itself! The trailer for the film promised "ectoplasmic colour," locating the supernatural within the very physicality of the filmstrip.

Haunted house films after the silent era almost invariably use sound to establish atmosphere,¹¹ and, more critically to estrange the audience from the cinema's conventions of phonic synchronization. Consider the terrifying banging noises in *The Haunting*, never explained, never associated with any physical form, with the uncanny characteristic of being heard differently by characters in close proximity to each other. This de-synchronization effect becomes even more striking when applied to characters. Mary Ann Doane writes that "The body reconstituted by the technology and practices of the cinema is a *phantasmatic* body, which offers a support as well as a point of identification for the subject addressed by the film" (Doane 1986, 336) – this point of

¹¹ Also, ghosts films are unusually prone to invoke the thoroughly non-cinematic sense of smell, and not only foul smells – the ghost in *The Uninvited* is associated with the scent of mimosa and the Conductor (Marius Goring) in *A Matter of Life and Death* (1945) with the smell of fried onions.

identification is necessary in most films to deny the very uncanny and dislocating affect that asynchronous sound has. Nataša Durovicová notes that, in the first years of sound cinema, voice dubbing or faking was called “ghosting” (88) and prompted such great unease in American audiences that it was eventually greatly discouraged. The cohesion of the relationship between (phantom) voice and (phantasmatic) body is under fire in the ghost film, where voices may exist without bodies and, through mediumship and possession, characters speak with voices not their own.

Having offered some theoretical thoughts on film’s ghostliness, I will move to the historical instead, and attempt to locate the identification of film with ghosts within the precepts and fascinations of the Nineteenth Century’s Spiritualist movement.

Ghosts of Electricity: Spiritualism and technology

“Every new medium is a machine for the production of ghosts” (141), writes John Durham Peters in *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Peters argues that every new development in communications technology, from print to the Internet, further estranges the spirit from the body, while offering new variations on survival after death. Friedrich Kittler’s influential *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* features an illustration from 1499, the oldest available image of a printing press, depicting skeletons dancing around a printing press while holding the pages it has produced, locating in the press both the potential to outlast death and a potent reminder of death (5). “Media both define and enlarge the spirit world, being populated by spectral beings who look or sounds human but offer no personal presence and possess no flesh,” writes Peters (141). Gorky’s linkage of cinema to death and the supernatural is consistent

with a long tradition of such associations with new media, but it is possible that film represents the apotheosis of this trend, both creating and becoming a vision of the most populous and vivacious spirit world of all. The twin mid-Nineteenth Century inventions of the telegraph and the photograph furnished more than their share of ghosts, both birthing and being re-imagined by the Spiritualist movement, and thereby shaping the entire modern conception of ghosts. This is the context into which film was invented, with five decades or more of anxiety and exploration of the ghostly potential of these media. Tom Ruffles offers the provocative speculation that “perhaps the decline of Spiritualism in the Twentieth Century can be attributed to the growth of a rival means of moving back in time and across space more reliably, at the flick of a switch” (7). Examining the Spiritualists’ ghosts, the ghosts born of telegraphy and photography, may give us a blueprint through which to approach the ghosts spawned by cinema. In particular, it will do much cause to question the rigid separations between technology and ghostliness; both very much walk together in Spiritualism.

Scholars are only now fully exploring the impact on present day thinking of the Spiritualist movement, which began in the mid-nineteenth century and has experienced periods of increased and decreased popularity to this day. Helen Sword’s *Ghostwriting Modernism* explores the impact on contemporary literature of Spiritualism, a subject which practically every Victorian intellectual either dabbled in, supported or vociferously opposed, ultimately arguing that the ideological precepts of Spiritualism and its practical devices helps usher in and give shape to modernism. This influence is exemplified by “ghostwriting,” a term invented in the early Twentieth Century that evokes the

Spiritualist practice of automatic writing and in turn, in its stratification of author and credit, helps signal the commencement of the era of “the death of the author” (11-2).

Though her analysis does not touch on cinema, Sword’s approach helps underline both the centrality of Spiritualist thinking in the social context into which cinema was invented and Spiritualism’s lingering influence on modern thought. It is no surprise that cinema became entangled with the supernatural and spirituality as soon as it was invented, and that, like Spiritualism itself, the association of cinema and ghostliness lingers to this day.

The importance of technology and science to the entire Spiritualist movement cannot be overstated. In *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England*, Alex Owen notes the irony of rational science’s eventual opposition to Spiritualism, “itself the child of scientific naturalism and rational explanation. Spiritualism, which emerged during the years in which Christianity and Biblical authority were being threatened by scientific discoveries, was steeped in the scientism of the period” (v-vi). Ghost fiction in the Nineteenth Century was increasingly framed around scientific concepts like drugs, psychiatry and mesmerism (Finucane 179) – in fact, writes Julia Briggs, “Ghost stories reached the peak of their popularity in the second half of the Nineteenth Century, a time when supernatural beliefs of all kinds, and especially those of Christianity, were under attack” (52). Scholars have pointed out that Spiritualism owed its very existence to the march of science and the unease accompanying new inventions in the Nineteenth Century. In *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Jeffrey Sconce connects the invention of the telegraph, first demonstrated by Samuel Morse in 1844, and the origins of Spiritualism,

conventionally dated to the “Rochester Knockings” or “Rochester Tappings” in 1848 and the subsequent frenzy of similar paranormal activity reported across America.

The Rochester Knockings constitutes the Ur-text of Spiritualism. Two girls, twelve and thirteen, found that a ghostly presence within their cottage in Hydesville, New York, could communicate with them through rapping (Sconce 22-4, Owen 18-9, Braude 10-2), once for yes and twice for no. It quickly became a sensation, with five hundred people apparently witnessing the phenomenon in the first week alone. The girls, Kate and Margaret Fox, found that even other houses they moved to started manifesting the mysterious rapping. Setting up many of the central narratives of Spiritualism, especially establishing young girls as the ideal mediums, the Rochester Knockings is also a haunted house narrative, complete with details such as past owners of the house having been troubled by strange noises and the girls’ conviction that the ghost was a spirit of a peddler who had been murdered in the house and buried in the cellar (Owen 18), with the postscript that later excavation did indeed find an adult skeleton behind a wall in the basement (Sconce 212), possibly specious though it may be (Owen 246). Certainly, the Fox House stands as the original *mediatized* haunted house, with the whole story unfolding into an atmosphere of excitement and anxiety from newly unveiled technologies of communication. Writes Sconce:

... the United States thus saw the advent of both the ‘electromagnetic’ and ‘spiritual’ telegraphs, technologies that stand as the progenitors of two radical different histories of ‘telecommunications’. Most technological time lines credit Morse’s apparatus with ushering in a series of increasingly sophisticated electronic communications devices over the next century, inventions developed in the rationalist realm of science and engineering that revolutionized society and laid the foundations for the modern information age. The ‘Rochester Knockings’

heard by the Fox family, on the other hand, inspired the modern era's occult fascination with séances, spirit circles, automatic writing, telepathy, clairvoyance, Ouija boards, and other paranormal phenomena. The historical proximity and intertwined legacy of these two founding 'mediums,' one material and one spiritual, is hardly a coincidence. (24)

This is not of course to suggest causal links but rather conceptual ones, ideas "in the air" that crystallized in these differing forms. Sconce goes on to argue that "many of our contemporary narratives concerning the 'powers' of electronic telecommunications have, if not their origins, then their first significant cultural synthesis in the doctrines of Spiritualism" (25). Spiritualism, born of technological advancement, swiftly drew upon science to justify itself, aligning itself with electrical science. "It was the animating power of electricity that gave the telegraph its distinctive property of simultaneity and its unique sense of disembodied presence, allowing the device to vanquish previous barriers of space, time, and in the Spiritualist imagination, even death" (Sconce 28) – we may swap "film" in this sentence for "telegraph" with only minor adjustments.¹²

Fascination with electricity is ancient, but the 1745 invention of the Leyden jar, the first crude battery (Meyer 19), tipped off a new era of both scientific analysis of electromagnetic phenomena, with such famous examples as Benjamin Franklin's 1752 kite experiment (in which he charged a Leyden jar using the static electricity from a thunderstorm) (Meyer 22) and Luigi Galvani's 1780 "frog experiment,"¹³ and an

¹² The later invention of the radio also resulted in its own wave of ghostly potential, a more auditory extension of the telegraph's facilitation of communication with different locations and, perhaps, worlds: Sconce discusses Attila von Szalay's attempts to record spirit voices as early as 1936 and Friedrich Jürgenson's 1967 book *Radio Contact with the Dead* (84-5). This has belatedly reached the cinema's attention in the form of 2005's *White Noise*.

¹³ The at first accidental discovery that proximity to electrical phenomenon caused a dissected frog's legs to move (Meyer 35), the genesis of Frankensteinian fantasies of electricity's animatory power and belief in

accompanying social unease about the implications of electricity's capacity to give and take life. One Spiritualist called electricity "the God principles at work" (Braude 5). Sconce writes that, "Already a fertile terrain for the speculative adventures of popular culture, the mysteries of electromagnetism would become in the Spiritualist mind a foundational science in a grand theory of technology and consciousness" (35).

If the telegraph supplied the sense of communication despite physical dislocation that fueled the Spiritualist' dreams, the imagistic, apparitional half of the spiritual equation came from the photograph. The photographer Nadar considered the photograph the greatest invention of them all, "that which seems finally to endow man himself with the divine power of creation: the power to give physical form to the insubstantial image that vanishes as soon as it is perceived, leaving no shadow in the mirror, no ripple on the surface of water" (qtd. in Beckman 74-5), a description that would actually seem to suit cinema as well as photography. In his essay "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations," Tom Gunning traces the Spiritualist movement's interest in the potential of manipulating photography and Spiritualism's links to stage magic, which in turn impacted early cinema. The photograph, he says, played the double role of aiding the scientific context of western culture by providing the idea of a definite record, it also served to ignite the fantastic imagination by offering new potential for the uncanny in its doubling. The Spiritualists movement itself was reshaped by the invention of photography that invited the possibility of spirit photography, a practice which came to the fore in the movement after the Civil War – prior to that, it had largely focused on

the ephemeral "spark of life." By 1803, Galvani's nephew Giovanni Aldini was mixing science and grotesque entertainment by publicly demonstrating galvanic experiments on hanged criminals (Sconce 32).

auditory spiritual manifestations, not visual (Gunning 1995, 51). In other words, Spiritualism became progressively more sensationalistic, becoming more visual, spectacular and yes, cinematic, over time, the closer it got to the advent of cinema itself.¹⁴

Spirit photographs either consisted of ghostly images, often those of the famous dead (Abraham Lincoln being a popular choice), overlaid on portraits in the development process (often said to require a medium's presence at the time of the photograph), or supposed live documentation of the dramatic spiritual phenomena known as "full materializations" (Gunning 1995, 53). The former instance simultaneously puts the photograph to "scientific" use in documenting the supernatural and reveals how easily photographs may be manipulated, while constituting an early attempt to profit off technology as novelty, presaging early cinema – William Mumler, who produced the first spirit photograph in 1861, made a living off his spirit photography, selling portraits for as much as \$10 each (Gunning 1995, 47-48). The "full materialization," whether or not documented by the photograph, offers a dramatic anticipation of the cinematic process. A whitish substance called ectoplasm was said to ooze from the mediums' orifices – usually noses, mouths, genitals and nipples – forming into full-fledged two- or three-dimensional forms, often shaping into the faces of the dead. I will deal more fully with ectoplasm and its implications in my chapter on *Poltergeist*.

The most famous of the full materializations was an ectoplasmic spirit named Katie King by medium Florence Cook in 1874, documented, in the form of forty-four

¹⁴ Not to suggest that Spiritualism lead directly to the invention of cinema, but only to support to supposition of Anne Friedberg and others that the cultural will that underlies cinema's popularity existed before the technology and is manifest in social institutions of the Nineteenth Century.

photographs, by the distinguished scientist William Crookes (Gunning 1995, 53-56, Sconce 60, Owen 227-8).¹⁵ In these conjurations, Cook underwent a “primal photographic process in emanating her double,” ostensibly entranced in a spirit cabinet while Katie walked around the room. However, as Gunning notes, “it is Crookes, the man of science, who fixes the image and lends it his authority” (Gunning 1995, 56). In one incident we find an ideal example of the scientific dimension of photography coexisting with its uncanny, spiritual, ghostly potential, and not coincidentally, they are gendered male and female respectively.

More than just being influenced by the technologies of the photograph and telegraph (one “spirit” even suggested that Morse invented the telegraph with ghostly help [Sconce 25]), the Spiritualists numbered among their fantasies machines for enacting their principles, and sometimes termed the séance a “spirit battery,” offering plans whereby a medium might “improve contact with the spirit world by asking her guests to hold a magnetized rope, its ends dipped in copper and zinc buckets of water” (Sconce 29). Spiritualist John Murray Spear drafted plans for bizarre machines powered by the spirit, based on information received from ghosts, and even began work on a perpetual motion machine made of wood, metal and magnets, designed “to be infused with the ‘life principle’ by bringing it into contact with the ‘personal magnetism’ of a number of human subjects,” ultimately designed for nothing less than powering a “‘circular city,’ built on principles of ‘symmetry and peace’ and incorporating temples of art, science and worship” (Sconce 39). Spiritualism’s strain of techno-utopianism should be no surprise in

¹⁵ Consult these sources for debate over the authority of Crookes’ claims, and the latter-day speculation that he may have been a willing party to Florence Cook’s hoax.

a movement spawned by the new unifying potential of communications technology. It should be no surprise either that the Spiritualists were entranced by the idea of modern technology existing at the juncture of science and spirit, just as film does.¹⁶

One of the most fundamental principles that the Spiritualists, and culture at large, borrowed from electrical science was polarity, which spread throughout the popular imagination and swiftly became a cardinal underlying principle of modernism. It informed the Spiritualists' understanding of gender, and the stubborn gendering of electricity continues into modern times, as evinced by our referring to electrical plugs in terms of their "male" and "female" forms, corresponding to their respective penetrative and receptive functions. Sconce writes that "as the two entities most closely associated with the mysteries of the life force, women and electricity were deeply imprecated in Victorian questions of spirituality" (47). Mediums were virtually always women, especially young women, with electrical theory used to demonstrate that women represented the negative (receptive) pole of the genders (the few male mediums were described as being unusually feminine).¹⁷ Individuals with a talent for mediumship were tellingly referred to as "sensitives." Women's innate receptivity made them more religious by nature, and as Spiritualism posited women as better equipped to accept spiritual signals than men, turning them into vessels of communication akin to the

¹⁶ *Thirteen Ghosts* (2002) is a haunted house film that posits the house itself as just such a machine (albeit of an infernal variant), simultaneously mechanical and spiritual.

¹⁷ *Stir of Echoes* (1999) provides a useful example. All the film's principal mediums are male, but one is a child and Tom Witzky (Kevin Bacon) only has his power awakened after being hypnotized (and publicly humiliated) by his sister-in-law (Illeana Douglas). Considering him rigid and close-minded, she leaves behind a post-hypnotic suggestion of a highly vaginal character: "After you wake up, your mind will be completely open, like an open door." After this, his personality begins to merge with that of a female ghost.

telegraph. But it is wrong to unproblematically consider the female medium a mere receptacle of male will; Spiritualism was a heavily feminized movement, one allied with the New Women, allowing a curious brand of advocacy. “Existing at the fringes of Victorian science’s understanding of electricity, femininity and spirituality,” writes Sconce, “the medium occupied a strategic political and intellectual space that allowed her to intervene in the public sphere through a combination of supernatural and technological discourses” (49) – stranger still, her agency came through her passivity, her apparent role as the vessel for spiritual communication, constituting empowerment through disempowerment. Ann Braude explains that the first widely attended woman speakers ever in the United States were trance speakers, their oration made acceptable because male spirits spoke through them, “the essential passivity of women asserted in a public arena, displayed before thousands of witnesses” (85) – even when the spirits spoke on matters of women’s interest through their mediums.

But, as ectoplasm demonstrates, Spiritualism was clearly an interest in woman’s body as woman’s voice. Freud described the female body itself in terms of the uncanny:

It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning . . . whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, “this place is familiar to me, I’ve been here before,” we may interpret this place as being his mother’s genitals or her body (245).

In *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed briefly offers an explanation of haunted house narratives by following Freud’s lead, suggesting that “The house is haunted by the ghost or trace of a memory which takes the individual back to the early, perhaps foetal,

relation to the mother” (54), painting the haunted house, in essence, as a giant womb. This may begin to explain the frequency of haunted house narratives that depend on the unraveling of some past mystery, most frequently a familial mystery, analogous to the pervasive question of “what was the womb like?”¹⁸ *The Uninvited* is exemplary in this respect, since here the mystery is one of maternity, where the question “who is Stella Meredith’s (Gail Russell) real mother?” – which is to say, “whose womb did she inhabit?” – needs to be answered before the house can be freed of its ghosts.¹⁹ Freud’s insight locates the haunted house as a feminine space, or at least one that derives its uncanny power from male fear of female sexuality, with the importance of rooms to the genre reflecting the womb. The best example here is surely the nursery in *The Haunting*, a womb from which Hugh Crain’s daughter never truly emerged, and which is haunted by that primal presence even long after her death. It might follow that the frequency of door imagery within ghost films, even iron gates in the case of *The Haunting* and *The Legend of Hell House* (1973), suggests the uncanny genitals Freud discusses.

The analogy of cinema as haunted house continues to stand, enriched by the addition of gender to the equation. The movie theatre has a womblike dimension to it, as a darkened, enclosed location where the viewer is, at least theoretically, passive and subject to the workings of the “body” in which he or she is contained. As Jean-Louis Baudry writes, cinema “takes place in a closed space and those who remain there,

¹⁸ Also, Michel Chion notes, “In the beginning, in the uterine darkness, was the voice, the Mother’s voice . . . Her voice originates in all points of space” (61), which is to say, is disembodied. This rhymes with the vocal disembodiment I have already discussed as a feature of the haunted house film, which we will find in characters like Emeric Belasco and the Entity.

¹⁹ The mystery in *The Changeling* (1979) is similarly one of parentage, and there are many other examples.

whether they know it or not . . . find themselves chained, captured or captivated” (294). Baudry argues that the cinematic experience reflects a desire to return to the womb. This would posit the movie theatre as a feminine space in two different registers, both because it makes its audience passive and reactive, and because it serves as a throwback to the mother’s body. This argument exists, at least on first glance, in opposition to the longstanding feminist argument of Laura Mulvey and others that film is a scopophilic and therefore masculine art form, one that privileges the male gaze and transforms the female body into its passive object. But these two viewpoints need not be conflictory – it may simply follow that the overall film-going experience contains multiple gender possibilities. Encased in a womblike and therefore feminized space, while simultaneously engaged in the masculinized activity of looking, but while simultaneously incapacitated and therefore feminized by passivity, film-going is a mesh of gender paradoxes. Indeed, the simultaneity of film’s passive and active dimensions – as an audience member, one is still subject to the director’s whims, while simultaneously the audience’s gaze may be privileged and given omniscience within the narrative – corresponds curiously with the female medium’s paradox of agency through passivity, while further implicating the separate-yet-coexisting dimensions of ghostly and technological within cinema itself.

The relationship of communications technology, electricity, gender, Spiritualism and social history, the subject of several book-length studies, is more complex than I can deal with in a satisfactory fashion here, so I will content myself with making a few insights towards tying it together with “the ghostly medium.” Cinema, as we have already established, may be viewed in terms of binaries not dissimilar to those in Spiritualism,

with its twin poles being the technological and the ghostly. Given the Spiritualists' central and defining interest in technology, it is no stretch to locate cinema as just the kind of spiritual apparatus of their fantasies. I will further observe that, though rational science and Spiritualism often faced off as enemies (Spiritualism's decline in popularity came in part from the frequency of exposures of its fraudulent practices) (Nelson 82), they were far from oppositional in nature but were in fact highly entangled, with Spiritualism fascinated by the implications of new technologies and drawing upon scientific rhetoric such as that surrounding electricity to justify itself.

Hopefully by now it should be evident what variety of films I must analyze. In making my choices, the following factors predominated – 1: each is a haunted house film, taking place wholly or principally in an uncanny location analogous to the cinematic apparatus itself. 2: each involves either Spiritualism and/or its academic descendent parapsychology, while simultaneously including technology and science into the narrative, and 3: the Spiritual and technological halves of the binary are put into conflict, along with the accompanying binary of masculine and feminine. But as haunted houses are inherently spaces for the blurring of boundaries, those binaries ultimately collapse in the face of their essential similarities. Of course, I have chosen these films for contrast as well as their similarities, and I hope that by revealing their essential similarity over obvious differences I shall prove the flexibility of my framework.

In Chapter One, I shall analyze John Hough's *The Legend of Hell House*, which takes place in possibly the most hostile haunted house in cinema history. In the Belasco House, not inaptly known as Hell House, a most vociferous and violent struggle between

scientism and Spiritualism plays out, but both extremes finally fail in favour of a pragmatic middle ground. At the same time, the binary of masculinity and feminine also comes under fire, with the haunting ultimately being attributed to a mammoth failure of masculinity and a reaction of ghostly disavowal.

The other two films I will analyze take place not in a remote, evil location like the Belasco House but in mundane domestic spaces made uncanny through haunting. Sidney Furie's *The Entity* (1981)²⁰ deals with the scarcely palatable subject matter of ghost rape and is the subject of my second chapter. It is odd man out among these films because it contains no overt mediumship, although it does posit the female body as the point of interaction between the physical and spirit worlds. It too gives us a struggle between factions of scientific and Spiritualist leanings, here embodied by rival psychiatry and parapsychology departments at a university, and also reveals their opposition as ineffective. In a strange horror film that heavily resists classifying or explaining its monster, the only relief in *The Entity* comes from departing altogether from the binary. I interpret it as an allegorization of the audience's place in the film-going dynamic, denying and frustrating the privileged position the audience occupies in most films.

Finally, I shall analyze Tobe Hooper and Steven Spielberg's *Poltergeist*, which directly invokes the uncanny quality of media technology, here embodied in television, which stands in a border position as both of and not of the family. I shall offer some analysis of television as an uncanny medium separate to cinema, but I believe that the

²⁰ The release year for *The Entity* is a matter of some inconsistency. For example, the Internet Movie Database lists it as a 1981 film (despite the fact that its release dates page contains no dates earlier than 1982!). Its American debut was in February 1983.

most useful approach to the film within the confines of this thesis is in locating television as an embodiment of cinema's material dimension, and that *Poltergeist's* main consideration is the erection of binaries akin to the structuring binaries of cinema, and then demolishing them. *Poltergeist* will emerge in my interpretation as allegorizing the audience's place within the apparatus, a narrative driving towards the collapse of meaning at the point when the film ends (with the lingering possibility of the reinstatement of meaning through the promise of a sequel).

Ghostwritten and Ghostread: Review of Literature

I will now take some time to review the existing literature to which I hope this thesis will contribute. To this end, I will make mention of the key writing on ghosts and modernity, ghosts as modernism, haunted houses in literature or film and ghosts in film, some with greater detail than others. The wealth of material on ghosts in literature is too large for me to review here, nor is it necessarily always applicable to my work, so I will largely not examine this area.

The cornerstone of my work, at least in terms of inspiration, has shaped out to be Jeffrey Sconce's *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. Sconce follows the unease created by new technologies from the Nineteenth Century through to the advent of cyberspace, exploring how the uncanny quality of these mediums have influenced popular narratives and societal fears. He discusses the rise of Spiritualism, the alien fantasies of the mid-Twentieth Century, the cyber-techno-paranoia of recent decades and so on. If Sconce's work has a significant flaw, it is that it rarely explores the uncanny potential of film. While he does occasionally discuss individual

films (*Poltergeist* included, along with items as eclectic as *The Truman Show* [1997] and *Shocker* [1989]), it is as exemplars of societal tensions. Sconce never engages with the *medium* of film itself, so it is here that I hope to build and expand upon his foundation.

Helen Sword's *Ghostwriting Modernism* is a tremendous account on the influence of Spiritualism on modernism, exploring both the use of séance and mediumship metaphors in authors like James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Rudyard Kipling, Thomas Mann, Sylvia Plath and many others and such practices of "necrobibliography," the practice of writing producing previously unknown works they claim to have come from dead authors. Sword's analysis does not extend to more popular works, nor to the contemporaneous invention of cinema, limiting its practical use to me. I cite *Ghostwriting Modernism*, too, as exemplifying a number of fairly recent works analyzing Spiritualist and ghost metaphors on modernism and postmodernism, which Sword collects in her epilogue (159-166), including Marjorie Garber's *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*, Avital Ronell's *Dictations: On Haunted Writing*, Jean-Michel Rabaté's *The Ghosts of Modernity*, Nicholas Royle's *Telepathy and Literature* and Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. These works receive no further mention in my thesis due to reasons of space and because their considerations are often removed from cinema and the frame of my inquiry.

A large portion of the works on screen ghosts – indeed, on horror films in general – leans more to the popular than the academic. Some of these books are of use to me as sources of production details and the like, even as I must acknowledge their lack of scholarly rigor. These include Jeremy Dyson's *Bright Darkness, More Things Than Are Dreamt Of* by Alain Silver and James Ursini, neither of which I will deal with in any

further detail, and also *Cinematic Hauntings*, edited by Gary J. Svehla and Susan Svehla. *Cinematic Hauntings* contains fifteen essays on various films by different authors, some academics but more of them with publications noted in magazines such as *The Monster Times* and *Cinemacabre*. Each essay is a mix of plot summary, production history and the rudiments of textual analysis, none in special depth, and most of the essays are lacking proper citations or bibliographies, marking this as a thoroughly amateur work.

A more theoretical approach is that of Barry Brummett in the article “Electric Literature as Equipment for Living: Haunted House Films.” Brummett uses a (Kenneth) Burkean approach, examining how haunted house films “help audiences to overcome feelings of anomie and disorientation” (247), arguing that the struggles presented in these films are merely fantastic variants on everyday ones. To this end, Brummett analyzes six films, dividing the bulk of his essay into sections heads “Disorientations in Time” and “Disorientations in Space,” each further divided into “Content” and “Medium,” demonstrating how these themes are raised at both levels. Brummett’s article is strong and original, though inherently limited by its brevity, presenting a convincing self-contained argument that does not especially overlap with my own (there is no coincidence between the films Brummett uses for his examples and my own).

Linda Badley’s *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic* devotes a chapter to recent ghost films, entitled “Spectral Effects: Postmodern Ghosts,” locating a version of her “Body Fantastic” within ghost films. She emphasizes the increasing “embodiment” of ghosts in the 1980’s and beyond through such manifestations as ectoplasm, and the increased importance on body horror and comedy – a far cry from the resistance to

embodiment demonstrated by films like *The Haunting*. I will make extensive use of Badley in my chapter on *Poltergeist* for her discussion of abjection in 80's horror films. I will also make extensive use of two of the major standard works on horror film, Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* and Carol Clover's *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, despite the fact that neither work deals with ghosts to a great degree (Creed's book is almost entirely devoid of references to ghost films). In particular, I will make use of Creed's work on abjection in horror films in my *Poltergeist* chapter and her formulation of the "Fifth Look" in my chapter on *The Entity*, as well as Clover's indispensable "The Eye of Horror" chapter, in which she argues for horror as the most self-reflexive of genre due to its compulsive focus on looking.

Katherine A. Fowkes' *Giving Up the Ghost: Spirits, Ghosts, and Angels in Mainstream Comedy Film* is an invaluable resource for the comic ghost films, a largely neglected sub-genre. Her primary interest lies in the masochistic viewing position a male viewer must take while regarding the (principally male) comic ghost's frustration at his inability to interact with his surroundings. Fowkes focuses primarily on films of the 70's and later, in which there was an explosion of films of this sort, though a late chapter provides welcome analyses of earlier comic ghost films like *Topper* (1937), *A Guy Named Joe* (1944) and *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947). Fowkes has less to say about horror ghosts, but many of her points carry over, and I will draw extensively on her view of the de-masculinized male ghost in my chapter on *The Legend of Hell House* and her construction of cinematic masochism in my chapter on *The Entity*.

Other books that I reviewed for this thesis will receive no further mention not because of a lack of academic merit but because their focus is too narrow to be of real use to me. One is Dale Bailey's *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*, which focuses on haunted house stories as a refutation and inversion of the American dream. It is my feeling that analyzing the haunted house formula in these terms is a valid approach that has too fully consumed scholarship on the haunted house, a trope that transcends American specificity. Likewise, Lee Kovacs' *The Haunted Screen: Ghosts in Literature and Film* offers analysis of a cluster of ghost films from the 30's and 40's based on literary and theatrical properties, offering coherent analyses (even if Kovacs never fully justifies his choice of canon), but the narrowness of his focus precludes overlap between his work and mine.

Straddling the line between academic and popular is Tom Ruffles' *Ghost Images: Cinema of the Afterlife*. It is sure to become a definitive work on screen ghosts, more because of its expansiveness than its academic acumen. Ruffles expends most of his length on formulating thematic categorizations for ghost films, some as broad as "Ghost Lovers" and some as narrow as "Meetings with the Ghost of Elvis" and "AIDS-Related Ghosts," and I will tap it for these details frequently. Welcome in its breadth but lacking in depth, Ruffles' book does offer close readings of six ghost films, but its real scholarly value lies in its early chapters, which chart the depictions of ghosts in proto-cinematic mediums and the silent cinema. Despite its 2004 release date, *Ghost Images* contains no references to recent ghost films like *The Ring* or *The Others*, and has little discussion of ghost films in languages other than English, a weakness curiously spotlighted by the

filmography that lists only sixteen foreign-language ghost films (separately to some seven pages worth of English-language ones!), mostly works as tangential to the genre as *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), *Rashomon* (1950) and *Solaris* (1987).

My criticism that the available scholarship on ghost films is of dubious critical merit is perhaps unfair, for much of it does not have any pretense of academic value, contenting itself with surveys and appreciations instead of critical analyses. I shall endeavour within this thesis to systematically raise a question that has remained submerged in many other approaches, that of the ghostliness of film. Chip Denman's article "Sitting in the Dark: Tinseltown's fascination with Spiritualism" begins by linking the experience of going to the movies to a Spiritualist séance, but only uses this angle as a pretext to discuss depictions of Spiritualism in cinema. Ruffles devotes a page to the question of "Film as Communion with Dead," detailing the similarities between the film-going experience and a séance, but does not pursue this angle in any textual way.²¹ It seems to me to be a major weak spot in analysis of the ghost film that no critic has systematically pursued this self-reflexive angle, and so I humbly deign to be the first.

²¹ Similarly, in Ruffles' analysis of *A Matter of Life and Death*, he mentions the metacinematic character of the film, with such examples the Conductor's winking reference to Technicolor, interesting point-of-view shots and the camera obscura that Dr. Reeves (Roger Livesay) operates, but fails to tie this interestingly to an overall argument.

Chapter One:

“She had to destroy my beliefs before they could destroy hers”:

The Failures of Polarity in *The Legend of Hell House*

In my project of identifying a self-reflexive dimension to the haunted house film, John Hough’s *The Legend of Hell House* must stand apart as a central text and the entry-point into my research. It is through this film that I initially came to contemplate the issues that sent me down this road – especially the role of technology in the ghost film and its relationship to gender – and I have encountered no other film that raises them so plainly. Spiritualism, in a rare film to name it as such and make an effort to be faithful to its practices and beliefs, figures centrally in the plot, pitted against scientism²² in a vociferous conflict (“You’re wrong” is the film’s favourite phrase), but with Spiritualism and scientism constructed as ultimately similar, and in the end, similarly incomplete, if not outright futile. The film arises directly from these issues of the Nineteenth Century, not only internally depicting the conflict but using the resources of cinema to embody it.

The Legend of Hell House, adapted by Richard Matheson from his own 1971 novel, concerns an investigation into the existence of ghosts and the possibility of survival after death on the behest of a media baron named Deutsch (Roland Culver), conducted in the “Mount Everest of haunted houses,” the Belasco House, pointedly

²² I chose this word to underscore the fact that Barrett’s science eclipses the rational practices of science to take on religious dimensions.

nicknamed Hell House. It was the abode of the degenerate millionaire Emeric Belasco,²³ who built the house in 1919 to serve as a palace of sin and debauchery for himself and his guests. In 1929, all were found dead except for Belasco, whose body was never recovered. The novel explains Belasco's excesses in great detail, which the film condenses to tantalizing succinctness: "Drug addiction, alcoholism, sadism, bestiality, murder, vampirism, necrophilia, cannibalism, not to mention a gamut of sexual goodies" – a carnivalesque atmosphere akin to de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* or Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death." The horrors did not end with Belasco's death. Since then, the house has violently resisted all attempts at investigation, leaving most researchers dead or insane. The present team investigating on Deutsch's behalf consists of physicist/parapsychologist (decidedly of the skeptical wing of parapsychology) Dr. Lionel Barrett (Clive Revill) and a pair of mediums, the ardent Spiritualist and mental medium Florence Tanner (Pamela Franklin) and the physical medium B.F. Fischer (Roddy McDowall), the only survivor of the last investigation into Hell House and consequently the most cautious and practical of the three. The film ratchets up the suspense not only as we witness haunting phenomenon but also as tension mounts between Barrett and Tanner, the embodiments of completely oppositional viewpoints, constantly at odds as they both refuse to budge from their beliefs. The house ultimately

²³ Why "Belasco"? I suspect that the name is a homage to New York's Belasco Theatre, a building with a long history of haunting (consult <http://www.hauntingthebelasco.com>, operated by actor Chuck Wagner). The ghost is thought to be that of its founder David Belasco, grand showman and playwright of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This further links Emeric Belasco to the image of the showman/auteur that I shall discuss later in this chapter. Richard Matheson seems fond for the name "Belasco" – it is one of the aliases of the vampire in his screenplay for *The Night Stalker* (1972).

kills them both, leaving it to Fischer and Barrett's wife Ann (Gayle Hunnicutt) to solve the mystery of Emeric Belasco and finally put his soul to rest.

The Legend of Hell House has a certain relationship to *The Haunting*. Even though Matheson denies designing his novel as an answer to Shirley Jackson's source novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (Crick 186-7), the parallels are striking. Both involve a four-person investigation of a famous haunted house, featuring a scientist and two psychics. In each case the haunting force is most pronounced in a certain spot, the nursery in *The Haunting*, the "chapel in hell" in *The Legend of Hell House*. But the differences are instructive. Matheson says that, contrary to *The Haunting*, he wanted to do "a haunted house story where you damn well know it's haunted, and there's no question in your mind" (Bradley 80). As Tom Ruffles writes, "whereas the events at Hill House are mostly suggested, and no definitive explanation offered, at Hell House the Aleister Crowley-like Belasco is responsible for everything that happens, and the death count is much higher"²⁴ (108). Furthermore, Hill House is simultaneously attractive and repulsive to its occupants (especially to Eleanor, who wavers between loving and hating it), where the Belasco House is never seen as appealing or desirable – Tanner calls it "hideous" before she even enters it, and never changes that opinion – with a thoroughly unattractive decorum and an atmosphere of dread palpable to all its occupants. Where *The Haunting* has a touch of the cozy, with drinks and warm conversation before the group dynamic disintegrates, Barrett and Tanner are at each other's throats from minute one in *The Legend of Hell House*.

²⁴ In fact, one character dies on camera in *The Haunting* (excluding the introduction), two in *The Legend of Hell House* – not exactly "much higher."

Another key difference between the two films arises in the houses' histories. As the opening sequence of *The Haunting* explains, Hill House's history is largely a familial one, dominated by the death of Hugh Crain's first wife, the inability of the "companion" to fulfill her role as Mary Crain's surrogate daughter, and so on. Unusual among cinematic haunting houses, the Belasco House was never a familial location.²⁵ *The Legend of Hell House* nods in the direction of this convention through Tanner's conviction that the ghost visiting her is that of Belasco's son Daniel, but this is a deception, Belasco acknowledging and utilizing this convention to his own end in exploiting Tanner. The absence of the familial makes the Belasco House among cinema's most masculinized haunted houses, at least on the surface. It is wholly dominated by Belasco's personality and bears an unbridled hatred for its female occupants, meting out most of his anger on them. But ultimately, the entire house is revealed to be haunted by the failure of Belasco's masculinity.

Hell House and *The Legend of Hell House* also show the influence of a less known work, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1859 short story "The Haunted and the Haunters, or the House and the Brain." John C. Tibbetts goes so far as to describe *Hell House* as "virtually an updating" of Bulwer-Lytton's story (100). The story's narrator learns from a friend about a dangerously haunted house in London that has, in its recent history, never seen any tenant last more than three days, and decides to spend a night there himself. He is a rational yet open-minded sort of Victorian: "Now, my theory is that the Supernatural is the Impossible . . . therefore, if a ghost rise before me, I have not the right to say, 'So,

²⁵ A point made in the novel with the gruesome detail of "Bastard Bog," the tarn where Belasco's female guests disposed of their unwanted progeny (43-4)

then, the supernatural is possible,' but rather 'So, then, the apparition of a ghost, is, contrary to received opinion, within the laws of nature; that is, not supernatural'" (315).

The story itself works similarly: the supernatural phenomena is definitely real, but is justified with references to electromagnetism, mesmerism, Spiritualism and other current discourses. In the end, the culprit turns out to be a warlock of sorts who uses a pseudo-scientific device to hold ghosts to the house:

Upon a small book, or rather table, was placed a saucer of crystal: this saucer was filled with a clear liquid – on that liquid floated a kind of compass, with a needle shifting rapidly round; but instead of the usual points of a compass were seven strange characters, not very unlike those used by astrologers to denote the planets (326-327).

With this device destroyed, the house becomes “clear,” inhabitable again. “The Haunted and the Haunters” is an example of the mixing of ghostly and scientific discourses in the Nineteenth Century; as Julia Briggs writes, “The magic magnet draws supernatural forces to itself, and this accounts for the great variety of spirits that appear. Once again, concepts connected with mesmerism, which might involve both real and psychic magnetic fields, are used to ‘explain’ the ghostly experiences” (58-9). Furthermore, it posits a magician as a “dark auteur” of a haunted space, anticipating not only Belasco but the rhetoric of magic that surrounded the popular reception of film, as I discussed in my introduction.

The Legend of Hell House draws heavily upon Spiritualist thought, not only in providing a Spiritualist medium as a character but in exploring the inherent mysticism and uncanny character present in electricity and, more distantly, communications technology, all definitive issues for the Spiritualist movement. More generally, the film

itself follows an electrical model, positing the house as a giant “psychic battery” and structuring itself around the binaries of science and Spiritualism and the accompanying masculine and feminine, both of them collapsing as the narrative proceeds in favour of a middle-road approach.

A House in the Fog: The Belasco House as Cinema

The Belasco House, typical of haunted houses, is an uncanny location where the borders of life and death seem blurred. It is a place apart in every sense: geographically remote, forever shrouded in fog and uncertainty, without a phone or radio, powered by electricity off its own generator. Belasco had all of the outside windows boarded up, so natural light never touches the inside. Formal elements underline the status of the house as apart from the rest of reality. *The Legend of Hell House* contains very little music, and what there is plays exclusively outside of the Belasco House in the small amount of material that takes place there – this becomes especially apparent when the characters leave late in the film as the bizarre machine called “the Reversor” works. Music plays as they stand outside, and stops as soon as they re-enter. Director Hough chooses to reinforce the ghostly potential of cinema by drawing upon film’s resources, employing a preponderance of uncomfortably high and low angles and canted angles, extensive use of the zoom lens, unstable tracking shots, shots off reflective surfaces, and more generally using unusual camera framings and positions that contribute to an uneasy and otherworldly feel, exploiting film’s uncanny potential.

The Legend of Hell House implicates communications technology in its construction of the ghostly events. In this case, that includes especially the telegraph’s

more auditory descendant, radio. The film leans heavily on the auditory in its depiction of ghostly phenomena, with distorted voices that sound distinctly radio-like and Belasco's presence in his lead-shielded tomb resembles a disc jockey in his sound proof booth. In a curious sequence after the characters arrive in the Belasco House, Tanner hears a strange voice and wanders away from the others, only to discover a phonograph with Belasco's voice on it. She hears the sound of the record, *then* she turns it on, influenced to the act Belasco's projected, broadcast will. This prepares us for the later transformation of Tanner into an instrument of communications technology akin to the telegraph or radio, a point that Hough underlines in this sequence by shooting Tanner's reflection off the spinning record.

But Belasco's power over the house resembles that of a film director as clearly as a radio DJ. The early episode where Belasco wills Tanner to the phonograph functions as metonymy for what Belasco does more broadly: throughout the bulk of the film, Belasco is in complete control of everyone. Belasco coaches all of their reactions, one way or another. He keeps Tanner and Barrett at each other's throats by posing as Daniel. He creates tension between both of them and Fischer by casting doubts on Fischer's control over his power. He influences Ann into sordid sleepwalking episodes. He is like a screenwriter, in that he prepared everything well in advance of its actually playing out – as Fischer says, “He saw it coming years before it came” – but also personally interferes, manipulating events as they happen. In the rare moments of the film where supernatural events are visually embodied, they have a highly proto-cinematic character rather akin to the magic lantern, strictly two-dimensional and manipulating the interplay of light and

shadow, as when Ann watches the shadows of the statue cast onto her bedroom wall writhe erotically, and also seen in the warped shadow that appears on the door of Tanner's shower. Both of these vanish suddenly, leaving no physical trace of their ever having existed, but have a lingering emotional effect on their viewers nevertheless.

Since Belasco's spirit occupies his entire house, in a real sense he has definitionally merged with the house itself – it has become a body to him. Belasco House is both alive and dead, like film, furthering its status as a location analogous to cinema. William Rothman writes that "Film is evil" (78), arguing that the perspective of the camera is often allied with villainy, and that is certainly the case here. Early on, Fischer muses that Belasco's spirit may have just walked right by them. Belasco may be anywhere, so he becomes everywhere. Frequently the film presents shots of ambiguous perspective, either objective or from Belasco's ghostly and all-pervasive subjective position – but in this film, the two run the risk of *becoming the same thing*, so that the totality of the camera's gaze comes to implicate Belasco's invisible surveillance. If Belasco has, in some tricky to define way, become his house, to an extent we may regard him as being the film itself too. Belasco marks a continuation of the association of the auteur of a film with an (evil) magician. The titular legend of Hell House is Belasco's legend; *The Legend of Hell House* is Belasco's film. Belasco is the reason for everything that happens in the film. He is the reason the house is haunted, and the ghastly auteur of everything that happens inside it. Overall we have the impression of Belasco as a ghost whose manipulation of both sound and light heavily resembles the powers by a film director, and the Belasco House as a location analogous to film as conceived by Gorky,

another such Kingdom of Shadows, a suitable place for the struggle between the ghostly and the technological to play out.

The First Struggle: Polarities of the Belasco House

This tension is manifest in the film from its first frames. It opens with a quote from Tom Corbett, “Clairvoyant and Psychic Consultant to European Royalty,” certifying that: “Although the story of this film is fictitious, the events depicted involving psychic phenomena are not only very much within the bounds of possibility, but could well be true.” This is a curiously redundant statement, and one of dubious merits. What, even within the film’s diegesis, constitutes “psychic phenomena”? The ghostly manifestations, Tanner’s sittings, what? Is Corbett actually contending that everything depicted in the film could happen? Furthermore, as the film undermines the credibility of its own psychics, whose talents are genuine but easily manipulated by external forces, why should we trust Mr. Corbett, even given his lofty titles? Though the Corbett quote may at first seem like an attempt to add verisimilitude to the film by citing an authority, it is easily problematized and may therefore be understood as serving to set up a conflict between different versions of the “facts,” identifying the film as simultaneously fictitious and containing truth.

The Legend of Hell House always concerns an attempt to find “the facts,” be they the facts concerning life after death on Mr. Deutsch’s behalf or those concerning Belasco and his fatal secret. The film provides onscreen titles that give the date and time at the beginning of almost every scene, so, superficially, the film frames itself as an investigation. But in practice, these titles, as irrelevant as the similar title that opens

Psycho (1960), draw attention to the inadequacy of Barrett's approach: this information tells us nothing useful.²⁶ The onscreen titles run up against the film's attempts at de-spatializing and temporalizing itself. They establish that the action takes place from December 21 to December 24, but no one, not even the highly religious Tanner, ever comments on its proximity to Christmas. Indeed, the film could just as well have taken place at any other time of the year – the grass outside is green. Odder still, several times we see onscreen titles listing the time as past 10 P.M., with exteriors of the house showing it still fully lit. The very title *The Legend of Hell House*, rather than a more investigative name like *The Case of Hell House*, implies a mythical rather than rational mode for the film, establishing that more than the scientific line will be necessary to explain the mysteries of this film.

What unfolds in *The Legend of Hell House* cannot be characterized simplistically as a conflict between science (Barrett) and Spiritualism (Tanner), though the two surely butt heads constantly. Spiritualism was never truly in opposition to science but staked its entire appeal, as Ann Braude writes in *Radical Spirits*, on its ability to “provide empirical proof of the existence of the soul,” and “‘scientific’ evidence of religious truth,” asking people to “become ‘investigators,’ to observe ‘demonstrations’ of the truth of Spiritualism produced under ‘test conditions’ in the séance room” (6). The film is keen on revealing the essential similarities between Tanner and Barrett. When Tanner declares that “there is no phenomenon recorded in the Bible that does not occur today,” she is

²⁶ Similarly, in *The Haunting*, when the characters find “Help Eleanor come home” scrawled on the wall, Dr. Markway sniffs the substance with which it is written to prove it is chalk, a completely useless exercise in (male) scientific investigation that does nothing to explain the mystery.

implicitly using observable science to justify her religious conviction, and Barrett's brand of science owes more than a little to Spiritualist theories. These parallel crusaders are given parallel deaths from crushing, the devout Spiritualist by a giant crucifix, the devout scientist by his machine. Jeffrey Sconce cites a variety of scientific approaches to the spirit from the Nineteenth Century, including one positing "a simultaneous existence of the material and spiritual worlds within the human body, arguing that the soul itself was an electromagnetic phenomenon trapped by material flesh" (42), thus imagining a secondary spirit body, chained to the body in life but capable of surviving after death. Curiously, Barrett accepts the lower level of this theory, explaining how the human body produces electromagnetic radiation that suffuses its atmosphere and leaves it tinged with an energy that gives a location its character (hence, in a house where unspeakable evils were committed, negativity reigns), but refuses to extend this already lurid theory to entertain the possibility of "surviving personalities." David A. Oakes writes that the Barrett of the novel "is a complex and contradictory character. The scientist is clearly open to unusual ideas because he believes in and investigates incidents that are dismissed as fantasy by the majority of the scientific community . . . however, his openness actually turns out to be limited because he cannot entertain ideas other than his own about the phenomena in Hell House" (86). Before they arrive at the house, Ann says that she wants to be there "when he proves his new theory," indicating that he comes to the Belasco House with preconceived notions, that he had his mind made up about the phenomenon before he actually has occasion to observe it. When Barrett dies chanting "I do not accept this!" as his belief system is shattered along with his machine, the film reveals that his

scientism was always a matter more of faith than the proper evidence-based open-mindedness of the scientific method.

In laying so much at the lap of electromagnetic radiation, EMR, the film both recreates and exploits the mystical character of electricity – we can buy that electricity can do anything, even create (or at least explain) ghosts. In fact, EMR is so general a term that it encompasses the visual light spectrum, ultra-violet and infrared, and even radio signals. But within the film’s verisimilitude, the vague electrical label is sufficiently mystical to justify blurring the supernatural and the technological. Electricity figures prominently in *The Legend of Hell House*. The poltergeist activity in the film is often accompanied by sparks thrown from lighting fixtures, and early on Mr. Deutsch’s assistant Hanley (Peter Bowles) promises that electricity is restored in the Belasco House, but on arrival they find that this is not the case, and have to operate Belasco House’s own generator to have power: this apparent throwaway detail is actually meaningful in several ways. It introduces the theme of electricity in the film’s first minutes, while simultaneously marking the Belasco House as being “off the grid,” disconnected from the world at large. It is powered from within, this electrical presence that keeps it alive paralleling Belasco’s continued electromagnetic presence as the house’s haunting force. Belasco’s voice on the phonograph the characters find left for them pointedly says that he hopes the guests will find “illumination.”

Barrett’s “Reversor” is an ungainly piece of machinery, such a contrast to its Baroque surroundings, and provides a curious counterpoint to the ghostly machines of the Spiritualists’ fantasies: this is technology designed to both dispel and disprove the

supernatural. Techno-exorcist supreme, its effectiveness depends on polarity, creating “a massive countercharge of electromagnetic radiation which will oppose the polarity of the atmosphere, reverse and dissipate it.” In a film where binarized thinking is under fire, it follows that the Reversor is neither a whole success nor a whole failure. Emeric Belasco’s soul is protected from the Reversor within his lead-shielded tomb, a factor Barrett could not anticipate. But the Reversor would have been successful in fully exorcizing the house were it not for Belasco’s protection. This is demonstrated clearly by the fact that Fischer turns it on *again* before finally leaving the house.

Though it may reject Barrett’s viewpoints, the film does not favour Tanner’s Spiritualist side of the equation either. In fact, she and Barrett are paralleled as unhealthily devoted to their various viewpoints, both to be finally eliminated by the narrative for their excess zeal. Tanner believes she has encountered the spirit of Emeric Belasco’s son Daniel and sets about trying to free him from the house. But it is all a ruse; there is no Daniel, just Belasco manipulating Tanner by impersonating him and so thoroughly appealing to her sensibilities that she is completely and disastrously misled. Belasco sends her on the Christian project of rescuing the pointedly named Daniel from this latter-day lion’s den. Belasco even tricks her into willingly having sex with his ghost. In the end, she gets a moment paralleling Barrett’s as she realizes that she has been tricked by Belasco before dying, and her theory of “controlled multiple hauntings” proves as incorrect as Barrett’s contention that there is nothing but “mindless, directionless energy” in the Belasco House.

If the binaries represented by Barrett and Tanner prove unacceptably rigid, the film prefers instead the middle road of wounded pragmatism, embodied in B.F. Fischer. The B.F. stands for Benjamin Franklin (Matheson 11), a sidelong reference to the quintessential master of electricity, himself a figure frequently claimed to have been contacted by mediums in the Nineteenth Century (Sconce 39). Fischer commits to neither scientism nor Spiritualism, remaining skeptical about both sides of the debate. He calls the Reversor “a pile of junk” and confronts Tanner over the inadequacy of her claims about Daniel: “What if you’re wrong? What if you’re being fooled?” “I just know I’m right!” is her feeble retort to one of his attacks. Having already witnessed a team of professionals, scientists and Spiritualists both, torn apart and destroyed by the Belasco House, Fischer recognizes the inadequacy of both lines of approach. Where Barrett and Tanner both feel themselves adequate to the challenges of the house, Fischer knows better: “There’s nothing in this house that we *can* handle.” He sees more clearly than the others that the laws of the outside do not apply within this setting: “I don’t trust anyone or anything, and anyone who does in this house is a fool.”

More than the others, Fischer comes to the Belasco House armed with *knowledge*. Only he knows intricate details about Belasco and the house’s history, which he finally draws upon in putting together the pieces and uncovering Belasco’s secret. With Barrett and Tanner both dead, it falls to Fischer to solve the riddle of Hell House and uncover Belasco’s Achilles Heel. Importantly, Fischer’s realization comes not from dogmatic faith in any belief system but through logical deduction – putting together the clues that the others overlooked, far too preoccupied with their own rigid approaches. Fischer

stresses instead that a *joint* approach was necessary, telling Ann Barrett that “Your husband really did have part of the answer, and Florence had part of it too, and with her help, I finally found the last part.” With Belasco’s power broken, Fischer again stresses cooperation, and in particular the idea that Barrett and Tanner were always working together even though they did not realize it: “Your husband and Florence helped us to rid this house of Belasco. Let us hope that their spirits guide him to everlasting peace.” This is the last spoken line of dialogue in the film, but for a ghostly whisper of the name “Belasco,” apparently in Tanner’s voice while we see a close-up of Belasco’s dead face, implying a strictly spiritual narrative to unfold outside of the film’s frame. Fischer provides a hopeful view that these two enemies will finally realize that their opposition is not only futile but also unfounded (their belief systems actually prove similar on observation), uniting as partners once in purely spiritual form. So is it with cinema: the struggle between its technological and ghostly elements belies the fact that they are, in the end, partners. The postmortem partnership of Tanner and Barrett locates them firmly in the spectral half of the equation, now excluding the material/technological, and therefore so the film cannot and does not depict this, nor does it confirm this to be anything other than a hope of Fischer’s.

Whither the Spectator?: Ann Barrett as Audience Surrogate

John Lyttle asks “What is the imagination of life projected onto the screen except a spectre made from light and the audience’s imagination?” (17). Indeed, the audience is a vital element of the cinematic apparatus, one whose role is at once spiritual (the “imagination” Lyttle notes, which facilitates the vital process of cinematic identification)

and material, with many of the pleasures of cinema imbedded in the flesh. If cinema is a haunted house, then the question emerges: who is the audience? Are we the human inhabitants subjected to the whims of the ghostly screen, or are we the ghosts, who look on invisibly and can never interact with the screen? Since ghostliness is present within the cinematic apparatus, it seems reasonable to suggest that both are possible, and they might even coexist.²⁷ The distinction may have more to do with genre than anything else. Horror ghosts films necessarily positing powerful and sadistic ghosts where comic ghost films, as Katherine Fowkes discusses, place the ghost in a disempowered position of the inability of interaction, allied with the audience's masochistic position. These are issues I will discuss at more length in the following chapter.

This ghost/audience nexus has been noted by certain critics. Barry Brummett writes that "At a very simple level, the movie-goers haunt the theatre like ghosts haunt their respective houses. Audiences as well as ghosts gather in the dark . . . audiences experience the same paradoxes of free and restricted movement encountered by characters and ghosts" (258). He also notes that Baudry's statement that "If the eye which moves is no longer fettered by a body, by the laws of matter and time, if there be no assignable limits to its displacement" (Baudry 292) appears to describe a ghost but in fact describes the viewer of a film (252-3). It may further be argued that ghostliness is implicit in the process of cinematic identification. Metz writes that, "In order to understand the fiction film, I must both 'take myself' for the character (= an imaginary

²⁷ *Stir of Echoes* recognizes this relationship of audienceship and ghostliness perhaps better than any other film, for it has the boy medium Jake (Zachary David Cope) deliver his dialogue to the ghost directly to the audience. The ghost is linked with spectatorship, with a pair of glasses as her most potent symbol.

procedure) so that he benefits, by analogical projection, from all the schemata of intelligibility I have within me, and not take myself for him (= the return of the real) so that the fiction can be established as such (= as symbolic)" (57). This paradox as laid out by Metz bears a striking resemblance to mediumship, or even possession, the taking on of another prosthetic identity that temporarily nullifies or at least diminishes the subject's primary identity.

In *The Legend of Hell House*, however, the clearest audience surrogate is neither of the mediums but rather Ann Barrett, the only important character not part of the triad of investigators. She knows nothing of ghosts or haunted houses, no more than the audience, and she has no place in the scientism-Spiritualism-pragmatism dynamic that structures the film. When she asks her husband if she can do anything to help with the machine, he tells her: "I'm afraid it's much too complicated." Ann is largely present as a *witness* to events in the narrative. During the most prolonged proto-cinematic episode in the film, she watches the embracing shadows, Ann watches while lying supine, an inactive viewer astonished by what she sees and therefore the mirror of the film's audience. These erotically entangled shadows irresistibly suggest a peepshow, another of cinema's early applications (one prophesized by Gorky), and Ann's disbelieving reaction to the movement she sees reflects the astonishment felt by early viewers of film. This further locates Ann as not only a viewer but *every* viewer, a figure of the quintessential film spectator, viewing the interplay of light and shadow while in an otherwise inactive state, not physically touched but subject to emotional affect, here arousal being the key one.

The consequence of Ann's witnessing the ghostly is that she begins to act oddly under the house's influence, sleepwalking and acting in a highly sexualized manner. At once this is a possession, albeit less literally than the instances in which Tanner is possessed by Belasco, with Ann becoming one of the sex objects from Belasco's court of old, and a reflection of cinema's affective power on its audience, within this film represented by two of the emotions that draw the most physical reactions from the audience, fear and eroticism. Of course, these are the cornerstones of horror and pornography, two of Linda Williams' "Body Genres," those genres designed to produce in the audience a physical effect that reflects that of a character in the film, and the third, melodrama, is partially accounted for by Ann's teary display before her husband after her sleepwalking episodes, and her reaction to his horrific death.

The narrative's positioning of Ann as the audience surrogate stems largely from her passivity, in turn linked to her femininity (mostly implicitly, but occasionally explicitly, as when her husband tells her she cannot help him with the Reversor). During the final confrontation between Fischer and Belasco, Fischer advises her, "Whatever you do, do not interfere"; Ann's presence, like that of the audience, is defined by the inability to act. This suggests that the cinematic audience may be seen as gendered female by its inaction. If this seems a problematic assertion, I have already argued for that the complexity of gendering the film-going experience in my introduction, but the frequency with which the audience surrogacy is granted to a female character within the haunted house oeuvre certainly deserves comment. I will explore this issue at greater length in my

next chapter, as I examine *The Entity* as a meta-text about film's capacity for influencing its audience.

A Second Struggle: Function and the Failure of Essence

In the final analysis, cinema itself is embodied most clearly in the characters that span boundaries instead of residing in them: Fischer and Belasco. With Barrett and Tanner dead, their over-rigid viewpoints disposed of, it is the two of them that must struggle. Their final confrontation takes place in Belasco's demonic chapel which doubles as the gateway to his lead-shielded tomb, at the heart of Hell House where Belasco is simultaneously strongest and most at risk; it also takes place in view of the audience's stand-in, Ann Barrett. As I've already established that both Fischer and Belasco represent film in its multiple potential, how may we conceptualize the cleavage between them? I submit that the struggle now has a different register – no longer is it an allegorization of the tension between the technological and ghostly aspects of film, but of different aspects of film – Belasco representing film's *essence* as present/absent, Fischer representing film's multiple functions, as a technological device for recording and a spiritual device for the expression of the ghostly.

For the majority of *The Legend of Hell House*, Belasco seems solely spiritual by the fact that we see him strictly as a ghost. The film (or Belasco) even disavows the very *existence* of his body, since Fischer says Belasco's corpse was never found among the dead of the house. In many films based on the lingering personalities of dead people, the film provides the audience with an artistic image of the deceased party: a painting in *Rebecca* (1940), *Laura* (1944) or *The Uninvited*, or a statue in *The Haunting*. But *The*

Legend of Hell House resists such symbolization; the only account of Belasco's appearance comes from Fischer, who (second-hand) describes him as very tall, known as "the Roaring Giant," and quoting his first wife that "his was a frightening visage, the face of a demon that had taken on some human aspect," further locating Belasco as a wholly spiritual being—we have no description of his hair colour, eye colour or anything similar.

At times we *do* hear Belasco's voice, on his phonograph and through Tanner's mouth, in both cases displaced and disembodied. The film never gives us any image of Belasco until Fischer and Ann find his corpse, resulting in a shift in our conceptualization of Belasco from the ghostly to the material. Pascal Bonitzer uses *Kiss Me Deadly* (1957) as a comparable example, where neither Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) nor the audience sees the villain Dr. Soberin (Albert Dekker) until the last scene, giving "his sententious voice, inflated by mythological comparisons, a much greater disquieting power, the scope of an oracle" (323). But once he is physically embodied in the film's finale, he loses much of his power, the voice now subject to the body (as both answer to a gunshot). Here again, the power that Belasco's voice and spirit possess dissipates upon the revelation of his all too material body.²⁸

The embodiment of presence/absence in Belasco flows from his simultaneous role as dead and, if not alive, nevertheless very *present*, never more so than when his body makes its belated appearance. Belasco has preserved his body and denied it the ravages of rot, but this apparent disavowal of his material nature draws attention to it all the more —

²⁸ The godlike disembodied voice of an enemy is a common motif in horror and suspense films. In *Saw* (2004), killer seems to exist only as a voice, omniscient and godlike voice, but the film's last scene reveals that his body was visible to us for the entire length of the film, hidden in plain sight. The technological dimension of cinema, too, is hidden in plain sight, obvious if we were only attuned to look for it.

it makes his body all the more conspicuous, fitting with theories of cinema and death.

Writes Maurice Blanchot:

The image does not, at first glance, resemble the corpse, but the cadaver's strangeness is perhaps also that of the image. What we call mortal remains escapes common categories. Something is there before us which is not really the living person, nor is it any reality at all . . . The cadaver is its own image. It no longer entertains any relation with this world, where it still appears, except that of an image, an obscure possibility, a shadow ever present behind the living form which now, far from separating itself from this form, transforms it entirely into shadow" (256, 258 qtd. in Loiseau 162).

Blanchot's approach bears an obvious comparison to Metz as Metz argues that cinema "combines a certain presence and a certain absence" (44), and a still more obvious comparison to Belasco, the corpse with a manner of "life force" still ascribed to it, a true *cadaver vivant*.

I previously quoted William Rothman that "Film is evil" (78). Now we may begin to understand the full dimensions of the metaphor of Belasco-as-film. Belasco's brand of evil was a decidedly non-functional variety; he and his guests were ruled by a moment's whims. Belasco himself was a sadist writ large, implicitly linked with the Marquis de Sade. Various thinkers have written about film as sadistic: Metz, for one, speaks of the filmic experience as a voyeuristic one, and therefore inevitably one with a sadistic dimension (61-3). In a fascinating article called "Flickers: On Cinema's Power for Evil," Tom Gunning asks: "Could cinema in its essence be evil?" (Gunning 2004, 21), pointing out that the 1915 U.S. Supreme Court withheld from cinema the privilege of free speech because "the new medium of film was 'capable of evil, having power for it, the greater because of the attractiveness and manner of exhibition'" (22). Gunning locates film's

“evil” nature in its essential status as a medium of deception and illusion, so distrusted in western metaphysics. Descartes believed in a god who did not deceive, and spoke of “a conjuror of cosmic proportions, the evil demon (*mali geni*) who can create a world of endless deception” (32), not so unlike the evil Merlin of Gorky, and the cruel mastermind Belasco of *The Legend of Hell House*.

If we accept that film is *essentially* (but perhaps not functionally) sadistic and evil, then Belasco’s simultaneous location as a figure of film’s essence and an individual of tremendous evil, makes perfect sense. The two are allied with each other. Writes Georges Bataille:

We cannot consider that actions performed for material benefit express Evil. This benefit is, no doubt, selfish, but it loses its importance if we expect something from it other than evil itself – if, for example, we expect some advantage from it. The sadist, on the other hand, obtains pleasure from contemplating destruction, the most complete destruction being the death of another human being. Sadism is Evil. If a man kills for a material advantage his crime only really becomes a purely evil deed if he actually enjoys committing it, independently of advantage to be obtained from it (Bataille 1973, 5).

Belasco surely suits the variety of non-instrumental “pure evil” Bataille envisions, and this evil is located within the filmic apparatus. Belasco’s ghostly evil operates through his presence/absence. It is through absence, for instance, that he is able to manipulate Tanner, since it is his invisibility and ineffability that allows him to pose as his son. But the house is full of his presence nonetheless, stocked full of the detritus of his evil reign there, both in terms of material objects and the ineffable lingering (electromagnetic, in Barrett’s assessment) negativity that fills the house. Likewise the film itself is simultaneously suffused with the presence and absence of Belasco; his *presence* is

overwhelmingly felt since he is the grim architect of most everything that happens within it, but he is absent at the same time, since he died long before it and is never seen in any form except as a corpse, Blanchot's exemplar of presence/absence.

However, Belasco's *essential* association with film (both film and general and *this film*, his film) is not totalizing – they do not refute Fischer's *functional* representation of film. The function of film is multiform – film as narrative, film as vehicle for meaning, or film as a commercial endeavour, just to name a few possibilities. Among Fischer's functions is a narrative one; he is needed to bring the story to a close. He is also the character in the film most associated with money, which presumably is the only reason he is present in the Belasco House at all, considering that he does not have a belief system to prove like the others – it is he who urges Belasco to leave the house and “bank the money.”

Fischer's pragmatism is allied with his functionalism, for it is through a process of deduction that he comes upon Belasco's secret, which, appropriately, is a secret of the body, a secret of material, a most potent refutation of Belasco's self-construction as a wholly spiritual being. Likewise, film's *essential* standing as absent/present depends on a powerful disavowal of its “body,” the clunky and physical mechanism inherent to film, which the cinematic experience is designed to hide. To the other roles (director, screenwriter, film itself) that Belasco plays, we might add the projector, a clunky physical form that is nevertheless the source of all the ghostly magic, but which must be hidden away in a small room, lest the cinematic experience be derailed by the revelation of its inadequacy. Likewise, Belasco's secret, the key that allows Fischer to defeat him, lies in

the revelation of his inadequate physical aspects. Fischer's final overthrow of Belasco may now be understood as the undermining of the (sadistic) essence of film through the revelation of the ever-present but also usually hidden physical apparatus of cinema. It has been jokingly said that every film made since 1939 contains a reference to *The Wizard of Oz*, and here is one in *The Legend of Hell House*, an echo of perhaps the most famous disillusioning scene in all of cinema. Emeric Belasco: the corpse behind the curtain.

Gender, or, The Secret of Belasco's Legs!

The exact nature of Belasco's secret and his Achilles Heel is a matter that has gone conspicuously unexplored even among those few scholars to discuss either *Hell House* or *The Legend of Hell House*. An egregious example is David A. Oakes, who, studiously avoiding being swept into a discussion of the novel's construction of gender, refers to Belasco's "weaknesses" and "the truth" without ever characterizing these things (87). I, however, shall discuss it: Belasco was very short, under five feet, and was so ashamed of his shortness that he had his legs chopped off and replaced with prostheses to transform himself into "the Roaring Giant," a dramatic self-castration as a response to castration anxiety. Belasco's decision is expressed in the Bible verse that Tanner quotes while channeling Belasco: "If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out" (Matthew 18:9), which is an important clue that helps Fischer unlock Belasco's secret. This forges a triangular link between legs, eyes and genitals, taking us back to Freud's essay on "The Uncanny," in which Freud analyzes eye imagery in E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sand-Man." Freud speaks of uncanny doubling as a protection against castration that ultimately only doubles the threat: "From having been an assurance of immortality, [doubling] becomes the

uncanny harbinger of death” (235). We may interpret Belasco’s action in just these terms. Belasco’s greatest fear is not castration but exposure, the revelation of his *existing* state of castration, which lead him to live in a remote location, board up his windows and stay in the darkness. His bizarre brand of self-alteration has turned him into his own uncanny double, an act of protection against the facts of his own shortness.

Fowkes’ *Giving Up the Ghost* paints the condition of being a ghost (especially a comic ghost) as a de-masculinizing one, since it removes narrative and personal agency from a character due to factors such as invisibility and the inability to communicate with the living or manipulate physical objects. In *Ghost*, for instance, much of the film places the audience in the masochistic position of watching action hero Patrick Swayze unable to beat up or even touch the bad guys, or have any physical effect on the world that surrounds him. The dynamics are somewhat different in the haunted house film, where the ghost invariably possesses some degree of agency and skill in manipulating material objects, Belasco probably more so than most, and yet the Belasco House is nevertheless constructed as a de-masculinizing space, not only for Belasco but for its other male inhabitants. Belasco’s obsessive desire to prove his manhood simply reinforces his own crisis of masculinity, with all of his hypermasculine posturing doing much to reveal his own inadequacy.

In Matheson’s novel, there is a scheme of parallelism between Belasco and Barrett, as the doctor himself is partially paralyzed in one leg because of childhood polio (43) and walks with a cane. Barrett is also almost entirely impotent and is completely happy about this, a very frustrating thing for his wife. Most of this is lost in the

adaptation, but in the fact that Ann is still depicted as highly frustrated sexually the film retains something of this de-masculinized element to Barrett's character. Certainly Barrett as portrayed by Clive Revill appears ashen and juiceless, his masculinity as monolithic and unyielding and essentially flawed as his scientism. There is a hint of chauvinism as he tells his wife that she cannot help him with the Reversor: "I'm afraid it's just too complicated," implicating masculinity within technology, so that Belasco's destruction of the machine and Barrett's belief system alongside it represent his ultimate unmaning by the Belasco House.

Importantly, the binaries of scientism and Spiritualism are here allied with the binary of masculinity and femininity, each embodied in Barrett and Tanner, taking us back to the Nineteenth Century struggle of masculine science vs. feminine Spiritualism. The psychic practitioners are also divided into mental (female) and physical (male) mediumship. These binaries are problematized since Tanner is associated with physical disturbances and Fischer is subject to something like possession himself at one point. Fischer is the physical medium, a telekinetic who can influence objects with his mind, which he seldom does directly throughout the film since he remains, in the film's parlance, "shut off," just like a machine. "We're not machines, we're human beings!" protests Tanner at one point, but in a real sense these mediums are machines, paralleled with the instruments Barrett uses to measure ghostly occurrences.²⁹

Tanner is the mental medium, capable of channeling and contacting spirits, and, like her namesake Florence Cook, she is able to conjure ectoplasm from her body, a skill

²⁹ A connection drawn explicitly in the novel, which even Tanner acknowledges: "We *are* like Geiger counters in a way. Expose us to psychic emanations, and we tick" (47).

that physicalizes her ostensibly mental skills. Tanner is the image of the ideal Spiritualist medium, a highly religious young woman. We initially find her outside a Spiritualist Church (in the novel she is the reverend of this church), reacting strongly to Belasco's desecrated chapel, offering a strange prayer before the first sitting, and describing mediumship as "God's manifestation in man," another sidelong version of the beyond communicating with our world through the medium's body. She quotes Ezekiel 3:27: "I will open thy mouth, and thou shalt say to them: Thus saith the Lord." She wants God to communicate through her, but instead becomes an unwilling mouthpiece for Emeric Belasco, the devil of Hell House. In a dark version of mediumship, her ability to contact spirits leaves her open to Belasco, who seems capable of taking her over on a whim.

Curiously, while the cinematic Tanner is quite young ("Hardly more than a child," in Barrett's estimation), the Tanner of the book is forty-three, described as a tall, "Junoesque" beauty (20), very different from the smallish, sylphlike brunette embodied by Pamela Franklin. Since Matheson's adaptation shows a high degree of faithfulness to its source, sometimes almost line for line, the alteration of Tanner's character must be considered significant. The reasoning must have been that a younger actress would better suit the role *on the screen*. Pamela Franklin, twenty-one or twenty-two when the film was made, brings with her the baggage of a role some thirteen years earlier, that of the ghost-troubled little girl Flora in *The Innocents*, but furthermore John Hough exploits her odd beauty to make her seem very ghostly herself. With her opalescent skin, green eyes and an expressive face capable of suggesting an unformed and uncertain girl and a willful adult at the same time, there's a difficult-to-characterize ethereal quality to Pamela

Franklin as Florence Tanner, underlining her ambiguous status as a being between this world and the next. Where the mental medium, Fischer, dresses modestly and is squarely of this world, Tanner frequently wears white to underscore her otherworldly qualities. Ironically, mental medium though she may be, Tanner's powers are more closely tied to her own body than Fischer's, since her body is hijacked by Belasco on several occasions, she manifests ectoplasm (which Barrett describes as "the organic externalization of thought" and "mind reduced to matter"), and it is her body that endures the brunt of Belasco's cruelty: scratching, biting, tricking her into consensual sex and raping her for her trouble, and finally shattering her body. Tanner's belief that sex with Daniel will give him the necessary power for his spirit to escape Hell House reflects the overarching motif of woman's body as a device for the transfer of power.

As I explained in my history of the Spiritualist movement, women were allowed unusually public venues in the Nineteenth Century so long as they spoke in voices "not their own," in the voices of spirits. Twice we see Tanner perform sittings for Barrett. She is made spectacle as the others sit in the dark to watch her, rather like the audience in a movie theatre, while the presence of Barrett's equipment – sound and camera equipment included – locates the technological alongside the ghostly. In the first she speaks with Belasco's voice, a feminine voice once again overwhelmed by a creepily distorted masculine one. This is especially significant in light of feminist theories of the voice on screen. As Mary Ann Doane writes:

Over and against the theorization of the look as phallic, as the support of voyeurism and fetishism (a drive and a defense which, in Freud, are linked explicitly with the male), the voice appears to lend itself readily as an alternative

to the image, a potentially viable means whereby the woman can “make herself heard.” Luce Irigaray, for example, claims that patriarchal culture has a heavier investment in seeing than in hearing. [Pascal] Bonitzer, in the context of defining a political erotics, speaks of “returning the voice to women” as a major component (1986, 346).

If the voice is a potentially feminine terrain, a point of feminist resistance even against the scopophilic qualities of cinema, then the overwhelming of a female voice by a male one must here represent a protectionistic masculine reaction. In one of the film’s most unnerving moments, Tanner is suddenly taken over by Belasco to cruelly berate Fischer, removing the mitigating situation of the sitting and suggesting that Belasco can freely possess Tanner whenever he likes. This has the curious double register of being de-feminizing (since it is a threat to Tanner’s feminine voice) and de-masculinizing (since Belasco’s obsessive need to reassert his masculinity stems from his own weakness). Fowkes notes that “The disembodied voice is . . . equated with male potency and omniscience . . . The authority of a (male) voice becomes largely incontestable once it is situated above and beyond the diegesis” (87). And so it appears to be the case with Belasco, until it becomes clear that his vocal prowess (and by extension, all of his disembodied hijinks) merely operates to help disavow his own inadequate body.

Belasco’s hatred of women (Fischer relates that in life he enjoyed destroying women for his own pleasure) extends to the other female occupant of Hell House, Ann, who sleepwalks and becomes highly sexualized under his influence. As Ann is not a medium, the implication here is somewhat different – more of a possession from within than a possession from without, but still ultimately under Belasco’s influence. Her somnambulism represents a different version of the uncanny, one that seems to have held

a special fascination for silent filmmakers – think of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and the vivid sleepwalking episode in *Nosferatu* (1922). Tanner also becomes more sexualized by the house, not only offering herself to “Daniel” but briefly attempting to seduce Fischer as well. She and Ann are becoming like the women of Belasco’s orgies, a comparison made outright as Ann discovers erotic books and watches the shadows erotically embrace on her wall, fascinated by relics of the house’s Dionysian past. These displays of female sexuality, however, are ultimately completely under male control, under Belasco’s control, akin to the sense in which the female Spiritualist mediums and their voices were ultimately under male control.

In the middle ground between masculinity and femininity stands Fischer, the same stance he occupied within the binary of the Spiritual and the scientific. Our view of Fischer may be influenced by our palimpsestic knowledge of Roddy McDowall’s homosexuality, but regardless of Fischer’s actual sexuality, Fischer is a somewhat demasculinized character, though differently from Barrett. His status as asexual is underlined by his lack of response to Ann’s possessed seduction attempts: in the novel she pelts him with “sexless” and “fairy” (171). His status as a “mental wreck” (and presumably a sexless figure as well) is resultant from his earlier visit to the Belasco House at the age of fifteen and his apparent weaknesses are a result of that experience, pointedly occurring during a puberty, which was the height of his prowess as a medium. As Belasco-in-Tanner snarls: “You may have been hot stuff when you were fifteen, but now you’re shit!” However, Fischer gains in ostensible masculinity as he is able to shed his weakling status and successfully confront Belasco. A male medium is inherently

feminized in the frame of the Nineteenth Century Spiritualists, yet Fischer appears phallicized as he uses a knife to cut open Belasco's pants and reveal his false legs, completing the process of castrating Belasco. Where Barrett's masculinity and Tanner's femininity are both threatened by Belasco, Fischer represents a hopeful fusion of the two. This is allied to his status as meeting point between spirit and science.

The centrality of polarity to the plot of *The Legend of Hell House* relates to its insistence on an electrical model, the "battery" to which Barrett compares the house. This implicates the binary of the technological and the ghostly present in film, which is reinforced by the film's self-reflexive construction of the Belasco House as a place analogous to film. But as it is with film, the Belasco House is a location that not only invokes polarities but ultimately depends on the *failure* of polarity, casting down the binary of Barrett's scientism and Tanner's Spiritualism and undermining the related binary of gender in favour of a middle ground.

Closing the Gate

Fischer's final unmaning of Belasco severs his ghostly side and reduces him to a simple corpse. Fischer turns on the Reversor to repeat the process on the house at large (indicating that the house will soon be shorn of the spiritual), and then he and Ann walk outside – leaving the house, just as the audience leaves the theatre. They close the gate, and the credits role. All the struggles – scientism vs. Spiritualism, essence vs. function, and even masculine vs. feminine – are over. The house is simply material now, the ghosts gone, and with the spiritual vanishing all around, the film is, most appropriately, over.

Who survives the terrors of Hell House? Not Barrett and Tanner, the rigid crusaders who cannot bend from their radical positions, but Fischer and Ann. Why? Oakes writes that the print *Hell House* “destabilizes readers by suggesting that neither a strictly spiritual nor rigidly scientific approach will be sufficient for coping with the modern world. The events of the tale demonstrate that wholehearted dedication to one or the other may end in disaster” (85). What the film adds to this dynamic is a self-reflexive awareness of the tension that exists in the modern medium of film between the ghostly and the technological, binaries that are analogous to Tanner’s Spiritualism and Barrett’s scientism. Film is always *both*, and so neither Barrett nor Tanner’s approach can satisfactorily solve the mystery of the Belasco House, their rigidity and inability to grasp the whole picture costing them their lives.

If Tanner and Barrett embody these polar characteristics of film, Fischer exists in the collapsed centre. Committed to neither the extremes of science nor Spiritualism, Fischer recognizes the failings and potential of both and therefore can draw on both, and so he possesses the resources to uncover the truth and confront Belasco. And Ann? She is the other half of the experience of film-going, the audience, who has witnessed everything, suffered difficult emotions and witnessed shocking things only to come out shaken but alive. The two walk out the gate together, and so must the audience, leave the theatre, the film over and yet still “with them.” From here I will move on to a discussion of *The Entity*, which will give me a further occasion to interrogate the role of the audience in ghost films and its relationship to the central binaries inherent to film.

Chapter Two:

The Trembling Mirror: The Audience Under Attack in *The Entity*

The Entity is based on Frank De Felitta's 1978 book of the same title, itself purportedly non-fiction,³⁰ one of a crop of "true horror" novels that emerged in the mid and late 70's, including Jay Anson's *The Amityville Horror* and De Felitta's *Audrey Rose*. Carla Moran (Barbara Hershey) is a single mother of three with a difficult and complex past, now living in California. Without warning or explanation, she is subject to rape from a ghostly assailant, an immensely strong, unseen man. Dr. Phil Sneiderman (Ron Silver) believes firmly that it is all in her mind, but neither he nor his colleagues in the psychiatry department at an unnamed university seem able to stop the attacks. Carla turns instead to the parapsychology department under Dr. Cooley (Jacqueline Brookes). As in *The Legend of Hell House*, the forces of Spiritualism and science or scientism are heavily in tension, both believing that the other's approach is wrongheaded, culminating in shouting matches between Sneiderman and Cooley's assistants while their superiors play university politics. Cooley's department builds a replica of Carla's house in a gymnasium on campus, hoping to capture the Entity in liquid hydrogen. But this attempt goes disastrously wrong, and, once again, both poles of inquiry prove to be equally inadequate. Carla barely escapes with her life. The compromise, however, is different from in *The*

³⁰ See Marianne Stone's "The Entity Revisited" for a partial account of the true-life events, which suggests that both the book and film add many elements not in the original story. Parapsychologists Kerry Gaynor and Barry Taff, presumably the models for the characters of Kraft and Mehan, have "technical advisor" credits in the film.

Legend of Hell House. It is not an approach of investigation, but one of acceptance – not of learning a secret, but giving up the search for secrets. Abandoning both medical and supernatural inquiry, Carla resolves to simply bear her attacks.

The film contains striking similarities to *The Legend of Hell House* and just as striking differences. I will first give a brief treatment to the binary of the Spiritual and scientific in *The Entity* and how they fail, but it is the other piece of the cinematic puzzle, previously embodied in Ann Barrett, that concerns the film most: the audience. I will view the film as an allegorization of the role of audience and in particular the attempt at the construction of meaning or the self – Lacan’s “I” – implicit in the cinematic apparatus. *The Entity* frustrates that attempt at every turn.

The film parallels the two sets of doctors attempting to, in the words of the parapsychologist Joseph Mehan (Raymond Singer), “gather some hard data on the phenomenon” – to study Carla’s strange affliction and find a way to help her. Both find that there is no hard data available because the Entity resists classification in its very nature. Sneiderman initially orders a battery of tests in hopes of finding the cause of her strange delusions. He also takes a full history of Carla to pursue a psychoanalytic approach. Through him, we get details of her upbringing, of her hellfire preacher father and his pedophilic leanings, of her youthful marriage that led to her son Billy (David Labiosa), her subsequent relationship with the man who fathered her two daughters and vanished, leading up to her present relationship with Jerry Anderson (Alex Rocco). Sneiderman concludes that her problems arise from her sexually repressive upbringing and unresolved feelings for her son, the “spitting image” (one of the film’s many

instances of doubling) of her dead first husband. Sneiderman places Carla before a panel of medical doctors under his department head Dr. Weber (George Coe), who pepper her with questions. “We’re trying to help you,” says Dr. Weber, but Carla expresses doubt that this talk will help: “So far it hasn’t helped, it hasn’t with Dr. Sneiderman.” In fact, despite having initially ceased when she is under Dr. Sneiderman’s care, her attacks come back and intensify. Disenchanted with psychiatry, especially after Sneiderman dismisses her attacks as manifestations of inner forces and confronts her with his difficult theory that she is lusting after her son, Carla turns instead to parapsychology.

This mode initially seems to help, with Carla, in the company of parapsychologists under Dr. Cooley, resisting several attacks from the Entity. Despite the ephemeral nature of their theories, they are ironically more convincing to her precisely because their inquiry initially seems more material and data driven as they employ cameras, rig her house with motion detectors and so on. Dr. Sneiderman regards parapsychologists Gene Kraft (Richard Brestoff) and Joe Mehan with smug disdain, tellingly expressed in terms of the media: “If you guys want to go on TV talk shows, bend spoons,³¹ entertain people, I’m all for that. But this lady is under my care and what you’re doing isn’t helping her.” Though the film constructs parapsychology and psychiatry as rivals, this opposition is undermined by the instances of parallelism

³¹ The signature of Israeli celebrity psychic Uri Geller, a displaced inheritor of the Spiritualist’s mantle of blurring mysticism and entertainment. While contacting the dead is not among Geller’s many claims, the relationship between Geller and the stage magic community (especially with magician/debunker James Randi, co-founder of The Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal – Randi and Geller have engaged in litigation against each other on several occasions) echoes the dynamic that existed between the Spiritualists and their magician counterparts in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. Note too that a bent spoon appears in *Poltergeist*; by the early 80’s this had become an all-purpose symbol for supernatural events, with a trace of entertainment present in the mix for good measure.

between them. They are different departments of the same university, and we are treated to matching scenes where panels of professionals debate Carla's condition, their language draped in jargon, be it medic-babble or mystic-babble. Under the care of each of them, Carla's attacks diminish only to come back with a vengeance. Dr. Cooley proposes the existence of "several planes of existence, distinct and separate" . . . she may be right in this ineffable claim, but she is certainly wrong in the belief that the intelligence from a different such plane can be isolated in ours. In the end, department heads Weber and Cooley watch helplessly from the same booth as the attempt to freeze and contain the Entity with liquid hydrogen goes horribly awry. Brushed aside in the same stroke, their approaches are finally both equally unable to quantify the Entity, much less to stop it. If psychiatry and parapsychology here represent the twin poles of cinema, scientific and ghostly, the binary collapses in the face of a shared impotence.

"A reflection on you as a woman": Gender in *The Entity*

The construction of gender in *The Entity* is also consistent with *The Legend of Hell House* insofar as the scientific is gendered male in Drs. Sneiderman and Weber and in the scoffer Jerry Anderson, and the Spiritual is gendered female, particularly in Dr. Cooley. But once again this is undermined in a variety of ways. There are male parapsychologists, Kraft and Mehan, in Cooley's camp, and female doctors on Weber's staff, one of whom asks Carla, "Would it be a reflection on you as a woman if he left you, or if you were cured?", a suggestion (which Carla emphatically rejects) that the self-conception of her femininity is tied to her status as passive receptacle of unstoppable male violence. Throughout the film gender roles are questioned and undermined. Male

characters are consistently de-masculinized by their inability to act and in particular their stunning inability to protect Carla from the Entity. The active male gaze is punished and inverted, seen most dramatically in the incident where Jerry arrives home from a business trip. He gives Carla a new silk blouse. In Weber's words, Jerry is "a real man," a solid sex partner rather than the (safely) very young and very old sex partners of Carla's past (including the very de-masculinized "overgrown kid" who died in a motorcycle accident, killed by a failed attempt to demonstrate his manhood). Carla rubs the blouse against her cheek and comments on its softness; her reaction is tactile, a benign variant on the terrible abuse her body undergoes throughout the film. But all Jerry wants is the visual, and he asks to see her wearing it. She goes into her room to change, and when he comes in, he finds her splayed on the bed naked, being raped by the Entity. Rather than the expected situation he has control over, he finds one where he has no control. His attempt to help her only makes things worse as he smashes a chair over her head, battering her into unconsciousness. Subsequently, he proves his lack of manhood by running away, utterly unable to cope with Carla's bizarre affliction.

In the climax, as the experiment goes disastrously wrong, out of all the characters present only Sneiderman is allowed to be active, running into the false house to save Carla from the Entity and its blasts of liquid hydrogen. As this act is not the novel, we might suspect the film of introducing a more heroic act for its male lead to suit the confines of screen drama, were it not for the fact that the film so resolutely downplays it. Sneiderman's heroic rescue of Carla is so minimized by the narrative that it ends on a note, not of masculine empowerment, but of disempowerment; afterwards we see him

lying on the floor, fruitlessly calling out Carla's name. This is the very last we see of the closest thing the film has to a male hero. If men are "feminized" by being consistently placed into positions of inactivity, and by running away from their problems instead of confronting them, one might further argue that Carla is masculinized by her final ability to stand up to the Entity and "defeat" it by denying its power. Nevertheless, I intend to show that the film constructs her strength as flowing from her feminine passivity.

The only figure of (ostensibly) unquestionable masculinity in the film is the Entity itself, usually referred to as "him." If Carla is feminized by her status as receptacle for violence, it follows that it is made male as the active perpetrator of the same. It is a more complete version of Emeric Belasco, sharing Belasco's propensity for sadistic violence and rape, and his allegorical status as a partial embodiment of the film, of its masculine, sadistic, "evil" essence. But the Entity lacks Belasco's key weakness, that of his body. Consequently, where Belasco only *appears* to be an embodiment of film's essence, the Entity truly is. The Entity, therefore, deserves a different category of "maleness": more than simply masculine, it is *hypermasculine*, an unreal extreme of masculinity, the ultimate fantasy version of masculinity that here need not answer to the fallible human body (or the inconvenient physical dimension of the cinematic apparatus). The Entity's hypermasculinity manifests as ultimate version of male violence, rape. Some have looked on rape as inherent to masculine nature: "Rape . . . is an exaggerated expression of a fully accepted sexual relation between men and women. . . . Force is intrinsic to fucking" (Dworkin 87). Within my argument, the Entity will stand as an embodiment for the (again, ostensibly) hypermasculine apparatus of cinema, both the sadism that Mulvey and

others find in the audience's gaze and the assault on the audience that we might find in a horror film like *The Entity*, a figurative rape of the audience's senses. We might borrow Dworkin's statement and adapt it to "Force is intrinsic to film." This sadistic dimension of film will be discussed later in this chapter.

The primary audience surrogate in both films I've discussed is female, Ann in *The Legend of Hell House* and Carla in *The Entity*. In both cases this relationship is established through their passivity, their status as either a largely non-participatory witness to events (Ann) or the largely passive subject of the events themselves (Carla), in both cases subject to the full force of film's affective power, especially in the form of terror, pain and eroticism. In *Recreational Terror*, Isabel Christina Pinedo discusses the variety of empowerment the slasher film offers its female protagonist by allowing her to fight back at her attacker. She writes: "The most misogynous of the slasher films (e.g., *The Entity*) invariably play down the feminist element of the genre" (77). This is a misinterpretation of the highest order, not the least because in no way, shape or form is *The Entity* a slasher film . . . it has no slasher, and no one gets slashed.³² However, Pinedo's statement is a useful starting point through which to interrogate gender in *The Entity*, and, by implication, the gendering of the audience. Pinedo would seem to be positing that *The Entity* is misogynistic because it does not allow Carla to fight back against her attacker – the empowerment of the female representing the feminist strain she finds in the slasher film, but this overlooks the fact that the film *does* allow her to fight back, but in a very different way from the slasher film's "Final Girl," through *that very*

³² In fact, *The Entity* – alongside *Poltergeist* – belongs to a select group of horror films with no deaths whatsoever!

passivity. If, as Carol Clover and other have argued, the Final Girl of the slasher film is masculinized by the resistance she demonstrates against the killer, Carla's very different manner of resistance, a mental rather than physical variety, would provide another challenge to the binary notion of gender that seems to be under fire in ghost films. Surely, Carla's brand of fighting back is admittedly very different from that of, say, Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) in *Halloween* (1978). Carla is never phallicized/masculinized in the sense that she never takes up a knife or gun or other weapon against her enemy. Rather, her brand of resistance is of a passive (feminine?) variety – she merely resolves to not let the Entity affect her any longer. I will demonstrate later in this chapter that her resistance flows from the cinematic apparatus itself, and is an allegorical figuration of what Barbara Creed terms the “fifth look,” the look away.

But the question remains – why *female* audience surrogates? I submit that the answer – at least as it applies to *these* films – lies with Spiritualism, in several senses. The relentless gendering of the medium as female flows from the acceptance of the female as the electrically negative pole of the race, the receptive pole. It follows that films saturated in the Spiritualists' interests – ghosts, mediums, séances and the like – should continue this trend, especially when considered within the broader social trend of women's greater interest in the spirit world than men.³³ Of course, *The Entity* contains no mediumship, at least not overtly, but once again it posits the female body as a site of interface between this world and another, so we may regard Carla as a figure analogous

³³ See Christopher P. Scheitle for an exploration of this phenomenon. Scheitle points to the female role of “kinkeeping” as giving women a greater connection to family, generally scoring higher than men on Grief Experience Inventory scales after the loss of a loved one (240), and a resultant greater interest in contact with the deceased and sensitivity to stimuli that may be interpreted as messages from the dead.

to the medium. The Spiritualist mediums of the Nineteenth Century were placed in the odd position of having a strong degree of agency but flowing from utter passivity, their state during channeling, and, as I proposed in the introduction, this paradox is akin to that embodied in the film viewer's simultaneous activity and passivity.

One might further argue that mediumship posits an inherent challenge to gender binaries. Indeed, it is this collapse of opposites that is implicit in the very word *medium*, a signifier of ambivalence and between-ness. Mediums always contain multiple gender potentialities, since they are (usually) females who are equally capable of taking on the personality of male or female spirits. Carol Clover suggests that a variety of horrific phenomena as relics of an earlier model of gender, when western thinking favoured viewing the genders as essentially one instead of essentially dialectical: "Stories of werewolves, vampires and other undead, and possession (by incubus, succubus, dybbuk, Satan) are stories that stem from the one-sex era, and for all their updating, they still carry with them, to a greater or lesser degree, a premodern sense of sexual difference" (15). Clover does not explicitly cite mediumship here but she easily could, and whether or not one chooses to affirm the underlying one-sex model, Clover's observations suit particularly the resistance to polarization I have found within the ghost film as a whole, be they the binaries of life and death, science and Spiritualism or masculine and feminine. *The Entity* functioning in this way perhaps more than most. One of its tasks seems to be the upsetting of rigid gender divisions, just as it threatens easy conceptions of science and Spiritualism and proves a tricky case to categorize as well.

Containing *The Entity*: Problems of Categorization

Is *The Entity* a haunted house film? I ask the question not in a trivial attempt to place the film within generic formulations but to assess what kind of critical approaches may be raised in analyzing it. We might further ask “is it a ghost film at all?” since the Entity is never discussed as the spirit of a dead person – though the word “ghost” is occasionally used – but rather a visitor from another level of existence. Tom Ruffles names his corpus broadly as “those films that involve the continuation of personality after bodily death” (4), a definition which should exclude *The Entity*, but Ruffles still discusses it with no problem. *The Entity* has proved a tricky case in categorization, as difficult to contain as its titular character. In *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, Carol Clover mentions *The Entity* only briefly but terms it a “possession film,” which it is only in the most abstract sense (74). In fact, though Clover devotes a chapter to such rape movies as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1977), *Ms. 45* (1981), *Deliverance* (1972) and *The Accused* (1988), *The Entity* never receives any mention here, despite its theme of rape, likely because it lacks the key distinction of rape-*and-revenge*. This lack of a revenge element likely explains Pinedo’s characterizing it as “among the most misogynous of slasher films” (as little as that label fits). One could also theoretically discuss *The Entity* as a keystone of a group of films that feature supernatural rape, such as *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), John Hough’s *The Incubus* (1981) and *The Evil Dead* (1981), not to mention *The Legend of Hell House*, in which the victim scarcely ever gets a chance at revenge.

The Entity’s resistance to conventional categorization represents another way in which it frustrates audience expectations. Even the label of “haunted house film” is problematic, but I feel it applies mainly because of the film’s use of the uncanny, perhaps

the most characteristic feature of this subgenre. *The Entity* certainly does not keep to the tradition of tying haunting phenomena to a specific location like a house due to some past event, which may challenge its status as a haunted house film. The Entity is more readily regarded as being tied to Carla herself than the house since it follows her outside, to her friend's house, to her car, and finally to the ersatz version of her house the parapsychologists construct. However, this latter event only proves the importance of the house, Carla's domestic space, and the film's dialogue favours mention of the home throughout: "They have a theory that there's something in the house." The house is the film's terrain, though it is far from such baroque haunted palaces as Hill House and the Belasco House: critically, it is a completely normal, ostensibly safe environment to which Carla retreats from the pressures of her difficult life, made unreal by the Entity's presence and the resources of cinema. Furie fills his film with a huge volume of canted angles, designed to destabilize the viewer's perspective and frustrate conventional perspectives on how a film "should" look. The cants become subtly more and less frequent as Carla feels more and less safe, but the film scarcely goes more than a few shots without at least a slightly non-level camera setup. The house therefore fits Freud's definition of the uncanny as "the class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (229). The false version of Carla's house which the parapsychologists construct, familiar but with manifest differences that Cooley catalogues as she leads Carla through the copy (non-functional light switches, no ceilings, beds misplaced), is only a literalized version of the process of becoming uncanny that Carla's home space undergoes throughout the film, while offering an uncanny mirror image of the original.

Film, Mirror, Ghost

Mirror images, both of the literal and figurative varieties, are legion in *The Entity*, and this set of symbolism provides an approach to the film, which I will analyze as an allegorization of the audience's position in the filmic apparatus. The connection between cinema and mirrors (and Lacan's mirror-stage along with them) is well noted. Baudry describes "the Screen-Mirror" as "a reflecting surface, framed, limited, circumscribed" (294). In *The Imaginary Signifier*, Christian Metz describes film as "like a mirror" (and points out that it is indeed constructed around mirror-effects, since the camera contains "a series of mirrors, lenses, apertures and shutters") (51). For Metz, "the cinema, 'more perceptual' than certain arts according to the list of its sensory registers, is also 'less perceptual' than others once the status of these perceptions is envisaged rather than their number or diversity; for its perceptions are all in a sense 'false'" (44-45). Consequently, on film "the perceived is not really the object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its *replica* in a new kind of mirror" (45). Here again we have a ghost metaphor as a "phantom" serves as the image that represents the relation of the film image to the real world, an image of death yet continuation.

An important respect in which cinema is not like a mirror, Metz tells us, is that "there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator's own body" (45). The process of cinematic identification is not so simple as that. As I delineated in the previous chapter, Metz lays out a complex scheme whereby a film viewer must simultaneously identify oneself as a cinematic character and not as that character, and notes too that, "... the imaginary of cinema presupposes the symbolic, for

the spectator must first of all have known the primordial mirror” (57). The safe distance between audience and screen is under fire in *The Entity*.

When Carla returns to her house after the Entity’s first attack, the film provides a lengthy pan surveying the damage to her room, finally ending on a mirror showing her reflection. The mirror is undisturbed amid all of the wreckage, with Carla’s image framed neatly within, an image is one of stability. But mere seconds later, strange sounds are heard and the panic starts up again. Freud (quoting Otto Rank) speaks of doubling as “an energetic denial of the power of death” (235), and here, in this safe home space, the many mirrors of the bathroom locating it as a fortress against the outside world through the doubling and redoubling of Carla’s image. But Freud goes on to say that, instead of their manifest function of protection through doubling, mirrors can become “an uncanny harbinger of death” (235). The bathroom becomes a location for a vicious violations.

Freud associates the uncanny with doubling, a failed attempt to protect against castration anxiety. *The Entity* is full of instances of doubling, both manifest, as in the false version of Carla’s home, her twin daughters and the description of Billy as “the spitting image” of his late father, and subtle, as in the film’s fondness for exploiting the uncanny potential of mirrors. In “The Uncanny,” Freud relates a personal incident set in a train car when he thought another traveler had come in by accident:

Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass on the open door. I can still recollect that I thoroughly disliked his appearance. Instead, therefore, of being frightened by [my] double, I simply failed to recognize [it] as such. Is it not possible, though, that [my] dislike of [it] was a vestigial trace of the archaic reaction which feels the ‘double’ to be something uncanny? (248)

Certainly, mirrors have long been associated with the supernatural. Tom Ruffles records that mirrors were used for centuries to create ghostly phenomena, noting that “the historical Faust is supposed to have used them in a lecture on Homer at the University of Erfurt” (15). Mirrors figure in many of the proto-cinematic devices like the magic lantern and Pepper’s Ghost, many of which were principally employed to depict the supernatural. Of course, “It’s all done with mirrors” remains a knee-jerk disavowal of the supernatural. Mirrors frequently figure in haunted house films, sometimes in narrative terms. For example, *Amityville: A New Generation* (1993) hinges on a mirror taken from the original house to the new one, bringing the haunting force with it, and *Poltergeist III* (1988) largely swaps the television imagery of the first film for the endless play of reflection in a steel and glass skyscraper. More famous is the Robert Hamer-directed “Haunted Mirror” episode of *Dead of Night* (1945), which strongly links its haunted mirror with cinema. Here, Joan (Googie Withers) buys a mirror from an antiquarian for her soon-to-be husband Peter (Ralph Michael). But Peter finds that the mirror sometimes looks onto an unfamiliar room, a sinister Victorian bedchamber, instead of reflecting his bland white-walled apartment. Peter plays the role of filmgoer, gazing at the mirror, both terrified and fascinated by it, obsessed with the idea that there is “something evil” on the other side. At first he is able to banish the mirror’s influence by closing his eyes – essentially by looking away, a point to which I will return – but the mirror has more and more power all the time. Joan learns that the mirror came from the room of a cruel man who murdered his wife in front of it more than a century before. Taking on the dead man’s personality,

Peter tries to strangle Joan but in the struggle she shatters the mirror, breaking the spell. Here we find in the mirror something of film's power of preserving another time and place, its affective, absorbing power on its viewer, and also the fantasy that destroying the (screen) mirror may reconstitute the self under threat in the cinematic apparatus. Counter to Metz's comment that the audience's body can never be reflected in the cinematic mirror, Peter sees himself in the mirror, despite the fact that it shows a location he's absent from, just as we may "see" ourselves in films. Mirrors serve as gateways to erotic or surreal or nightmarish nether-realms in films as diverse as *The Blood of a Poet* (1930), *House* (1985), and various versions of *The Phantom of the Opera*. In Cocteau's *Orpheus* (1949), Death's servant Heurtubise (Francois Périer) explains that "mirrors are the gates through which death comes and goes . . . if you see your whole life in a mirror you will see death at work." It is through mirrors that we see ourselves dying, day by day and year by year; it may therefore follow that when we look into the Screen-Mirror and see our own absence, we are rehearsing for our own death.

More frequently, however, mirrors are used cinematically both to provide visual shocks and to establish an uncanny setting. It is not uncommon in horror films for the sudden recognition of a character's reflection to serve as jolt a moment, shocking the characters and the audience at the same time. Memorable examples occur late in *Psycho* (1960) and early in *The Haunting*, both times mise-en-scene using the presence of mirrors in a creepy and unfamiliar house to suddenly alter the perceived landscape of the location. *The Entity* employs mirrors in a related but distinct way. Let us consider the bathroom sequence. We see Carla drawing a bath. Her bathroom is full of mirrors, and

Furie frames her so that her image is doubled and redoubled, often within a single shot. As Carla takes her clothes off, we see her nude body only through reflection, and as then fragmented and doubled so that we are often looking at two versions of a portion of her body. The impression is not one of increased protection but of increased vulnerability (while simultaneously achieving the cinematic “fragmentation” of the body as described by Mulvey [63] and Shaviro [55]). Here too, the mirrors reveal the inadequacy of the feeling of wholeness that, for Lacan, the mirror phase initially provides. The Entity’s first action upon attacking is to force Carla’s face into the bathroom mirror, not only shattering her illusion of safety but forcing her to bear witness to her own vulnerability, making her audience to her own violation, and reminding us of her status as our own audience surrogate, so that it may as well be our faces slammed into the Screen-Mirror.

As I noted before, the female medical doctor on Dr. Weber’s staff asks Carla: “Would it be a reflection on you as a woman if he left you, or if you were cured?” The key word being “reflection,” and coupled with the doctors’ belief that she has “fallen back into an infantile reality,” the language itself strongly invites a Lacanian read, here more than compatible with Freud’s version of the uncanny as both test our vision of the cohesion of our “property,” either our houses or our bodies. Carla’s sense of “wholeness,” her belief in the control over her body, is under attack from the Entity, a creature of the pre-symbolic order and therefore of “the other side of the mirror,” nameless, motiveless, resisting explanation and quantification of any kind. Highly suggestive of this read is an unnerving sequence in which we see Carla sleeping and her breasts being manipulated by unseen fingers. Far from the brutality the Entity displays in

other sequences, here it is gentle and gives her pleasure – this, for her, is the greatest violation of all, turning her own body against itself. She shudders in orgasm; this wakes her, whereupon she flies into a rage. She picks up a lamp and, like the wife in *Dead of Night*, she begins smashing mirrors, at once (as per Freud) refuting the false protection and the image of death and weakness mirrors provide and (as per Lacan) being dragged away from the symbolic. Lacan writes that the mirror phase “situates the agency of the ego . . . in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality” (2). What the Entity accomplishes is a reminder of that very fictional quality to the wholeness the symbolic order presents, ripping that asymptotic divide between the real and symbolic wide open. Carla’s automatic reaction of smashing mirrors suggests an instinctive realization of the failure of the symbolic. Despite the illusion of wholeness the mirror stage offers, the body remains fragmented and rebellious, subject to the *real*, the province of the Entity as that which exists apart from symbolization (Sneiderman says that Entity is only a symbol, when it actually is everything but a symbol). Significantly, this sequence is placed within the narrative just before Carla realizes the futility of a medical/scientific approach and rejects Dr. Sneiderman’s inquiries, though she is slower in realizing that the alternative, the parapsychologists’ approach, is another such flawed system of the symbolic.

When Carla rampages after her Entity-given orgasm, the camera once again frames her in reflection, so that only when she smashes it do we realize that we are

looking at her through a mirror, with cracks spreading across the very face of the screen. It appears as if she is smashing through the screen itself. Compare the shooting instruction for the shower scene in *Psycho*: “The slashing. An impression of a knife slashing, as if tearing at the very screen, ripping the film” (qtd. in Clover 199). The scene also echoes a sequence in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* where an entire sequence plays out in mirror image, recognizable only through the backwards writing on Jack Torrance’s (Jack Nicholson) shirt, until the revelation that we are looking at a reflection. In each case, the register is the same: a reminder of the fragility of film’s replication of reality, frustrating our privileged position as the audience. Carla stands as an embodiment of the film’s audience and in fact the viewers of film in general, subject to all of the affective properties a horror film promotes in its watchers, with her smashing of the mirror that separates her from the audience serving as an attempt to destroy cinema itself. This attack fails because Carla is a naïve spectator who destroys a symbol for cinema rather than cinema itself. It is only once she becomes a knowing one at the film’s end that she will learn that the only way to escape cinema is by turning away from it entirely.

A few scenes later, Carla brings the parapsychologists Kraft and Mehan over to her house. Walking past an oval mirror (suggesting the iris of the camera?), they feel a tremor shake the house. Immediately, as if instinctively, they run to the mirror and stare at their reflections in it. As the tremors occur again, we see their reaction *only through the mirror* – through the trembling mirror, though at points this is evident only if the viewer keeps track of which character is on the left and which is on the right. Kraft and Mehan are of academia, the apotheosis of the symbolic order (appropriately, Carla meets them in

a bookstore), and this framing reveals the fragility of the symbolic, forever in danger of collapse. Carla initially feels safe with Dr. Cooley's team, calls them "my forces," even, but this is another illusion. Their protection involves a new series of uneasy doubles, both the failed simulation of her house (which, pointedly, is entirely without mirrors – that would be redundant, for it *is* a mirror) and the constant reproduction of her image onto a video screen. Furie shows us the trio of parapsychologists watching her pace her false home from their perch on high. The parapsychologists' reflected images layered over hers in the video monitor link their entire experiment to all the mirror imagery earlier in the film, revealing the whole *technologized* set-up as no more legitimately protective than any of the mirrors of Carla's home. In the final parallel between the psychiatrists and parapsychologists, both are of the symbolic order, and as academics both groups try (and fail) to explain it, and their attempts at protection fails because they cannot recognize that the Entity is beyond explanation. It is this indecipherability that most troubles the characters in the film. Traumatized by witnessing an attack of Carla, Jerry refuses to see her. "I could've taken anything, a disease, cancer," he says – anything *explainable*, but not this which defies explanation. After the disastrous failure of Cooley's experiment, she declares that though they lost the Entity they still have something: "We have a witness." But Dr. Weber weakly says: "I saw something. But I don't know, I just don't know. With all that going on down there, it could've been anything." For the ultra-symbolic academic (and king male scientist), no answer outside of the symbolic can be accepted.

The threat of technology's malfunction looms from the very first moments of *The Entity*, where Carla, at her typing class, types out "Typists get good paying jobs." This is

both the fallibility of technology and of the symbolic, the domain of language; or technology is linked to the symbolic as the force that helps us maintain control over our world, which keeps us at a distance from the real. The Entity proves itself a master of technology, casually wresting mankind's most treasured creations from its control and using them as it pleases – the film therefore acknowledges that the real encompasses the symbolic rather than standing in opposition to it, hence the Entity's access to the symbolic, reflected in its ability to speak³⁴ and its mastery of technology. The film establishes this early on, when Carla watches a light bulb on her bedside turn on by itself (a reminder of the Spiritualist connection of ghosts to electricity, as well as film's status as a medium of light). In later sequences, the Entity takes control of her car during traffic and the huge liquid helium machine the parapsychologists set up over their replica of Carla's house. Technology is an extension of the symbolic body, apparently whole and reliable, but always in danger of disastrous malfunction. The Entity's comfort with technology establishes that, despite being ultimately a creature of the pre-symbolic, it has the ability to enter the symbolic and blithely toy with those inventions that simultaneously represent and sustain the symbolic order. The Entity's link to technology extends to the medium that dominates the modern imagination, cinema itself.

In a very real way, the technology, at least some of the time, forms the Entity's "body." In Cooley's experiment, the unreal double of Carla's house lies beneath the huge liquid helium machine, with scrotum-like tanks and an exaggerated penis-like nozzle . . .

³⁴ Unlike the comparatively talkative Entity of the novel, the filmic Entity has the ability to speak but hasn't much to say, only uttering one word. The novel makes much more of the Entity's "dwarf" helpers, who only figure very briefly in the film.

the film provides us with a close-up of it from Carla's worried perspective. The machine provides a striking symbolization of the Entity, an overhanging force of overwhelming maleness and astonishing destructive force (and the "man of the house" that Carla's real home lacks). The Entity assumes control of the machine easily, following her about the house ejaculating its deadly cold. Better yet, the nozzle appears to have a camera mounted on it, through which the characters in the booth above see her image. It is strikingly similar to another house-haunting rapist "ghost," the computer Proteus in *Demon Seed* (1977), which Clover terms "[t]he most phallic camera on record . . . Although we never see 'Proteus' (as pure intelligence, he has no being), we assume his masculinity from his name, low (digitalized) voice, and telescopic metal penis . . . [the film has] the only rape I know of that is 'filmed' from the ostensible point of view of the penis" (182).³⁵ This carries with it a number of implications about the phallic, assaultive quality of the camera's gaze, further locating the Entity, the creature from the other side of the mirror, as an allegorized figure of cinema itself – or at least of a component of cinema, its sadistic, scopophilic, *masculine* dimension. As Clover writes, "If the assaultive gaze . . . could hardly be more phallic, its object could hardly be more vaginal" (188) – that is, receptive, like the filmic audience. Note too that the only time the Entity speaks in the entire film, it is to call Carla a "cunt."

These symbols of cinema's hypermasculinity in films like *Peeping Tom* (1960), *Demon Seed* and *The Entity*, these hyper-phallic camera surrogates prone to violate women, implicate the more broadly masculine dimension to cinema. The cinematic

³⁵ This in turn implicates the phallic/reflective camera-mirror-spike setup in *Peeping Tom*. See Clover, 168-181.

process may be described as a series of ejaculations, that of the camera and that of the projector, both of which “shoot”; likewise Sneiderman asks Carla “Did he ejaculate?” on their first meeting (the answer is affirmative) and the machine spews a most deadly brand of semen. However, rape may paradoxically be a signifier of masculine weakness: “The rapist is a weak, impotent, angry and depressed individual compensating for just these deficiencies with fantasies and demonstrations of virility, power and possession” (Te Paske 126). The erect phallus is simultaneously a symbol of masculine power and a reminder of its fragility; hypermasculinity naturally undermines itself. Appropriately, when the Entity is at its most phallic (as the machine), this is also its moment of greatest vulnerability. Carla’s (passive) resistance of it brings an all the stronger burst of ejaculatory violence from the Entity, a visible proof of the threat to its masculinity, as it is denied the passive female terror that its sadistic masculine violence requires. Ejaculation, finally, becomes a signifier of weakness.

No theory of film’s hypermasculinity can be totalizing, for it denies film’s feminine dimension. The converse is true as well; the apparatus of film resists gendering by nature and undermines gender poles. Lucy Fischer notes that Mulvey, in tying male spectatorship to infantile experience, ties cinema to maternal presence and thereby femininity (26). Cinema may make objects of hypermasculinity (like John Wayne) *feminine* as it turns them into passive objects of the audience’s gaze. The killer in *Peeping Tom* vents his scopophilic impulses only as a consequence of spending his childhood as the passive object of the camera’s gaze. Emeric Belasco’s cruel sadistic acts are the consequence of his own self-castration. And, “unmanned” by Carla’s resistance,

the Entity is reduced to name-calling.

Entity Unnamable

If the Entity has no real body and never did, nor does it have any name, except perhaps in the term the title uses and which is occasionally bandied about in dialogue. The term favoured by Cooley's parapsychologists in the novel, "discarnate entity," is used exactly once in the film, defining it through disavowal, its lack of materiality or body. As "the Entity," it is defined simply by being-ness, which is to say, essence. There is a label that does suite the Entity, but both the film and the book conspicuously avoid using it: "incubus." The film alludes to this very directly in the sequence where Sneiderman shows Carla a book of old woodcuts, depictions of medieval demons and monster: "Bats, werewolves, dragons, demons, all sorts of goblins . . . they were supposed to abuse people sexually, they were supposed to impregnate people . . ." ³⁶ Incubi are the demons who rape and impregnate women, a link even stronger in the book, where Carlotta experiences an apparently hysterical pregnancy and miscarriage. But by never naming the rapist demon as an incubus, the film holds to its resistance to concrete signification, while refusing to locate the Entity within the framework of ancient superstition any more than modern psychiatry.

Barbara Creed draws attention to the frequency with which defeating a monster involves naming it or otherwise comprehending it, learning the rules of its existence and therefore its weak points and the means of its destruction (29) – the Rumpelstiltskin narrative is exemplary in this regard. In *The Innocents*, Miss Giddens (Deborah Kerr)

³⁶ In the book, this line is "Sometimes they were said to impregnate women" (239). The change further underlines the film's blurring of gender distinctions.

possesses the mysterious conviction that having young Miles (Martin Stephens) speak the name of Peter Quint (Peter Wyngarde) will dispel his power. The film ends on a famously indecisive and tragic note, unclear on the effectiveness of this particular tactic against the supernatural, ambiguously refusing to confirm or deny the value of “the name.” In Tim Burton’s *Beetlejuice* (1988), the demon Betelgeuse (Michael Keaton), Yahweh-like, has a name so powerful that it is dangerous to say it aloud, so the characters must employ euphemisms like “the B-word.” Even the distortion of his name in the title of the film suggests that his name is too powerful for the film to bear. But the name Betelgeuse can banish him as well. Of course, *The Legend of Hell House* abstractly fits this model too, as Belasco’s undoing comes through a “naming” of sorts, the airing of the facts of his body.

The Entity must stand as a powerful counterexample to the investment of supernatural power in names, that is, in signification. Rules govern the conditions of existence for a vampire, werewolf or zombie, surely, but no such rules apply to the Entity. In H.P. Lovecraft’s 1923 short story “The Unnamable,” the seminal horror author stages a debate on whether or not a being can be just that, unnamable, with the narrator opining: “And since spirit, in order to cause all the manifestations attributed to it, cannot be limited by any of the laws of matter; why is it extravagant to imagine psychically living dead things in shapes – or absences of shapes – which must for human spectators be utterly and appallingly ‘unnamable’?” (199). The Entity fits most readily into this tradition, the conception of the supernatural as beyond human reason and language and therefore, in Lacanian terms, beyond the symbolic. It only speaks once in the film, at the

very end while Carla takes a last look over her house before leaving it forever, and it is not naming itself but naming her: “Cunt.”

As an allegorization of film’s (sadistic) essence, at war with its audience, the Entity is a figure of that dimension of film that violently resists symbolization, naming, explanation. Attempts at finding meaning in the film that bears its name are, in the end, futile, no matter how prudent they seem at the time: Sneiderman’s assessment of Carla’s history does not lead to her being cured, and Cooley’s speculations about the Entity’s true nature do not allow them to contain it. The dynamic here, it should be noted, is somewhat different from in *The Legend of Hell House*, where both Barrett and Tanner’s investigative techniques seem futile until meaningfully combined by Fischer as film’s function, with Ann on hand to represent the audience. Here, the figures of function and audience are collapsed in Carla, with her role as audience surrogate predominating.

Embodying the Audience: The Active/Passive Spectator and the Fifth Look

On few matters are film theorists more divided than on the essential nature of the audience. Some, like Laura Mulvey and Christian Metz, see the audience as active agents of the gaze engaging in a scopophilic brand of sadism, while others, like Gaylyn Studlar and Steven Shaviro, approach it as passive and subject to the film’s mechanism, deriving pleasure from masochism. Metz writes that “For its spectator the film unfolds in that simultaneously very close and definitively inaccessibly ‘elsewhere’ in which the child *sees* the amorous play of the parental couple, who are similarly ignorant of it and leave it alone, a pure onlooker whose participation is inconceivable” (64). This construction of Freud’s primal scene as “Ur-movie” (Clover 207) seems especially pertinent to *The*

Entity, especially if we consider the Entity to be a warped husband figure for Carla; the sequences of Carla being raped in view of her children – among the most stressful in the film – fulfill Freud’s conviction that the child imagines the sex act as causing pain to the mother. But other critics have questioned Metz’s view, among them Kaja Silverman: “Far from controlling the sounds and images of parental sexuality, the child held captive within the crib is controlled – indeed, overwhelmed by them. Adult sexuality invades him or her through the eyes and ears, puncturing, as it were, these vital organs” (156-157, qtd. in Clover 207). My intention here is not to settle the debate but rather to show how it may be brought to bear on *The Entity*. Here, scopophilia is located within the cinematic apparatus itself, embodied as the Entity, with Carla a decidedly masochistic vision of the audience, almost wholly subject to the sadistic whims of cinema, but capable of a partial form of resistance in the shape of what Barbara Creed terms the “fifth look.”

Like Ann Barrett, only much more so, Carla Moran is a figure of the audience, subject to the full force of film’s *affective* power. Alice Lovejoy says that the most eerie thing about *The Entity* is that “[the destabilization effect of the strange camera positions] centers on Hershey herself – through the course of the attacks, she loses all self-possession, her eyes become vacant, her gaze detached. ‘Normal’ interactions seem to serve only as noise in the midst of this tranquil state” (31). Within the cinematic apparatus, Carla suggests two roles, representing not only the audience but also the screen itself, for virtually every other character in the film witnesses the attacks on her at some point or another. There is no conflict here, for audience and screen may easily blur. Walter Benjamin wrote of the tactility of film: “It hits the spectator like a bullet, it

happens to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality” (238, qtd. in Shaviro 50). The audience is the ultimate *projected upon*: the projector projects onto the screen, and the screen projects onto the audience. Steven Shaviro writes that “in the realm of visual fascination, sex and violence have much more intense and disturbing an impact than they do in literature or any other medium; they affect the viewer in a shockingly direct way. Violent and pornographic films literally anchor desire and perception in the agitated and fragmented body” (55). Central in *The Entity* is the spectacle of the terribly suffering female body, all presented so directly and heartlessly that these scenes readily produces analogous, if not identical, physical reactions in the audience. The Entity does to Carla what film can never do to us, much less the movie screen: it leaves physical imprints on her body, cruel bruises and bite marks. These may be viewed as symbolic of film’s broader effect on the audience, which may be physical to a considerable degree: film can make the audience shiver or faint or vomit, or can provoke the physical reactions associated with arousal. In showing Carla’s face into the mirror, the Entity provides the ultimate “edge-of-your-seat” film experience commonly associated with horror and suspense films, an “inability” to turn away from the screen.

The position of “audience” within *The Entity* is associated with impotence and terror, the castrated position of forced inaction in which most of the characters (the male characters especially) find themselves, and with the Entity even using mirrors to make Carla into the audience of her own violation (collapsing subject and witness into one, just as Carla represents a collapse of screen and audience). Carla’s children watch horrified as she is violated in front of them in the living room, her son suffering a broken arm as she

tries to help him, and Jerry is so traumatized by witnessing her rape that he walks out on her despite his plans to marry her. The parapsychologists bring cameras into Carla's home, and ultimately recreate her life in a setting where her life is the entire show. Dr. Cooley invokes the voyeuristic/sadistic quality of cinema by reminding Carla not to get dressed in any of the rooms without ceilings, where television cameras watch her every move. Finally, of course, Cooley, Kraft and Mehan, Weber and Sneiderman all become impotent observers as the parapsychologists' experiment goes horribly awry.

The Entity is at once congruous with and in opposition to Laura Mulvey's theories of cinematic scopophilia. She writes that "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which 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*" (62). Scopophilia is embodied in the Entity itself, the apotheosis of the sadistic male voyeuristic impulse Mulvey finds in the masculinized audience (which is further implicated in other male characters and indeed the whole voyeuristic setup of Cooley's experiment). "I suppose he finds me attractive," Carla tells the medical doctors, her speculation as to why the Entity (or the casting director?) has chosen her. So too must we the audience find her attractive, if we are to accept the narrative. Sometimes our gaze is implicitly allied with the Entity's, as when we watch Carla undress for her shower. But though a viewer may be erotically interested in Carla's nude body, the dominant emotion is fear for her. In this way the audience's gaze is disempowered. As long as the audience's gaze implicates the Entity's, the audience is uneasy, for the sight of Carla's

suffering will inevitably follow, something akin to what Bataille called “that which exceeds the possibility of seeing, that which is intolerable to see” (Bataille 1986, 268, qtd. in Shaviro 55). Within the narrative scopophilic pleasure is denied or even rebuked, most strikingly when Jerry gives Carla the silk dress. He expects the visual pleasure of her wearing it but instead gets the terrifying spectacle of her nude body subject to the Entity’s wrath. “Help me . . . help me . . .” she croaks, but no help is possible, neither from Jerry nor the audience. *The Entity* refuses to privilege the position of spectator, rather laying it bare as a position of inactivity, passivity and impotence.

This rejection of scopophilic pleasure is allied to the film’s undermining of the symbolic, being denied the ideal “I” of Lacan. *The Entity* comes close to being an unpleasurable film, not only violent and unflinching but with a narrative that often excludes explanations (why, first instance, should the Entity’s attacks have diminished and come back under both the care of Sneiderman and the parapsychologists?) and closure (removing, for instance, any meaningful closure for so key a character as Sneiderman), undermining the sadistic audience desire for control over the narrative. “Sadism demands a story,” says Mulvey, “depends on making something happening, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end” (65), exactly the process of the Entity’s victimization of Carla. Carla’s final resistance lies, not in defeating the Entity, but de-narrativizing its attacks, not precisely retaking the narrative so much as denying the narrative’s meaning, and, finally, rejecting the apparatus. The film denies us the sadistic pleasure of an ending, either happy (revenge) or unhappy (death). The film ends

with her leaving home, allegorizing the only real resistance the spectator has against cinema, the power to leave the theatre.

In Baudry's analysis of the commonalities of Plato's cave and the cinema, he mentions that, for "[Lacan's mirror phase] to be possible, there must be . . . two complementary conditions: immature powers of mobility and a precocious mobilization of visual organization" (294) -- essential passivity accompanied by visual primacy. The constitution of the self, then, requires cinema-like conditions; it is no surprise, then, that, "the 'reality' mimed by cinema is . . . first of all that of a self" (Baudry 295). But does it not follow that cinema is also a suitable place to "undo" the mirror phase? It is this potential -- cinema's potential for the dismantlement of meaning -- that intrigues Shaviro. "All cinema," he argues, "tends away from the coagulation of meaning and towards the shattering dispossession of the spectator, the moment of the razor slicing the eyeball in *Un chien Andalou*" (54). To this, perhaps, he could add any of the rape scenes in *The Entity*, equal assaults on the audience's senses, and again with a female victim.

In *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed writes, again about the mirror phase:

Confronted by the sight of the monstrous, the viewing subject is put into crisis . . . Identity is an imaginary construct, formed in a state of alienation, grounded in misrecognition . . . Lacan argues that the self, because it is constructed on an illusion, is always in danger of regressing. The horror film puts the viewing subject's sense of a unified self into crisis, specifically in those moments when the image on the screen becomes too threatening or too horrifying to watch, when the object threatens to draw the viewing subject to the place "where meaning collapses," the place of death. By not-looking, the spectator is able momentarily to withdraw identification from the image on the screen in order to reconstitute the boundary between self and screen and reconstitute the 'self' which is threatened with disintegration (29).

If the Entity can be fought at all, it is by refusing the definition it applies to Carla,

the “cunt” that he names her as. This is her act of resistance against it as Dr. Cooley’s experiment fails. “You can do anything you want to me,” she says, “you can torture me, kill me, anything. But you can’t have me. You cannot *touch* me.³⁷ That’s mine” – a de-narrativization of the Entity’s acts coupled with the mapping of a new narrative over top of it. If Carla functions as a figure for the film’s audience, then her decision is the same all film viewers must make when threatened with unusually affective material: simply choose not to let it affect you, or termed differently, to look away. The look away is what Creed terms “the fifth look” in cinema (29),³⁸ an essential but barely acknowledged feature of the cinematic apparatus that challenges any interpretation of the film viewer as truly passive. So film at once controls and does not control the spectator, who is always allowed this partial escape of the “look away.” The fifth look, of course, is particularly observable in audiences of horror films, the genre perhaps most prone to provide direct assaults on the symbolic cohesion of its viewers.

The Entity provides us cues for this behaviour throughout – literally, in Carla’s daughters as they recoil in terror witnessing their mother being assaulted, and figuratively, in the ostrich-like cowardice of Jerry and Dr. Weber, unable to cope with their experiences and so denying them instead. But the film’s prime audience surrogate, Carla, provides the strongest example of all, one deemed positive rather than negative, consisting of an act of resistance against film’s sadism rather than a flight from it. The look away does not refute the apparatus, and critically, does not remove the spectator

³⁷ Neither, of course, can cinema.

³⁸ The first four being the camera’s look, the look of the characters within the diegesis, the look of the spectator and the look of a diegetic character onto the audience.

from the metaphorical ground of cinema. Though *The Entity* ends with the knowledge that the Entity has not been explained or contained, that its attacks on Carla will continue, the viewer may take away a small measure of satisfaction in the knowledge that they now *mean* something different to her (related through the symbolic in the form of writing, the only onscreen crawl in the film): that in agreeing to bear but not be emotionally affected by the attacks, she controls the *symbolic* register of the entity's *non-symbolic* actions. This is the logic of the fifth look, and so it fits that Carla's final resistance against the Entity comes not from attacking it physically (since we can never physically interact with the cinema, a medium of absence), but from a brand of literal "passive resistance," the only way we can act against the film while still subject to the cinematic apparatus.

In Creed's assessment, the fifth look represents an attempt to achieve the mirror phase and reconstitute the self against those forces aiming to destroy it, hence Carla's erecting of a new narrative emphasizing her own strength. In any event, it is a decidedly partial escape. Looking away, after all, does not remove oneself from the sound or darkness of the theatre, and the very fact of looking away confirms the terrors of the screen. Indeed, the mirror stage can never be complete, the symbolic and the self can never be wholly secure, so that any escape can only be partial and temporary. An extension of the logic of the fifth look is a more complete escape, the one we see enacted for us in *The Entity*'s last scene, as Carla patrols her home one last time. The Entity is still present but she pays it little mind as she leaves, gets into the car with her children and drives away. Like *The Legend of Hell House* (and furthermore, like *Poltergeist*), the film ends with a departure, the leaving of haunted space, the closing of a door, cueing the

audience to do the same. But each film also swiftly informs us that the cinematic experience does *not* strictly end when we leave the theatre (*The Legend of Hell House* with an ambiguous shot of a black cat, *Poltergeist* with a reminder of TV's uncanny power, *The Entity* by underlining the fact that Carla will not be free of the Entity even in her new dwelling). Cinema, after all, does not *want* to end with the audience's departure; it wants to be talked about, dreamed about, perhaps even shuddered about long after.

The film's ending reflects the incompleteness of this variety of "escape." At first the audience members may take some comfort in the safe distance between themselves and the screen, even as they are drawn in Carla's plight. The viewer, however, may take comfort in the general "unreality" of the proceedings. The sequence where Dr. Sneiderman shows Carla a book of ancient woodcuts and illustrations and explains that supernatural creatures are nothing but manifestations of internal forces plays as a lesson not only to her but to the audience: even if his dismissals are incorrect or at least inadequate within the fictional world of the film, he is convincing, and his statements apply in the viewer's world, the "real" world. But the film ends by frustrating even the distinction between reality and fiction, with an explanation that "The film you have just seen is a fictionalized account of a true incident that occurred in Los Angeles, California, in October 1976 . . . The real Carla Moran is today living in Texas with her children. The attacks, though decreased in both frequency and intensity . . . continue." Why save this information for the end of the film? It is the converse of the Tom Corbett quotation from *The Legend of Hell House*, which (at least on first glance) tries to achieve verisimilitude by placing its quasi-factual status up front. *The Entity* serves it up as a final psychic blow,

this one directed not at Carla but at the viewer, threatening the safe illusion of a distance between the audience and the film. Clover writes:

No one who has attended a matinee or midnight showing of a horror film with a youth audience can doubt the essentially adversarial nature of the enterprise. The performance has the quality of a cat-and-mouse game: a “good” moment (or film) is one that “beats” the audience, and a “bad” moment (or film) is one, in which, in effect, the audience “wins” (202).

In other words, this “game” is aimed at preserving a sense of self under attack from the film, as surely as Carla is under attack from the Entity. Within this formulation, *The Entity* is certainly a film in which the audience loses. One can only imagine that it left its audiences in stunned silence.

The house in *The Entity* contains a television, the device that clearly turns domestic space into a location for spectatorial gazing, but it rarely seems to be on and certainly receives no narrative focus. When the television gains emphasis within the setting of the haunted house, however, we have rich new metaphorical potential for the collapse of the cinematic experience and domestic space (implicit in the phrase “home theatre”). If film is “like a mirror” for Metz, a site of the mirror phase, the television, a household object with a reflective surface, is even more like a mirror, especially since it is increasingly the case that children are socialized through the television. Within a haunted house film, one would expect televisions and mirrors alike not to provide a stable vision of normality that aids the constitution of the self but to open a window on an uncanny nether world. This is the case in *Poltergeist*, in which the television, a displaced representation of the cinematic apparatus in which film’s technology and film’s magic are both evident, identically collapsing alongside the literal collapse of the haunted house.

Chapter 3:

Between Static and Slime: Ghosts of Film and Television in *Poltergeist*

In my approach to *The Entity* as a narrativization of a struggle between the audience and cinema, I have to some degree strayed from the overall framework that I established in my introduction and utilized in Chapter 1, regarding cinema as lodged between the structuring dialectics of Spiritualism and science, magic and technology. Analyzing *The Legend of Hell House*, it becomes evident that these are false dichotomies, collapsing inward in the character of Fischer and the medium of cinema. In *The Entity*, I switched focus to the audience's relationship with cinema, with the audience, embodied in Carla, in a violent physical struggle with cinema, embodied by the Entity. Moving into *Poltergeist* requires a unification of the preoccupations of the previous chapters.

Poltergeist also concerns spectatorship very centrally, and it is simultaneously fixated on binarism that we may regard as a version of, if not precisely the tension between science and Spiritualism,³⁹ then at least the more generalized dichotomy of evanescence and materiality. *Poltergeist*, as I shall demonstrate, is compulsively driven towards bifurcation and in particular the erection of high/low dichotomies, the most pertinent to my purposes being perhaps film and television. Television is a central image in *Poltergeist* and functions, among other ways, as an uncanny mirror of film, and in

³⁹ When the trappings of science appear in *Poltergeist*, wielded by Dr. Lesh (Beatrice Straight) and her assistants, they are thoroughly subservient to the aims and objectives of Spiritualism, and likewise, in the film's exegesis, technology is exploited for the depiction of the supernatural.

particular an embodiment of film's materiality. Of course, television is not cinema and brings along its own uncanny properties and its own brand of "ghostliness" especially through its capacity for "liveness"; I shall offer analysis of this as well. Nevertheless, I believe that, within *Poltergeist*, television principally functions as a surrogate for cinema, especially as embodiment of cinema's material dimension – television is an object (even an abject one?), where its materiality is as conspicuous as it is inconspicuous in the cinematic experience. Television nonetheless contains a profound symbol of evanescence, static; the ostensibly opposite poles, in this and a variety of other ways, prove to have great similarities.

I have described the haunted house as a location the cohesion of which is constantly being tested. It is likewise with cinema, which exists between the inevitable collapse of its structuring binaries. While the high/low binaries that play out in the Freeling house in *Poltergeist* continue to collapse, the house itself is consistently suffering violent threats to its very physical reality and finally implodes into nothingness, vanishing with little material trace except for that inscribed in the bodies of those who have viewed and experienced it. My object in this chapter is to explore how this collapse comes to bear on *Poltergeist*, a film which is driven to erect binaries and then demolish them, driving forever towards the moment where meaning collapses – the moment where the film ends.

Poltergeist is the story of the Freeling family, Diane (JoBeth Williams) and Steve (Craig T. Nelson) and their very nuclear family, three children and a dog. They live in a California suburb development called the Cuesta Verde Estates, for which Steve works as

a real estate agent. Their five-year-old daughter Carol-Anne (Heather O'Rourke) has an unnerving fixation on the television set, especially when it shows static, and as supernatural events suddenly erupt through the house, she vanishes, sucked into her bedroom closet and ending up in a place normally called "the Other Side," though her voice can be heard through the television static. Steve enlists the aid of a team of parapsychologists under Dr. Lesh, and learns from his boss Mr. Teague (James Karen) that Cuesta Verde was built on a cemetery that the company quietly moved to another location. Dr. Lesh brings in a psychic and professional exorcist named Tangina Barrons (Zelda Rubinstein) to help retrieve Carol-Anne from the Other Side, a portal to which exists in the closet of Carol-Anne's room. Ultimately Diane passes through the portal to retrieve Carol-Anne and Tangina declares the house to be "clean," but the family decides to move away nevertheless. But as they prepare to leave, the house reawakens with spectral happenings as ghosts arrive to reclaim Carol-Anne. It is discovered that the land developers under Teague moved only the headstones from the cemetery but left the bodies.⁴⁰ Desperately fleeing as the house collapses on itself, the Freelings spend the night at a motel outside of town – but only after wheeling the TV set out of the room.

Contrary to earlier chapters, I will not devote a large portion of my analysis to gender. I have several reasons for this, the most fundamental being considerations of space and scope. Gender figures prominently in many of the existing approaches to

⁴⁰ It is an *extraordinarily* common mistake, even in academic sources, to say that Cuesta Verde is built over a Native American burial group. But it is actually built over a regular Christian cemetery. Teague says as much: "It's not ancient tribal burial ground. It's just . . . people." I suspect this confusion stems from *The Shining*, where the Overlook Hotel was indeed built on a Native burial ground, mixed with the Native mysticism which surfaces in *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* (1986).

Poltergeist, and in particular Carol Clover in *Men, Women and Chain Saws* (scattered throughout, but especially pages 72-4, 77-9, 94-97 and 102-7) says little that I would disagree with. In brief, *Poltergeist* is largely consistent with the scheme of gender I have laid out thus far. It feminizes the Spiritual to a considerable degree, with a young girl as a version of the medium, a trio of parapsychologists with two men under a female head (quite like in *The Entity*), and implies throughout that women are inherently more responsive to the supernatural than men. Masculinity is thoroughly questioned throughout *Poltergeist*, with Steve and other masculine structures of the symbolic proving to be just as impotent as they are in *The Entity*.

Spectral Spectatorship

Carrying over a thread from my discussion of *The Entity*, I wish to begin with the subject of spectatorship. Various tropes of spectatorship run through *Poltergeist*, which opens with an extreme close-up of the family's television, as "The Star-Spangled Banner" plays over a montage of images of patriotic Americana. The television channel goes off the air, replaced by the static of white noise that bathes the living room in its flickering light. Steve is sleeping; a passive spectator, he is unable to recognize the coming danger. In fact, throughout the opening portion of the film, characters are very rarely shown actually watching TV, though it is often on. When Carol-Anne looks into the television intently, it is a sign of tension. She resembles the husband in *Dead of Night*, staring into the Screen-Mirror and not seeing what she's supposed to but something else entirely, visible only to her, making her a powerful symbol for film spectatorship. The parallel with *Dead of Night* is especially instructive because Carol-Anne is staring so

intently into static (at one point she even deliberately changes the channel to static), not at any particular image but at the *essence* of the medium, and it is into this that Carol-Anne is eventually drawn. Visualized as static, it is the medium uncoupled from representation, with the inchoate mists of the static realm a potent articulation of Lacan's imaginary. The pre-symbolic is never far away for any of us, and for a child like Carol-Anne, for whom the primal mirror of the Mirror Phase is not far in the past, the danger of falling back into it is very evident indeed.

I have argued for Ann Barrett as the primary audience surrogate in *The Legend of Hell House* and for Carla Moran as an even more central one in *The Entity*. In *Poltergeist*, virtually all the characters play the role of spectator at some point. They stare at the television into which Carol-Anne has vanished, they watch a parade of glittering ghosts walk through the living room and the whirl of toys flying around the children's rooms. Construction workers size up the attractive older sister Dana (Dominique Dunne), brother Robbie (Oliver Robbins) nervously eyes his creepy clown and the tree outside his room, and, in the end, Teague and a crowd of spectators watch in terror as the house implodes into nothingness. However, the central audience surrogate in *Poltergeist* is clearly Carol-Anne. *The Entity* implies that the cinema's physical effect on the viewer's body represents a profound threat to the symbolic order in which movies might initially seem to operate, exposing the audience as passive victims of its power. I have already allied the physicality of the viewer's body with the overall physicality of the apparatus (the projector and the stock that runs through it, the screen and the physical set-up of the theatre), and *Poltergeist* takes this collapse even further, suggesting that the

consequences of spectatorship will include a definite merging of the viewer and the apparatus. Carol-Anne does not just vanish into the television,⁴¹ she *becomes* the television. But not television programming, of which we see none after she enters the television – she has merged with the medium.

The importance and tensions of seeing are reinforced again and again in *Poltergeist*. When we see Steve at work trying to sell a house to a couple, he mentions that he lives in Phase One of the Cuesta Verde Estates. The woman identifies that as: “The area with the lived-in look.” Steve reacts slightly defensively at her reference to his neighbourhood, slipping into salesman mode: “It has that, but I think that in a couple of months, you won’t be able to distinguish Phase One from Phase Three . . . you know, we have a saying around here: ‘The grass grows greener on every side’.” When questioned about the fact that all the houses look the same (emphasized by a dissolve from the Freelings’ kitchen to the identical kitchen in the house Steve is showing), Steve retorts that the construction standards are very liberal and that his neighbour’s alterations were featured in last month’s issue of *Town and Country*. Steve the salesman emphasizes spectatorship in his work, and so does the film, painting a convincing picture of middle-class prosperity on the verge of being inverted by angry spirits. Later in the narrative, Mr. Teague comes by to visit Steve, who has missed work since Carol-Anne’s vanishing. He takes him to a nearby hillside dominated by the cemetery that Teague proposes to relocate to make Phase Five (as he previously did for Phase One). Anxious to keep Steve on his team, Teague tries to bribe him with a new and better house in Phase Five. More

⁴¹ This is true literally as well as figuratively – she vanishes into a vortex in her closet and manifests in “TV Land” afterwards.

specifically, Teague tries to bribe him with a view: “How’s that spot for a bay window?” Steve replies: “It’s pretty nice if you’re living up here, but not so great down there in the valley looking at a bunch of homes cutting into the hillside.” Spectatorial pleasure for one is displeasure for another.

The film further parallels human spectatorship and ghostly spectatorship, the dual character of which I noted while discussing *The Legend of Hell House*. In *Poltergeist* the ghosts too are definitely spectators (they implicitly look out onto the Freeling household through the Big Brother-esque eye of the television), and they have kidnapped Carol-Anne because they are “attracted by her life force,” which is described as a light (like cinema, or perhaps even more to the point, like television). If cinema is a haunted house, the eternally present/absent spectators equally suggest the humans of the house and the ghosts, and *Poltergeist* plays on this paradox, drawing attention to the essential similarity between the two groups – both are defined by *looking*. The twist endings of films like *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and *The Others*, which require a dramatic shift in audience perspective from the human to the ghostly, demonstrate the essential permeability of this divide.

Poltergeist bears a connection to Linda Williams’ aforementioned “Body Genres” theory, especially through the naked terror that many of the characters experience throughout the film (most frequently at horrible *sights*), cuing the audience for an identical reaction. It also frequently invokes another emotion, one that Williams does not discuss but which could very easily fall under her framework. This is open-mouthed astonishment, the most Spielbergian of emotions, with characters often draped in

Spielberg's trademark soft light that so resembles the light from the screen that illuminates the faces of a movie audience. It implicitly reverts the viewers to the uncritical audience of 1895, amazed by the new medium of cinema. Naturally, the Spielbergian special effects cinema of the Post-Classical era may be said to inaugurate a new Cinema of Attractions, selling itself on the merits of its novelty and its capacity for amazing an audience.⁴² The curious sequence where a group of ghosts parade through the Freelings' living room allows an interesting range of reactions from the characters present, with one of Dr. Lesh's assistants, Marty (Martin Casella), reacting in horror and the other, Ryan (Richard Lawson), reacting with amazement. This corresponds to the range of reactions of early viewers of film, allowing for Gorky's uneasy reaction as a counterpoint to the usual astonished one, but always lodged in spectatorship. Like a throwback to the Cinema of Attractions, this scene has only a smidgen of narrative context or explanation, existing principally as a self-contained sequence of wonder.

As in *The Entity*, spectatorship in *Poltergeist* is linked to the physical disruption of the spectator's body. This is most dramatically seen when Marty goes to the haunted kitchen in search of food (more on this in a moment). As he holds a chicken drumstick in his mouth, he watches a pork chop make its own way across the countertop. He trains his flashlight onto it, and just as that light hits it, it bursts with maggots, rotting into slime before his eyes. The drumstick drops from Marty's mouth and he races into the bathroom to vomit. Staring into the mirror above the sink, he watches a parallel disintegration of his

⁴² *Poltergeist* borrows from the language of another proto- and quasi-cinematic locale, the carnival funhouse in pieces of its iconography, like Robbie's deranged clown, and its fondness for subjecting its characters (and audience) to flashing lights and shifting images. Uncoincidentally, Tobe Hooper's previous film was *The Funhouse* (1980).

own face.⁴³ Naturally, in a neat articulation of the dual character of Lacan's mirror, he finally must look into the mirror to confirm the illusion of his bodily cohesion, the same mirror that has just demolished the very same illusion. The film also visualizes a less dramatic but more lasting form of bodily disintegration as the family physically degrades from the stress ("You *look* like shit," the ever-diplomatic Teague informs Steve [emphasis mine]). Everywhere in the film, abject physicality threatens to swell up and overtake the diegetic world. As I have noted, *Poltergeist* is a rare horror film in which nobody dies. Even its human villain, Mr. Teague, is spared, though he does not escape punishment. The worst punishment can this film mete out is spectatorial, ending with Teague standing on the street watching the Freeling home collapse into non-existence. Rather than dying, he is forced to become a witness to the death of his dream. The sight is a terrible blow to Teague who reacts to it physically, letting out an anguished howl of pain and burying his face in his hands. As Steven Shaviro writes, "The cinematic gaze is violently embedded in the flesh" (156). This is the case even with the apparently evanescent, ghostly spectators, whom Tangina refers to as "earth-bound spirits" and who are drawn to the Freeling's world because they miss the pleasures of the flesh, the term here not strictly implying sexuality, but all events that may draw from us bodily reactions . . . just like watching movies.

I Abject!

One word that's been strikingly underused in this thesis thus far is "abjection." A work that employs Lacan, that speaks of "collapsing meaning" and sometimes draws

⁴³ This scene became iconic enough to be parodied in the Spielberg-produced *Casper* (1995).

directly on Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* would seem obliged to use the language of abjection. However, the films themselves do not often invite discussion of abjection, since ghost films so seldom use overtly abject imagery (hence the near absence of any meaningful mention of ghosts in Creed's book, which covers virtually all the other major horror archetypes). I raised this point briefly in my introduction and will return to it here. Ghost films of the classical mould depend on "tracelessness" necessary for the ontological uncertainty of Todorov's fantastic mode; this is part of the reason why I have connected them with the equally traceless medium of cinema. The prime consideration of this thesis, after all, is film's essence, and film is *essentially* clean and non-abject. However, there has long been an abject component present in ghostliness (visible in the Spiritualist invention of ectoplasm), and after a fashion there is a body and thus the potential for abjection present within the cinematic apparatus – the spectator's body. When film tries to draw a physical reaction from its viewer, one that the viewer does not necessarily expect or even desire, it reveals a lack of bodily control (even bodily emission) on the part of the viewer, and therefore implies abjection.

In time film has come to depict ghosts and haunting in more abject ways. *The Amityville Horror* represents a major transitional work in this respect, where the haunted house manifests such unclean physical traits as swarms of flies and bleeding walls. Unlike the voices and spectral visions seen in many other ghost films, these take on an objective character due to their materiality and discourage any attempt to interpret them as subjective and ambiguous. *Poltergeist* seems to exist in an uneasy tension between these two trends, wavering between non-abject and abject depictions of the supernatural,

and the film's incessant need to erect hierarchical distinctions of its various sets of bifurcations. These correspond with film's evanescent and material dimensions, and like that distinction, they inevitably collapse.

Louis Gianetti's *An Introduction to Film Studies* includes a still from *The Innocents* that includes both Miss Giddens and the ghost of Peter Quint in the same shot. The caption notes that throughout most of the film we are unsure of the ghosts' standings, if they are "real" or the governess's hallucinations, "but when an objective camera is used . . . both the governess and the ghost are included in the same space . . . Hence, we conclude that the spirit figure has an independent existence outside of the governess's imagination. He's real" (190). While this logic might suffice for first year students, in truth, such "objective" shots are not necessarily anything of the sort, certainly not in a film like *The Innocents* where we go so deeply within the perspective of a possibly insane character. However, the film also offers a moment when the crying spectre of Miss Jessel (Clytie Jessop) leaves a tear behind. The material trace of a ghost is enough to encourage us to read the ghost as objectively real and something beyond a hallucination. While tears are hardly what we generally think of as an "object" fluid in the conventional sense, this sequence offers a quiet microcosm for the direction ghost films in general would go, with the uncertainty of Todorov's fantastic mode shifting towards the marvelous, the presentation of a world where the supernatural is factual. By the time of *Poltergeist* and *Ghostbusters*, the genre would receive a veritable baptism by goo.

Needless to say, materiality and abjection are not the same thing, though I believe that within my framework the two might be productively regarded as allied. The object is

“the place where meaning collapses, the place where ‘I’ am not” (Kristeva 2, qtd. in Creed 9). It is linked heavily with the body, as the body rebels from the mind’s control and falls short of the Ideal-I’s self-conception, and is often embodied in bodily fluids and wastes like feces, urine and blood. Barbara Creed writes that “The ultimate in abjection is the corpse . . . it signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution . . . the body without a soul” (9-10). Creed further notes that several of the most popular horror figures – vampires, ghouls, zombies and robots – are each versions of “bodies without soul.” Though she does not include the ghost in her examples, we may now regard, for example, the discovery of Emeric Belasco’s corpse as a profound intrusion of the abject, as well as a parallel revelation of film’s materiality. *Poltergeist* contains a host of similar scenes. Early on, Carol-Anne stumbles on her mother trying to flush her dead canary down the toilet, a neat linkage of death and excrement in a way congruent with Kristeva’s theories.⁴⁴ The canary is buried in a cigar box under the flowerbed in the back yard, which doesn’t last long before being dug up by a backhoe to make room for a pool. And in the end, the dead bodies of the cemetery lurch from underneath the house, covered with excremental mud.

Tropes of abjection run throughout *Poltergeist*, a film especially fond of grotesque reminders of the body’s fragility. The best example of this has the pork chop turning to rotten slime on the kitchen counter setting the stage for Marty’s vivid vision of

⁴⁴ Writes Kristeva: “These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty on the part of death . . . Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere* [to fall], cadaver” (3). Carol-Anne’s consistent role is preventing the dead from going “where they’re supposed to go,” whether it’s the canary down the toilet or the ghosts to the “real light” of salvation.

a parallel disintegration of his own face and flesh. That sequence involves food, a buried motif in the film; food, too, has a very real presence in the cinematic experience, as any popcorn vendor or theatre-sweep can tell you. Kristeva writes that “food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (3). Certainly in the mirror sequence of *Poltergeist* the desire for food is linked with human fragility, with Marty’s reaction of “food loathing” very typical of the dialogue of abjection. It is hunger, a fundamental reminder of the body’s weakness, that compels Marty into the kitchen, and he has a chicken leg in his mouth as he sees the pork chop disintegrate; Marty soon finds himself vomiting rather than eating, but both acts are equally suggestive of the abject.

Poltergeist is fixated on consumption, from the pickle Dana suggestively munches and the waffle Robbie surreptitiously slips to the dog under the table at breakfast to the coffee one of the construction workers steals through the window and the flask Lesh shares with Diane. Carol-Anne insists on burying the canary with three strips of licorice for “when he’s hungry,” a prefiguration of the supernatural’s dark brand of consumption, with the tree trying to eat Robbie and a lashing “tongue” appearing from the vortex to drag people in. This food and consumption motif is established in the opening sequence as it follows the family dog E. Buzz as it wanders the house eating scraps and leftovers, taking from everyone,⁴⁵ these leftovers representing a form of surplus or waste.

The dog’s indiscriminate consumption links it with Teague, the cold-hearted capitalist who cares for nothing but the bottom line.⁴⁶ And since it was Teague who left

⁴⁵ Indeed, far from the heroic pet that we might expect to find completing the film’s nuclear family dynamic, E. Buzz is no help against the ghosts. Rather, he is shown trying to give them toys.

⁴⁶ The dog’s name likely comes from E. Buzz Miller, Dan Aykroyd’s lecherous late-night television

the bodies under Cuesta Verde, they constitute a profound material (excremental) “trace” of his actions, the symbolic excrement of his duplicitous capitalism (“Cuesta Verde” is Spanish for “I steal green”).⁴⁷ The entire suburb, then, is built on a heap of lies and corpses, prettified and sold on a buyer’s market. Nor does the family escape this stain of abjection; Steve, Teague’s most effective sales rep, has worked to perpetuate this lie (perhaps this is the reason the ghosts have singled out this family for their haunting).

All these abject tendencies, however, are in conflict with the tendencies within both the ghost film at large and *Poltergeist* in particular to envision the supernatural as traceless and clean. Just as often the ghosts are rendered in clean optical effects, seen as a parade of departed souls that fill the Freeling’s living room and vanish without a trace, or the white flashing lights that fill the children’s bedroom. Indeed, the language of cleanness runs through the film alongside the abjection, most memorably in Tangina’s line “This house is clean.” But actually, the house becomes strikingly less clean after Tangina works her magic, with a stronger presence for abjection heralded by Diane and Carol-Anne’s re-entry into the world covered by a coating of material that looks much like red currant jelly⁴⁸ and equally suggests afterbirth and ectoplasm. They are immediately ushered into the bath, an attempt to wash away the influence of the supernatural. Diane’s return to the bathtub later in the film heralds the parallel re-eruption

personality on *Saturday Night Live*. This character is frequently confused (including by me, at first) with Irwin Mainway, Aykroyd’s snake-oil salesman who is forever selling ludicrously unsafe projects like the children’s toy “Bag o’ Glass.” Irwin Mainway and Mr. Teague are brothers under the skin.

⁴⁷ Compare Stuart M. Kaminsky’s observation that “The fact that the money in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* is buried in a graveyard can have immense Marxist and Freudian overtones – with money, associated with feces and death, accumulated through the old work ethic or death ethic” (55).

⁴⁸ Linda Badley’s description (46) evokes food, once again.

of the supernatural from the children's closet. Diane has been physically marked by her visit to the Other Side by a shock of white hair; only once she dyes it out of existence do the ghosts reappear, an instance of the ghosts reasserting abjection against attempts to deny and exclude it. Now, when the vortex reappears, it is very different, not a point of flashing light but as a physical tunnel of a distinctly anal or vaginal character. It may seem, then, that abjection/materiality finally wins out over evanescent cleanliness, finally embodied in the field of corpses that lurch in the mud under Cuesta Verde and the film's disavowal of the "cleanness" associated with suburban life. However, it is equally evident that, by the end of the film, the distinction between materiality and evanescence is scarcely tenable. The film's evocation of the Spiritualists' most curious invention, the paradoxical substance called ectoplasm, does much to underline the two poles' essential similarity in the face of their opposition.

Enter Ectoplasm: Industrial Ghosts and Magic

I glossed over the concept of ectoplasm in my introduction, and I return to it now, precisely at the moment that Hollywood seems to have discovered it. For the Spiritualists of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries,⁴⁹ the term "ectoplasm" referred to whitish material that was said to ooze, often painfully, from orifices of mediums, especially their noses, mouths, nipples and genitals. Ectoplasm was the most corporeal form of the mediums' projections and ostensibly the most scientific, since it was supposed to provide physical, verifiable evidence of the supernatural. As Karl Schoonver

⁴⁹ Indeed, ectoplasm seems to have enjoyed its major boom in the first decades of the Twentieth Century, after the invention of cinema, suggesting that its pseudo-cinematic character and appeal may be no coincidence.

notes, ectoplasm (and in particular the practice of photographing mediums exuding ectoplasm) bears a marked difference from early spirit photography, which “de-emphasize the body . . . The rigidly posed human subject . . . rarely displays emotion or movement and appears either unprovoked by the apparitions or unaware of their presence. The ghosts themselves have little effect on the mortal world, seemingly unable to disrupt the human subjects or disturb other elements in the mise-en-scene” (33). The abject slime that is ectoplasm, on the other hand, is dependent on “a human medium in the throes of violent struggle with an invisible entity” (33), a description that can now hardly fail to conjure up *The Entity*, especially coupled with the fact that virtually all mediums were women (abjection, of course, is centrally connected to the female body, with Kristeva’s conception of abjection flowing from the figure of the primal mother). The cleanliness and tracelessness of the earlier forms of Spiritualist conjuration have been shuffled aside, abject and taboo substances now exalted.

Ectoplasm was described as “milky white in color and smelling like ozone . . . The substance could be light and airy, like smoke, or sticky and viscous” (Guiley 104, qtd. in Badley 47). The reference to the smell of ozone links ectoplasm to electricity and reinforces the standing of the medium as analogous to communications technology (“It’s electrical,” notes Ryan in *Poltergeist* at a stray flash of light at the breakfast table. “You can smell the charge.”), and the potential for ectoplasm to span a range of physicality and immateriality reflects its status as a liminal substance between matter and spirit. Both Tom Gunning (in “Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations”) and Karl Schoonver relate ectoplasm to the idea of indexicality in photography. Like the photograph,

ectoplasm represents a trace of reality, in this case a trace of the traceless. As Linda Badley writes, “the very concept of ectoplasm, like the concept of anti-matter, was mind boggling. It was the visual, tangible representation of ‘spirit,’ the word made if not flesh something close to it. Ectoplasm destroyed the most basic distinctions between mind and body, medium and message” (44). Ectoplasm is paradox reified; quite like film, another such interstitial category between body and spirit, it combines properties of materiality and insubstantiality. It is spirit made flesh.

Ectoplasm was first and foremost a medium of depiction. Ghostly faces, especially those of the famous dead (Abraham Lincoln was a particularly popular choice), would appear in the ectoplasm; sometimes it would even form into the “full materializations,” walking, talking apparitions like Florence Cook’s famous alter ego Katie King. As explained in my introduction, ectoplasm marked the post-Civil War shift in Spiritualism away from strictly auditory displays of the supernatural towards more concrete and visual embodiments like spirit photographs and full materializations. This was also implicitly a move in the Spiritualist movement away from communication (or the illusion of the same), as in the *séance*, and towards pure spectatorship, the production of novel and astonishing sights for the consumption of a paying public in a way that anticipates the Cinema of Attractions. Like film, it is not possible, or at least not advised, to touch ectoplasm. James Randi states that “sitters are prohibited from touching the ectoplasm, for fear that the medium may be harmed,” adding that “it may be that the reputation of the medium might also suffer” (86). Like film, ectoplasm generates light (Randi 85), but paradoxically can only exist in darkness (a favourite conceit of the

Spiritualists, who had a multitude of reasons to keep the lights down at their séances). Even the flash of the camera, it was said, was enough to destroy it. “The technology that secured a lasting material record of the ghostly manifestation also eradicated the physical phenomenon itself,” writes Schoonver, “reducing any material evidence of spirit activity to a mechanical tracing” (30).

Ectoplasm figures in *The Legend of Hell House* in 1973, depicted with a discrete optical effect as white strands emerge from Florence Tanner’s fingers as she begins to conjure a figure she believes is Daniel Belasco. But it is one of only two films prior to *Poltergeist* that I can identify to depict ectoplasm or a substance inferable to be ectoplasm.⁵⁰ The other is Tod Browning’s last film, *Miracles for Sale* (1939), in which a medium “goes into a trance, her chest becomes pale in colour, and a cloud of ectoplasmic-like substance rises above her, its ‘tail’ streaming back towards her as it rises. The shape elongates and the face of [a murder victim] appears. A conversation is conducted by means of yes/no raps until Mme. Rapport comes out of her trance and screams, and the ectoplasm vanishes” (Ruffles 119). Both *Miracles for Sale* and *The Legend of Hell House* place ectoplasm in the context of Spiritualist mediumship (a connection which seems to vanish in the 1980’s) and emphasizes its ephemeral tracelessness, thus de-emphasizing its material abjection.

The 1980’s saw a definitional shift away in the word ectoplasm, away from the Spiritualist meaning described above. The term came to describe the sticky detritus left behind by the path of the newly abject ghost, mediumship now excluded from the

⁵⁰ The word itself had some presence: William Castle’s *13 Ghosts* boasted of its “ectoplasmic colour.” It is also used in *Voices* (1972), among other places.

definition. This definition rode on *Ghostbusters* and its jargonized language of the supernatural (*Ghostbusters* also deserves credit for turning “slime” into a verb, a victory for the abject if ever there was one). What is consistent between these two “ectoplasms,” however, is just that factor of depiction. Whether oozing from a medium’s nose or depicted on a movie screen with expensive special effects, they provide material, concrete embodiment of the supernatural. It remains linked to the human body as well, for filmmakers seem to like nothing more than to cover characters’ bodies with ectoplasmic slime. Even more so than *Ghostbusters*, though, I think that *Poltergeist* (which does not use the word ectoplasm) marks the best example of this shift towards the abject, since in *Poltergeist* it is embedded in the level of narrative. As Badley writes, “*Poltergeist* brought goo into the ghost story proper – buckets and buckets of goo” (44).

It should be no surprise that this shift towards the ghostly abject coincided with the unification of the ghost film and the special effects blockbuster in *Poltergeist*, and that it happened under the auspices of Steven Spielberg. *Poltergeist* is something that *The Entity* and *The Legend of Hell House* are plainly not – a special effect picture. In my discussions of Spiritualism thus far, I have avoided making reference to fakery, or passing judgment on whether or not its practitioners were outright fakers, deluded true believers or genuine practitioners of supernatural arts. In the section of my introduction on Spiritualism, I gave little or no emphasis to the fact that many of the specific figures I mentioned, including Florence Cook, William Mumler (the inventor of spirit photography) and even the Fox sisters of the Rochester Knockings, were eventually revealed to be frauds. I have not considered the issue of their veracity to be an especially

productive one for my purposes until now. It is possible to engage with the Spiritualists as entertainers, masters of exploiting light and illusion, and their spectator's senses, in conjuring images that astonished their audiences.⁵¹ They are like filmmakers, then, and perhaps the filmmakers they resemble most are special effects filmmakers. Spiritualism (and its close cousin and frequent sparring partner, stage magic) had its most direct impact on cinema through the trick films of the Cinema of Attractions. Ectoplasm here is a suitable metaphor: if ectoplasm was indeed nothing but cheesecloth or sheep entrails treated with luminous paint, only exhibited in partial darkness to prevent close inspection, people were taken in by it nonetheless. The medium's game, like that of the stage magician or the special effects artist, is misdirection, burying the spectator in illusion so to keep him or her from looking for the seams. Indeed, the most familiar dialogue of "film magic" is in relation to special effects: one need think only of George Lucas's effects firm Industrial Light and Magic, a name which neatly collapses technological precision and magical imagination into one.

The increased complexity of special effects technology, alongside the shift of focus to abject, material effects, helps shift the cinematic ghost story from the fantastic mode to the marvelous. The more advanced the effects, the more "real" they become in their unreality. This saps the ontological uncertainty that is a feature of many ghost tales. One need look no further than Jan DeBont's remake of *The Haunting* (1999), where state-of-the-art effects transform the original masterpiece of ambiguity, in which nothing is ever seen, into a cut-and-paste narrative in which *everything* is seen. There no longer

⁵¹ More than that, they convinced their audiences of the absolute veracity of their productions, a skill many filmmakers would certainly envy.

exists the tantalizing possibility, as in the original, that the ghosts are merely the projection of a deranged mind. While the two *Hauntings* provide an easy contrast, this trend goes far beyond them. Consequently, when we find a Barrett/Sneiderman-like naysayer in these later films, it is as a character like Walter Peck (William Atherton) in *Ghostbusters* or Dr. Seaton (Richard Fire) in *Poltergeist III*, a priggish bureaucrat who possesses not a whit of real credibility, a minor villain who must be appropriately punished by the narrative. Who could credibly deny the ghosts' existence, when we the audience see them so convincingly? Like the tagline for the special effects-heavy Spielberg-produced *Casper* promises, "Seeing is believing."

Pauline Kael wrote in her review of *Poltergeist*, "You've become the director's target: you're being subjected to thrills, bombarded by them . . . the director puts you in the position of being a connoisseur of special effects . . . The special effects are so varied that the film turns into a showcase for special effects" (351-2). She is right both in recognizing the essential targeting of the audience, and the fact that audience is "bombarded" by cinema. Kael is correct too in noting the inconsistency of the effects, one of *Poltergeist*'s most puzzling features. They alternate between traceless optical effects and abject practical effects, again wavering between the very ephemeral and the very abject. One might say that it exists on two rising curves in horror and adventure films at once, reflecting the rise of the optical-effects heavy special effects blockbuster and the rise of the brutal and abject "body horror," a prime instigator of which was none other than Tobe Hooper, the director of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). David Skal discusses the rise of gruesome special effects in *The Monster Show*, but his intricate

descriptions of foam latex, the substance that made all manner of new bodily distortions, suggest a new version of ectoplasm: a colourless and shapeless goo that, properly shaped, may become anything, and is especially a potent means of depicting the grotesque.

It might fairly be said that cinema was becoming increasingly abject in the period of *Poltergeist*'s release – or at least that it was more willing to exploit its abject potential. Cinema's most abject feature, however, is as old as cinema itself, its ability to provoke bodily reactions in its viewers. This, of course, is a major preoccupation of horror films, one that likely gained new appreciation with reports of audience members vomiting while watching *The Exorcist* (1973). The clearest such gross-out moment in *Poltergeist* is the mirror sequence, where Marty's spectatorial horror and disgust cues a parallel reaction in the audience, with spectatorship leading to bodily transformation. The abjection of cinema exists in its capacity for drawing such bodily reactions from the audience; the formal physicality of the apparatus remains clean and non-abject, and so, superficially, is television. Nevertheless, within *Poltergeist* television functions in part as an embodiment of film's material, corporeal and therefore potentially abject side.

Abject Television?

Is television abject? It seems instinctual to say "no" (or even "no!"), though it does perhaps suit the broadest definition of the term, that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4) at least in so far as that television occupies a border position between being of the home and not of the home. I would suggest that television is actually more abject than cinema, at the very least since it is more physical and with all materiality there exists the potential for abjection. Consider, too, the famous description

of 1961 television by Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow as a “vast wasteland.” Jeffrey Sconce puns on this phrase when he describes Carol-Anne “sucked into the haunted set’s vast ghostland” (164). Let us not miss the excremental metaphor inherent in *wasteland*.

There is a sense in which television, film’s more obviously physical cousin, has – or at least appears to have – a greater potential to encourage bodily responses in the spectator tending toward the abject, a potential that flows from that very physicality. Where cinema may make us nauseous, aroused or thrilled, it seldom seems to have the capacity to work profound bodily changes in its audience to the degree that television is frequently charged with. Worse yet, television is said to work insidiously, beneath the spectator’s notice. Whether the science behind “don’t sit too close to the television set” paranoia is valid or not makes little real difference – I am willing to guess that no one has ever posited a threat in sitting too close to a cinema screen. *Poltergeist* acknowledges this mania directly, as Diane comes upon Carol-Anne staring into static. “Oh, honey, you’re going to ruin your eyes,” she says. “This is no good for you.” She obliviously switches the channel to a war film and walks away, neither moving Carol-Anne farther away from the set nor recognizing the true danger facing her daughter.

Television’s opponents have often used the motif of profound physical transformation under the medium’s influence. Lynn Spigel reproduces a cartoon from a 1950 issue of *Ladies’ Home Journal* featuring a twisted creature called a “telebugeye” with an alarmist text:

This pale, weak, stupid-looking creature is a Telebugeye and, as you can see, it

grew bug-eyed by looking at television too long. Telebugeyes just sit and sit watching, watching. This one doesn't wear shoes because it never goes out in the fresh air any more, and it's skinny because it doesn't get any exercise. The hair on this Telebugeye is straggly and long because it won't get a haircut for fear of missing a program. What idiots Telebugeyes are. WERE YOU A TELEBUGEYE THIS MONTH? (51).

1978 saw the release of Jerry Mander's influential *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, an apocalypse-flavoured tome that paints television not as a neutral technology that needs to be reformed and recuperated, but an irredeemable menace that worms its way into human minds and society at large, reaping a huge destructive influence beneath the notice of anyone (which is to say that its evil is inscribed on the level of medium). The third of Mander's four broad arguments is called "Effects of Television on the Human Being," where he investigates various angles, from eyestrain to hypnosis to sleep teaching, assembling a body of evidence that television watching has a very real and deleterious effect on the human body. One passage reads as follows:

When you are watching television, you are experiencing something like lines of energy passing from cathode gun to phosphor through your eyes into your body. You are as connected to the television set as your arm would be to the electric current in the wall . . . if you had stuck a knife in the socket.

These are not metaphors. There is a concentrated passage of energy from machine to you, and none in the reverse. In this sense, the machine is literally dominant, and you are passive (171).

Mander speaks of the television set as a source of x-rays, an argument explicitly figured in terms of object bodily distortion: "In one celebrated series of studies, the roots of bean plants . . . placed in front of a colour television set grew *upward* out of the soil. Another set of plants became monstrously large and distorted. Mice which were similarly placed developed cancerous lesions" (172). At points, Mander even uses cinema as a

counterpoint, as when he notes that “The eyes move *less* while watching television than in any other experience of daily life . . . the eyes do not move as much as they do when seeing a movie, where the very size of the theatre screen requires eye and even head movement” (165).

One could make a strong *prima facie* case that 1982 and 1983 represent the pinnacle of mass anxiety over television’s *bodily* effects on the viewer, seeing the release of *Poltergeist*, David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983), and *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (1982), the bizarre sequel that disposes of Michael Myers in favour of an unrelated Halloween-themed horror story. *Videodrome* offers the most abject television of all, which pulses and ripples like flesh, responds to the touch and explodes with human entrails. The “Videodrome signal,” which is eventually revealed to exist at the level of medium and not content, produces fundamental and bizarre transformations in the physicality of those exposed to it, here couched in Cronenbergian language of “the New Flesh.” The mad media prophet Brian O’Blivion (Jack Creley) preaches that the divide between the body and the television set has been abolished: “The television is the retina of the mind’s eye. Therefore the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain . . .” O’Blivion’s rhetoric is not that far removed from Mander’s discussion of the viewer’s physical connectedness to the television. *Halloween III* involves a mad Irish toy maker named Cochran (Dan O’Herlihy) who plots to destroy America’s children through an outlandish mix of technology and mysticism. His company floods the market with his “Silver Shamrock” Halloween masks, promoted with an infuriating jingle that seems to play on TV constantly. Each mask is implanted with a piece of stone from a piece of

Stonehenge that Cochran has stolen. At the proper point on Halloween night, all children are directed (by TV advertising, naturally) to crowd around the television set, a computer signal will be activated that makes their faces erupt with snakes and insects that will kill them painfully.⁵² These three films, ranging from blockbuster to art horror to lame slasher sequel, are remarkably consistent in their themes of corporate exploitation, abject goo and television as having profoundly negative *physical* effects on its viewers.

The physicality of television is established in *Poltergeist*'s first moments, where the extreme close up on the television shows us the images broken apart by pixillation in a way that never happens to the cinematic image. It is swiftly replaced by evanescent static, but the pixillation reminds us that the television image is always a fragile image (in fact, it always contains static!), more obviously so than cinema. But here we also find these binaries of the material and the evanescent beginning to collapse; evanescence is located within materiality (or phrased differently, on analysis television proves to combine properties of insubstantiality and substantiality, just like ectoplasm). We shall find, in fact, that the film's most extreme embodiments of the material and evanescence, ectoplasm and static, prove to be similar expressions of meaning's collapse into the pre-symbolic.

Imaginary Friends: "Last night, Carol-Anne was in the Kingdom of Static"

Standing in ostensible opposition to ectoplasm in *Poltergeist* is static. If ectoplasm is the ultimate version of the film's abject tendencies, static is its opposite number, completely inchoate and formless, an extreme of abstraction. If ectoplasm is

⁵² Not one of the more child-friendly narratives in the history of cinema. Every child in *Halloween III* is annoying and shown as deserving its fate.

always about depiction, as I have argued, the screen of static that is a central image in *Poltergeist* is a paradox of another sort – the image shorn of the necessity of representing *anything*. The film twice shows the montage of patriotic American images, from Iwo Jima to the Lincoln Memorial, that closes the broadcast day. These symbolic images, packed with meaning good or ill, inevitably give way to static and meaninglessness. If the ghost story is, as Gillian Beer contends, a narrative of “the usurpation of space by the immaterial” (260), static provides an appropriate example, associating immateriality with a lack of signification. The static is meaninglessness incarnate. Jeffrey Sconce notes that television seems to have the capacity to “generate [its] own autonomous spirit world” (rather than being a simple conduit to an existing spirit world, like earlier media) “an ‘electric nowhere’ . . . a zone of suspended animation, a form of oblivion from which viewers might not ever escape” (127, 131), the Other Side, what Gorky might call a Kingdom of Static, must be a place of meaning’s ultimate collapse.⁵³

When Carol-Anne starts talking about the “TV people,” her family pays it little mind, assuming them to be new imaginary friends. However, they are just that, figures of Lacan’s imaginary, the fundamental fantasy that exacts a pull on all subjects, with Carol-Anne, a being who has more recently risen to the symbolic order, being a suitable choice to feel its pull most strongly (note that through the early scenes of *Poltergeist* Carol-Anne does not seem to fear the ghosts, but rather welcomes their presence). In the opening sequence, Carol-Anne speaks into the field of static on the television screen (a version of

⁵³ Garrett Stewart refers to the static in *Poltergeist* as “stroboscopic” (168), producing a “strobe effect” on the Freeling’s domestic space. Even though *Poltergeist* constructs film as more stable than television, this has the effect of reminding us that the filmic image, too, is constructed of movements of stillness and has unperceivable gaps built into its essence.

the primal mirror): “Hello! What do you look like? Talk louder, I can’t hear you.” Then after a pause, she says “Five. Yes. Yes. I don’t know. I don’t know.” She is a creature of the symbolic and therefore uses language to address the land of the imaginary, though it’s fitting that most of her dialogue largely reflects incomprehension. Once she is in the Other Side, Carol-Anne is at first able to speak through the television to her parents but begins to lose this ability as her connection to the symbolic erodes.⁵⁴ At the same time, however, the imaginary cannot be separated from the real, the other half of the pre-symbolic dyad, and so her immersion into the abstract world of the imaginary is simultaneously a bath in the real, a reversion to the fleshy confines of the womb (when the illusion that we control our bodies and their fluids erodes, the truth is laid bare – they control us). Just as ghosts of the Other Side seem disembodied but ultimately prove (like Belasco) to retain an indexical link to their abject bodies, so too is the imaginary (static) located within a material, real form like television. Indeed, the process Carol-Anne goes through – intense spectatorship resulting in a reversion to a womblike state of quiet immobility – is akin to that which we go through every time we go to a movie.

But what *is* static? Ron Kaufman gives an explanation going back to nothing less than the Big Bang. In short, static on a television set is a trace of cosmic microwave background radiation, composed of high energy photons that have been cooling since the universe’s beginning: “When you are watching TV, you are watching static. The TV signal is not perfect, there are always small random electrons that go astray when the images are shot onto the screen . . . You may not see it, but the background radiation is

⁵⁴ The fact that the verbal threat from Steve of a spanking re-ushers Carol-Anne into the symbolic provides a tidy articulation of Lacan’s Law of the Father and its relationship to the symbolic.

always there. So the static is always there” (2). In other words, static is a fundamental underlying factor of television, which rhymes with Lacanian theory – the pre-symbolic is never far away, be it the real (slime) or the imaginary (static). The link between static and things cosmic is reflected in *Poltergeist*’s conflation of outer space and the spirit realm. This is made most literal when Dr. Lesh and her assistants discuss where Carol-Anne’s voice might be coming from as they hear it through the white noise. Ryan says: “The absence of a channel that is not receiving a broadcast means that it can receive a lot of noise from all sorts of thing things, like short waves . . . outer space. Or inner space.” Indeed, television signals often literally come from outer space, bounced off satellites. Likewise, Dr. Lesh speaks of herself feeling “like the proto-human coming out of the forest primeval and seeing the moon for the first time and throwing rocks at it,” perhaps forging another high-low distinction between the moon and television, both luminous objects of simultaneous fascination and terror.⁵⁵ The children’s bedroom is also associated with outer space, through the posters for interstellar narratives *Alien* (1979) and *Star Wars* (1977), as well as a preponderance of *Star Wars* iconography in the form of toys, blankets and the like. This room, too, is the locus for the bulk of the more evanescent and optical depictions of the supernatural. And at risk of stating the obvious, like space, it is upstairs.

Upstairs, Downstairs: A Hierarchy of Haunting

The distinction between the film’s abject and non-abject tendencies (with their most extreme representations in the slime and static that furnish me with the title for this

⁵⁵ Jerry Mander writes, “Anne Waldman, the poet, has suggested that television might itself represent a surrogate moon; a substitute for the original experience for which we, somewhere, continue to long” (170).

chapter) is only one of the many hierarchies *Poltergeist* constructs. Critics have recognized the film's tendencies towards bifurcation, often attempting to attribute it to the split in authorial voices. Tobe Hooper is the credited director of *Poltergeist*, with Steven Spielberg receiving producing and writing credits. However, it is widely held that, for whatever reason, Hooper was informally dismissed early in the process, with Spielberg taking on de facto directorial duties for himself. Many have tried to account for this dual authorship within the film itself. Tony Williams, for example, speaks of Spielberg "oppressing any of the differences Tobe Hooper intended" (225). One can certainly be forgiven for expecting a different vision of family life from the director of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* than that of *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), and it seems irresistible to propose that the dual ending of *Poltergeist* is divided between a Spielberg ending (with flashing lights and digital effects) and a Hooper one (with corpses and much mud) – in other words, with the non-object glibly labeled "Spielberg" and the object labeled "Hooper." Rob Latham envisions a slightly more complex relationship, considering *Poltergeist* as "an uneasy alliance between Spielberg's confidence in the suburban project and Hooper's corrosive contempt for bourgeois institutions" (203). As we are not party to the exact dynamics of Hooper and Spielberg's relationship or their individual contributions to *Poltergeist*, it seems to me unproductive to speculate about it, but it is a useful starting place for describing the film's obvious internal dividedness.

The ghosts transfer from playful to vicious, from very abstract to very object, and even have two separate and not obviously reconcilable sets of motivations, 1: they are attracted to Carol-Anne's life force, which has distracted them from the light of heaven

and caused them to linger on earth, and 2: they are angry about Teague's desecration of the graveyard in which they were buried. On two occasions objects fall out of the Other Side by route of the living room ceiling; the first time they are completely clean, while the second they are covered in ectoplasmic goo. The film has two distinct climaxes, one featuring a lot of flashing lights and cleanly optical effects, the other with a lot of muck and skeletons rising from the mud. The first highlights film's potential for visualizing the evanescent, while the second depends on film's ability to depict the abject.

Uncoincidentally, the first climax principally takes place upstairs, in the children's second floor room, while the second climax takes place all over the house but draws most attention to a place *underneath* the house, to the pond of mud within the newly excavated swimming pool and the skeletons even further beneath.

The hierarchy between the evanescent and the material is built into the mise-en-scene of the house itself, with the upper floor (the children's room) housing the entryway to the spirit world, the living room ceiling (ground floor) housing the exit point. The bulk of the more material horror (with Marty's episode in the bathroom being the clearest example) takes place on the ground floor, with the bulk of the optical effects expended upstairs. But the distinction here is more a permeable wall than a rigid boundary, reflecting the house's status as a location in collapse, where boundaries blur. After all, the parade of ghosts that the parapsychologists record starts out on the second floor but marches *down* the staircase, only to vanish upwards, and the very material tree (which spans all levels, from roots deep below ground to branches high above the house) attacks Robbie through a second floor window. The Kingdom of Static proves a paradoxically

abject place, with slime clinging to the rope and tennis balls as they leave it, and with Diane and Carol-Anne remerge, from the other side bathed in the abject, *falling* back to earth and the ground floor, the distinction of levels – or between materiality and evanescence – no longer seems to matter.

In Tangina's lengthy speech, she explains that the ghosts have kidnapped Carol-Anne because of "her life force . . . a light that implies life and memory of love and home and earthly pleasures, something that they desperately desire but cannot have any more." In this version of the dialectic, we find Carol-Anne located in the lower position as she represents the ghosts' tie to the earthly plain and the body. Tangina goes on to say that Carol-Anne is "a terrible distraction from the real light that has finally come for them." The simultaneous association of Carol-Anne with the body ("earthly pleasures" would seem to justify the buried themes of food and sex – hence the presence of Dana and her burgeoning sexuality, even though she's virtually extraneous to the narrative – present in *Poltergeist*) and domesticity suggests an equivalence of body and home. Certainly both are equivalently lower within *Poltergeist*'s belief system than the idealized "real light" ("Inside this spectral light is salvation," Tangina says) that ghosts *should* go towards, with the Other Side as an interstitial gap between the two.

The "big light"/"little light" dichotomy can hardly fail to suggest the film's divided scheme of special effects, and, even more fundamentally, the distinction between cinema and television. Returning first to special effects, the most obvious example of the film's inconsistency in style is the portal in the children's closet, which goes from a nest of flashing lights to a giant pulsating tube, complete with a tongue-like feeler that grabs at

people – the very same vortex figured twice by two different special effect processes. Perhaps the most useful example for my purposes, however, is in the aforementioned sequence where a glittering optical ghost wanders through the living room before vanishing, either unaware or simply not acknowledging the amazed humans present. The incident is recorded onto videotape by Dr. Lesh's assistants, who then play it back on one of the numerous television sets they've brought with them.

Douglas Kellner writes of this incident that "The poltergeists are actually recorded and played back on a video recorder, demonstrating the mechanical reproducibility of everything in media society and the possibility of instant replay. We see here, symbolically portrayed, the power of television, a power so great that cinema might be obliterated . . ." (127). He suggests that the fear of television's power on the part of the film industry underlines the film's "evil TV." Without necessarily nullifying this reading, I will suggest that what's most evident in this sequence is not television's strength but its weakness, or at very least its *difference* from film. The images of the ghosts recorded onto videotape are strikingly different from those the family sees – that we see – in the living room. The original, *cinematic* spectre is a single floating mass of light with shroud-like tendrils swirling around it. On the videotape, however, the image is strikingly different, a long procession of featureless balls of light. The effect of recording live events within the diegesis of the film (read: cinema) and displaying them on the small screen is one of transformation, even something of a diminishment, since the image

of the videotape is less spectacular and, of course, smaller.⁵⁶ The formal elements within the sequence underlines that impression, with the camera zooming close in on the TV but the cutting away just before it fills the frame, the implication being that, no matter how much television might approach film, it can never reach it

So to say that television functions as a representative of film within the self-reflexive dimension of *Poltergeist* would be accurate, but incomplete. More like it, we might envision television as a partial *surrogate* for film, and *Poltergeist* is interested in both the differences between the two media and their similarities; television both is and is not like film. Television provides a particularly useful symbol of cinema's technological, material, mechanical dimensions. But before returning to that angle, I will now move into a discussion of how *Poltergeist* exploits television as a separate medium to cinema, with a potential for the uncanny all its own. This represents a detour from the main thrust of my argument, but I think it is important to take some time to contemplate television's own ghostly properties, akin to but distinct from those of film, with an eye to, perhaps, working towards a parallel theory of ghostliness for television (an adequate treatment of which would probably require another thesis-length work, at the least).

Liveness: A Televisual Uncanny

It may be productive now to take a step back and return to the concept of the uncanny as it applies to television. As television is the most domestic of all media and

⁵⁶ A similar case is the sequence in which Ryan boasts about having photographed a child's toy moving seven feet over a seven hour period, evident only through time lapse camera. This is comically juxtaposed with the children's room, now whirling with ghostly activity. Here again we have a hierarchy between the modest disappointments of TV-scale recordings and the special effects extravaganzas of cinematic "reality."

perhaps all art forms today, which is to say, the most homely/*heimlich*, from which potential for the *unheimlich*/uncanny inevitably follows. The association of television with the uncanny is the evolution of the trend beginning with the telegraph of mass anxiety surrounding new inventions, as Jeffrey Sconce describes in *Haunted Media* and as I summarized in my introduction. Sconce devotes a chapter entitled “Stasis and Static” to television’s ghosts, discussing particularly the way that *The Outer Limits* and *The Twilight Zone* reconfigure television itself into an occult netherworld. Sconce unearths a fascinating 1962 television repair advertisement that showed a ghostly outline fluttering over a domestic TV antenna. A gnarled tree appears on its right, looking curiously like the one in *Poltergeist*. The ad asks:

Getting a TV ghost? There’s a house on our block that everyone thought was haunted – shades were pulled all day, there was never a light on in the house. As it turned out, the only thing that was haunted about the house was the TV picture. It was so ghostly-dim that you couldn’t see it, if there was a glimmer of light in the house. So, if you have a ghostly-dim TV picture, let us make it brighter than new with G-E tubes (Sconce 124-5).

This ad provides a neat collapse of television’s simultaneous qualities as uncanny and familial, while reflecting several other central narratives, including the association of ghosts with light, the foundation of television (and film!), the transformation of the house to an uncanny space under television’s ghostly influence, and finally the “selling” of ghostliness, the company advertising for a techno-exorcist to “banish” the unwanted spirits. In a sense, the advent of home media like the radio and television transformed all homes into the Fox House where the Rochester Knockings occurred, a place where the spirits of beyond are accessible and even, after a fashion, answerable to the owners, the

remote control turning into a modern day magic wand that makes anyone into a modern day wizard. It turns the living room into a séance room. Television does more than import the filmic image into the domestic sphere. It brings *cinema* home, importing the entire apparatus with it in miniature, and expands the entire (haunted) house into a setting akin to a movie theatre, a point made as white light ripples throughout the dark house in the opening sequence of *Poltergeist*. The link between haunted house and movie theatre is cemented by the television's presence.

Poltergeist makes the point that television allows "ghosts" to enter the house with a well-chosen clip from the World War II-era afterlife fantasy *A Guy Named Joe*. It occurs as Spencer Tracy's character, Pete Sandridge, is being informed that he's dead. He says, "You mean I'm dead? You mean this is for good?" He pats his body, reasserting its paradoxical physicality in face of its demise. The film plays on the television in the Freeling's bedroom, but neither parent is paying attention, Steve reading a book about Ronald Reagan and Diane rolling a joint (they will be equally oblivious to the ghosts that will shortly erupt from the same television set). If Pete Sandridge is dead (and shortly to be send back to Earth), so is Spencer Tracy, and yet there he is on broadcast TV and thereby in the Freelings' bedroom, acknowledging his own death but simultaneous materiality. The subtext is that television not only resurrects the dead, as film can do, but also turns all our houses into haunted houses.

In my introduction I described the haunted house as a location the cohesion of which is constantly being tested. *Poltergeist* suggests the impossibility of maintaining the home as a truly private space when the presence of television transforms it into a public

one. On one level, the entry of the ghosts through the television is simply a metaphor representation of everything that enters the home through the media (and which *sucks* children out of the family unit, in Carol-Anne's case). If the Fox House was the original mediatized haunted house, the Freeling house in *Poltergeist* represents the final culmination of that trend, one reflecting the media saturation of modern life. *Poltergeist* is full of media references both diegetic and exigetic. Diane's line "Smell that mimosa" pays direct homage to *The Uninvited*, as does the serpentine staircase that dominates the house; the creepy children's song that plays over the closing credits is a likely reference to the one that opens *The Innocents*. As in *The Entity*, the presence of the parapsychologists is accompanied by a variety of surveillance devices, and the Freeling house becomes full of televisions that Lesh's team brings in. When Dr. Lesh mentions that she'll need to show the amazing ghost footage she recorded in their house, Steve says, "Please not on *60 Minutes*," and Diane adds, "Or *That's Incredible!*" (they fear their private space becoming a location of public scrutiny, especially on television). Carol-Anne's (late) canary is named Tweety; the dog is named for a *Saturday Night Live* character, himself a television personality. The upstairs bedroom shared by Carol-Anne and Robbie has posters for *Star Wars* and *Alien* and is full of *Star Wars* toys. Robbie, terrified by a thunderstorm and eyeing his creepy clown (an example of the uncanny uncertainty of whether or not an inanimate object might in fact be alive), tosses a blanket over the clown, and is satisfied as Chewbacca's hairy face stares at him from where the clown's was before. Noël Carroll uses Chewbacca as an example of how context and affect determine a monster: "A creature like Chewbacca . . . is just one of the guys,

though a creature gotten up in the same wolf outfit, in a film like *The Howling*, would be regarded with utter revulsion by the human characters in that fiction” (16). In the same way, *Poltergeist* comments on the thin line between friend and monster, setting the stage for the transformation of trusted domestic items (not the least including television) into sources of uncanny unease or outright danger and horror. Rather than the friendly Chewbacca, a poster of the villainous Darth Vader hangs next to the closet from which the vortex to the other world will erupt. A pan from the vortex past the poster of Vader boldly links the evil forces in *Poltergeist* to Vader himself. This is an appropriate choice, for Vader exists as a threatening meld of technology and spiritual power, quite like the evil TV.⁵⁷

Let us return to the opening sequence. Carol-Anne rouses from her bed in an apparent trance⁵⁸ and walks downstairs to the static-covered TV, which she speaks to. As the whole family wakes and arrives (turning her into the spectacle, prefiguring the eventual merging of Carol-Anne and the television set itself), she reaches out and touches the picture tube. She is a modern permutation of the Fox sisters of Hydesville, the young girl who can communicate with supernatural forces that adults cannot recognize. Just as the Rochester Knockings unfolded against the background of the telegraph’s invention, here again the context is one of spiritual dislocation through communications technology.

I have already spoken of the television/mirror nexus evident throughout

⁵⁷ Furthermore, Vader is a being of great spiritual power who is nevertheless conspicuously material and technological. He is physically crippled despite his powers, and his spirit ultimately answers to his materiality. This begs the question: could the inspiration for Darth Vader have been Emeric Belasco?
⁵⁸ Another example of somnambulism linked to the supernatural, as we saw in *The Legend of Hell House*. Here again, it is linked explicitly to the feminine, as Diane relates a sleepwalking episode from her own childhood.

Poltergeist, which implies Lacan's mirror stage. Metz tells us "there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in [the cinematic screen]: the spectator's own body" (45), but television is a reflecting surface that may indeed contain the viewer's body, layered over an image as ghostly palimpsest. We see Carol-Anne's body this way in the opening sequence. The sequence closes with Carol-Anne placing her hands directly on the static-covered picture tube, touching the medium in a way that one can never do with film. In an early, comic sequence, Steve, responding to a comment from Diane about his age and the degradation of his body, stands before a mirror and pumps his belly in and out, chanting "Before, after, before, after . . ." Here we have a neat summation of the double Lacanian function of mirrors as creating the fantasy of bodily cohesion and undermining the same. Of course, Marty looks into a bathroom mirror and sees himself rotting, a corpulent visage of human frailty and the inadequacy of the symbolic, linked with the film's opening, where television is revealed as being similarly fragmented through pixillation. When Marty's hallucination vanishes, however, he naturally looks into the suspect mirror to reaffirm his bodily cohesion. The nexus between the mirror and television (and implicitly cinema as well) is fully recognized in *Poltergeist III*, where mirrors provide access to the Other Side the same as the television does in *Poltergeist*.

What *is* television? How may we conceptualize the differences between television and film in terms of their potential for the uncanny? Without enumerating the countless similarities and differences between theatre, cinema and television, I think one predominates in this instance: while television and cinema are both media of absence (for the spectator does not share physical space with it, as in theatre) what distinguishes

television is a greater degree of *liveness*, ostensible or otherwise. This is baggage from TV's live roots which simultaneously constitutes a large portion of TV's continuing appeal, with news and sporting events staking their success on having at least the appearance of immediacy and simultaneity, something that cinema can never truly possess. It has, says, Jeffrey Sconce, been "variously described . . . as 'presence,' 'simultaneity,' 'instantaneity,' 'immediacy,' 'now-ness,' 'present-ness,' 'intimacy,' 'the time of the now,' or, as Mary Ann Doane has dubbed it, 'a "*This-is-going-on*" rather than a "*That-has-been* . . .'"⁵⁹ (Sconce 6). The very language of "liveness" invokes the uncanny uncertainty of whether or not an object is animated. Within the context of ghostliness, Tom Ruffles notes that "A character in the satire on television *Meet Mr. Lucifer* (1953) muses that if [talk show host] Gilbert Harding can enter his living room (while physically at 'Ally Pally') then there is no reason why his dead father should not be able to – both would be equally mysterious" (7).

Television's persistent power comes specifically from its ability to "convey both simultaneity and togetherness, as can be seen, for example, in the broadcasting of sporting events of national importance" (Agger 12). We see television playing this role in *Poltergeist*, as Steve and his friends crowd around the living room to watch a football game. They cheer at the proper moments, a tiny segment of a mass audience cheering all over America. But then suddenly the game turns into Fred "Misterogers" Rogers singing "Won't you please be my neighbour?" This song is ironic because the Freelings' neighbour, Ben Tuthill (Michael McManus) is changing the channel, their remote

⁵⁹ Cinema, again, is more of a *that-has-been* . . . and now is again.

controls interfering with each other. He and Steve engage in a duel with their remote controls.

This early sequence raises comically issues that the film will engage more seriously, including the self-defeating triviality of masculine exertions (Ben and Steve are reduced to comic buffoons), the collapse of public and private space and the lack of “neighbourliness” in suburbia. Less obvious, though, is how this sequence reveals how television’s version of liveness may turn uncanny. Steve and his friends do more than watch the game, they yell and cheer and jump to their feet, boisterously *interacting* with it, investing much in it (and not just metaphorically – one man yells “I bet my life on this game!”). The very *heimlich* Mr. Rogers becomes a menace that disrupts their game. “Who the hell is this guy?” asks one of Steve’s buddies. It is not a television program that is disrupting their game so much as a man, one looking directly into the camera and speaking (or rather singing) directly to the audience. In the most clever of the film’s numerous media references, Mr. Rogers’ becomes an uncanny harbinger, his unwanted presence foreshadowing the infinitely more disrupting entrance of other unwelcome guests arriving through the television set.

Using Mr. Rogers is an inspired choice. Consider the following incident related in Frank Mankiewicz and Joel Swerdlow’s *Remote Control: Television and the Manipulation of American Life*: “A young child approached Fred Rogers in a hotel lobby and asked how he got out of the television set. The child then listened to a lucid explanation . . . about the difference between real people and television people . . . The child asked a follow up question, ‘But Misterogers, how are you going to get back into

the television set'?" (47). This anecdote illustrates not only the fact are young children ill-equipped to separate reality from fantasy, but that television happily encourages the impression that its internal world is real and self-contained; in short, it shares the properties of Lacan's mirror, which implies a coherent world of the imaginary existing on the other side. André Bazin wrote that "Television . . . adds a new variant to the 'pseudopresences' resulting from the scientific techniques for reproduction created by photography. On the little screen during live television the actor is actually present in space and time. But the reciprocal actor-spectator relationship is incomplete in one direction. The spectator sees without being seen" (97). But that is not the way it necessarily seems. After all, what is rare in cinema, a person looking in the camera or speaking directly to the audience (the "Fourth Look"), is commonplace on television, and children of Carol-Anne's age are quickly socialized into blurring the line between "TV land" and their own domestic space (think only of *Romper Room* and its "magic mirror" that allowed the hosts to greet the children in the audience directly – "I see Billy and Susie and Sally," etc.). Lynn Spigel cites uneasy articles from the early 50's referring to TV as "the New Cyclops" and "the Giant in the Living Room": "The giant . . . has arrived. He was a mere pip-squeak yesterday, and didn't even exist the day before, but like a genie released from a magic bottle in *The Arabian Nights*, he now looms big as life over our heads" (qtd. in Spigel 47). Television's opponents call upon the monstrous in their rhetoric and recapsulate clichéd horror movie scenarios, with the transformation of television into a Cyclops conjuring up the image of a huge unblinking eye staring *out* at the spectator; Jerry Mander calls TV "a machine that invades, controls and deadens the

people who view it” (158). Spigel suggests that “the threatening aspects of television technology might have been related to its use as a surveillance and reconnaissance weapon during World War II” (47), again emphasizing the dangers of spectatorship, and the sense that when we look, something might be looking back at us.

Perhaps this is where we may locate the most uncanny property of television, which *Poltergeist* exploits as it blurs the lines between “looking at” and “being looked at”: television, unlike cinema, is an object unto itself, as conspicuously material as film is seemingly immaterial, and an object that can be imagined as possessing a “liveness” all its own. Clover notes that *Poltergeist*’s television set “does not strike out and penetrate its viewers but instead sucks them in and swallows them up” (196), inverting the usual “flow” in the television viewing experience. Once again, it turns all our houses into haunted houses.

Despite *Poltergeist*’s exploration of how television is not like cinema and has its own uncanny properties, television is still heavily allied with film within the narrative. Cuesta Verde seems to have no movie theatre; in this suburban setting, the role of film has been usurped by television. With the exception of the football game/Mr. Rogers sequence, curiously little television programming is actually depicted in *Poltergeist*, a film which seems to be so fully “about” television. What we see is almost exclusively related to movies, suggesting that the film is principally using television to comment on cinema. We see brief clips from *A Guy Named Joe*⁶⁰ and *Go For Broke!* (1951), and as

⁶⁰ If we need further evidence for the fact that *Poltergeist* constructs film as superior to television, we need only remember that Spielberg later remade *A Guy Named Joe* as *Always* (1989), liberating it from television and restoring it to the big screen. This should be no particular surprise coming from Spielberg,

the family eats a hectic breakfast, movie critic Gene Shalit from NBC's *Today* show adorns the kitchen TV set. It is my contention, finally, that television's principal function within *Poltergeist* is as an embodiment of cinema's material dimension.

Striking a Happy Medium

Moving from one medium to another, Tangina Barrons. In a narrative sense, Tangina owes much to Father Merrin (Max von Sydow) in *The Exorcist*, a vividly drawn outsider brought into the narrative in its third act to help the protagonists conquer the supernatural. Just as the demon inside Reagan McNeil (Linda Blair) is too much for Father Karras (Jason Miller) to tackle alone, requiring the intervention of the older, more primal figure of Merrin, associated with ancient cultures and ancient threats (in Africa and Iraq), the challenges of the Freeling house prove beyond Lesh's team of parapsychologists, necessitating a retreat back to the primal power of Spiritualism. Tangina is the lone character in *Poltergeist* associated with religion, and the mix of her mystical language and her proper ladylike bearing help to evoke the Spiritualist movement at its most courtly.

Tangina's entrance into the house provokes the most skeptical reaction from Steve. "What side of the rainbow are we working tonight, Dr. Lesh?" he asks, a coy reference to Tangina's dwarfism via *The Wizard of Oz*, and then, "Is this your Knott's Berry Farm solution?", alluding to the popular California theme park, noted especially for its annual "Halloween Haunt" or "Knott's Scary Farm." Both references implicitly accuse Tangina of being a fraud whose strange displays are more showmanship than evidence of

who started out in television but "graduated" to film, more literally than most, his thriller *Duel* (1971) being a rare instance of a work playing on television and later being released in theatres.

a legitimate talent, while associating her with the visual media.

Linda Badley speaks of “Tangina tell[ing] the parapsychologists to turn off their machines, which are causing ‘interference’ with her reception” (46). I think that Tangina’s line “Y’all mind hangin’ back? You’re jammin’ my frequencies” actually refers to the people present and not just the machines (the people do indeed stay on the ground floor while she ventures upstairs . . . note too that Ryan keeps his camera rolling in her presence in subsequent scenes but she never complains). But nevertheless, the connection between this medium and the media is clear, and even if one does choose to assume she’s referring to the parapsychologist’s equipment, “interference” in this instance seems to imply more essential similarity than essential difference. Her lengthy monologue opens with her face doubled by virtue of her image transmitted to a television via Ryan’s hand-held camera. Her “this house is clean” line is delivered in a camera, and Tangina self-consciously removes her glasses and smooths back her hair. As the contemporary construction of mediumship is related so heavily to telecommunications technology, it is no surprise to find Tangina linked with the media (note too that the film mentions *That’s Incredible!* and contains a sideways nod to Uri Geller). If she has no need for the kind of detection technology that the parapsychologists bring with them, this is simply because it would be redundant – she duplicates the function of such devices. It should be noted, however, that her first and foremost association is with television, another medium attuned to the receiving of invisible signals. Tangina’s dwarfism renders her physicality conspicuous in its inadequacy, rather like the medium of television, which has no recourse for hiding its physical shell. Where Florence Tanner is young and

beautiful and otherworldly, Tangina is old and grotesque and earthy. Superficially, Tangina more resembles that “funny little sawed-off bastard” Emeric Belasco.⁶¹ She is a quirky hybrid of body and spirit, with both halves of the equation very conspicuous.

Tangina is also an uncanny double for Carol-Anne. Tangina’s stature and high-pitched voice makes her a grotesque doppelganger for the five-year old, reinforcing the link between television and mediumship. It is persistently hinted in *Poltergeist* that Carol-Anne possesses a latent talent as well, inherited from her mother (both mother and daughter had somnambulistic episodes as children, and Diane correctly discerns that Tangina had not visited the Other Side before), and that this may be a factor in her abduction. If Tangina is a television, she is a “good” television that is needed to counter the film’s “evil” television. A large portion of her contribution is “broadcasting” (which, of course, a television set cannot do, but in *Poltergeist* televisions are capable of quite a number of implausible tricks!), directing the earth-bound spirits “into the light.”

It should be noted that Tangina does *not* successfully dispel the ghosts haunting the Freeling house, and her statement “This house is clean” is also untrue . . . the house is manifestly not clean, or if it is, it is about to get very dirty again. Tangina’s failure is also the failure of Lesh and her parapsychologists, none of whom resurface in the narrative after Tangina works her magic; like the parapsychologists under Dr. Cooley in *The Entity*, they remain a system of the symbolic. Tangina lacks the final piece of the puzzle – clairvoyant though she may be, she appears to have no awareness of the bodies under Cuesta Verde. Despite being very much of her own body, she ironically does not know

⁶¹ She also bears similarities to another mediumistic figure from Spielberg’s imagination, E.T.

about *those* bodies. The “good television” is also a failed television, one that fails to tap her hybrid nature properly. Tangina’s method is incomplete because it only engages the ghosts on their abstract level, when they are *both* abstract and material. After the film’s second climax, the re-eruption of the supernatural, the distinction between the two no longer seems to matter.

Collapse and After: The Fall of the House of Meaning

I have argued that that structuring oppositions of cinema will always collapse, and the same is certainly true of the evanescent/material in *Poltergeist*. The film’s upstairs/downstairs hierarchy, as I have already noted, is an uneasy one at best. Ectoplasm and static, though they reside at opposite poles of the scale of embodiment, are actually paradoxically similar. They are both visions of nothingness, both implying a lack of signification. If the Kingdom of Static, the Other Side, is so abstract that the film cannot even envision it,⁶² it is also paradoxically fleshy and slimy, with goo clinging to the rope and tennis balls that emerge from it, as well as the bodies of Diane and Carol-Anne. The ghosts in *Poltergeist* may tug the Freeling household in either direction at any moment, though after Tangina’s intervention abject materiality seems to predominate.

It may be instructive to compare the endings of fates of the houses in the three films of this thesis. I have already noted that each of them ends with a departure. The Belasco House continues to stand, but is no longer “Hell House” because Belasco’s spirit has been dispelled from it. *The Entity* sees the spectacular ruin not of Carla’s house but of its uncanny double, accompanied by Carla’s departure from the genuine article, even

⁶² *Poltergeist II*’s its tepid depiction shows just how wise the first film in not depicting the undepictable.

though the Entity itself remains. *Poltergeist*, however, insists on nothing less than the complete and utter destruction of the house before the eyes of Teague and a crowd of Cuesta Verde's inhabitants.⁶³ The second climax broadens the scope to Cuesta Verde itself, complete with corpses lurching out of the dirt, broken fire hydrants sending plumes of water high into the air, leaping roaring flames, and then the final spectacular collapse of the Freeling house before Teague's eyes and the eyes of a crowd, representing the cinematic audience. This collapse here takes the form of an *implosion*, a falling inwards, all matter vanishing into a point of glowing light in the middle of the air. It is striking how this point glows and lingers after the house is gone. It resembles, I think, the dot that remained in the center of the screen when an older picture tube was shut off, a last luminous trace of the images that were once present, but now uncoupled from meaning.

It is shutting off with which the film's ending is concerned. The final solution for the problems of television is a very simple one, according to much of the rhetoric – you turn it off. In January 2005, President George W. Bush said “They put on an off button on a TV for a reason. Turn it off.” This is only one of the simple homilies collected at www.turnoffyourtv.com. Jerry Mander's proposition of nothing less than the elimination of television itself is the extreme of this logic, another permutation of the fifth look?

It would seem that the film should end with the destruction of the house, that which stands for the end of the cinematic experience as the apparatus shuts down and

⁶³ Compare the last lines of Poe's “The Fall of the House of Usher” to this fall of the House of Freeling: “While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘*House of Usher*’” (65).

meaning ends. But instead it goes on. Why? What is after the end of the cinematic experience? Recall that no characters actually die in *Poltergeist*. The only thing that “dies” is the house itself. Its inhabitants – the film’s spectators – all go on, but all are marked by the experience, with Diane’s white hair being only the most literal case. The film continues to offer a narrativization of the audience’s departure. It is a long goodbye, reflecting the fact that the cinematic experience does not *want* to end.

Throughout this chapter I have enumerated some similarities and differences between *The Entity* and *Poltergeist*. We now come to a profound similarity: in neither film are the ghosts conquered. Retreat is the only option. The end of *Poltergeist* is actually more negative than that of *The Entity*: where Carla walks away self-assured and with her head held high, the Freelings flee Cuesta Verde bludgeoned, defeated, and more scared than ever. It is this note of continued fear on which the film ends, as Steve wheels the television from the motel room and onto the balcony.

What does this act mean? Douglas Kellner’s analysis is typically glib: “The audience laughs and claps and the filmmakers grin and everyone goes home and, sooner or later, probably sooner, turns on the TV” (127). Kellner is right that the film will hardly dissuade any viewer from his or her usual television-watching schedule. If the film constitutes itself as a statement against television, and by extension media culture, it has much to answer for; as Linda Badley notes, “the film epitomizes the consumerist culture it indicts” (46). But that is assuming that the film was ever *about* television per se, when I have argued for television as a displacement of film’s materiality. Let us return to the sequence itself, which is remarkable for simultaneously articulating the unspooling of

meaning following the destruction of the house and promising the reinstatement of the symbolic order. The Freelings drive from Cuesta Verde in the rain, and their headlights illuminate a sign that reads “You are now leaving Cuesta Verde. We’ll miss you!” Suddenly, there is a cut to a pulsing neon star, a reminder of the film’s outer space and spectatorship motifs, which we soon find is on the outlandish sign of a Holiday Inn. The marquee reads “Welcome Dr. Fantasy & Friends.”

The first sign is similar to one that Carol Clover discusses in another Tobe Hooper film, *Texas Chain Saw Massacre II* (1986), where the protagonist is running through the killer family’s labyrinth and suddenly encounters a glowing EXIT sign, of exactly the sort one sees in movie theatres. Clover writes that it draws an audience reaction “partly because of the analogy it admits (labyrinth = moviehouse, chain saw-wielding sons = camera-wielding filmmakers, terrified victim = audience) but partly because [it is] such a breach of third-person protocol – such a naked disclosure of the cinematic signifier” (201). The sign in *Poltergeist* works similarly to herald our forthcoming exit from the apparatus, which will indeed “miss us,” and it all but says “Please come back,” which of course we will, whether to this film or any other. The dying apparatus not only lives on in our memories and flesh, but also promises its own resurrection – cinema will always live again.⁶⁴ Likewise, though the Freelings flee their haunted house they must flee *to* another structure, to another potential movie. The magician-sounding name “Dr. Fantasy” named on the marquee offers an elegant collapse of film’s scientific and Spiritualist functions into one, with the audience as his friends, being welcomed into a new (cinematic)

⁶⁴ This collapse and promise of a reinstatement of order is also evident in the film’s opening. A television channel may go off the air, but it is understood will be back in the morning.

environment (movies have marquees too, after all). But between these two written signs that work to reinstate the symbolic order, we have the star. While it has an iconic function of sorts, representing actual stars and perhaps abstractly signifying Hollywood, its foremost impact is one of pure spectatorship. It is a gaudy grabber of attention, cinema (or television, for that matter) stripped of the veneer of its representational function and exposed as pure flash and dazzle.

The remainder of the film is one long unbroken cut. The family trudges along a balcony to their motel room and Steve unlocks the door. White lights flash subtly atop the railing alongside them. Through the window we can see a very small portion of the room, including a television set directly next to the door. Seconds later, Steve draws the curtains, and our view into the motel room vanishes, and appropriately so – it exists outside the realm of the film, as surely as the Other Side does, so we cannot be shown either. With everyone else inside, Steve lingers in the doorway and waits a moment before entering himself, closing the door. Five or six seconds later, the door reopens and Steve wheels the television onto the balcony, pushing it hard against the railing. Taking a last uncertain look at it, he vanishes into the room again. The Freeling family has well and truly “looked away.” Now all that remains on the balcony is the sinister TV set . . . and us. Oddly enough, the television is unplugged yet the screen seems to be rippling with static; this is a very subtle effect from the flashing lights atop the rails.

But no sooner has the door closed than the camera begins pulling back, perhaps in revulsion. Numerous indeed are the films that end with a pullback, a gesture of departure that simultaneously remains fixed on the image. The credits begin to roll, still over the

image. The film is ending, but it is ending slowly. As we pull away, the tracking shot becomes a crane shot, pulling off the balcony and over the parking lot. The Holiday Inn sign creeps into view in the distance, its pulsing star visible. The television set eventually leaves our line of sight, lost under the railing. Finally, the utilitarian-looking two-floor motel, another potentially haunted location and, potentially, another go-round for the cinematic apparatus, is centered in the frame, and the screen slowly fades to black.

One register of the ending is a reiteration of cinema's superiority to television. It is a lengthy, difficult shot, a *cinematic* shot, one smoothly accomplished through the technical acumen of a skillful filmmaker. The crane shot requires a material apparatus, but this "body" of the shot is forever out of view. Whereas television? The set clanks audibly as Steve shoves it against the wall. It is physical, material, an object, easily refuted – as easily, at least, as removing it from the room, of switching it off. But refuting it leaves behind a body, one that still ripples with the semblance of life – a *cadaver vivant* of the machine. The star, a crude and flashy grabber of attention, serves as its stand-in in the back of the shot. In this single shot, then, the body of cinema is both conspicuously present and conspicuously absent, a paradox of the apparatus neatly articulated.

The film's slow goodbye reflects the fact that film may not so easily be turned off (less easily than television, ostensibly). Cinema resists ending . . . no wonder Steve cannot resist casting the television a last look before returning to the room. This reflects Steven Shaviro's statement that the image is "never quite lost, that it is never quite distant or absent enough" (17). As a trade article said in 1947, "The motion picture is one product which is never completely consumed for the very good reason that it is never

entirely forgotten by those who see it. It leaves behind a residue, or a deposit, of imagery and associations, and this fact makes it a product unique in our tremendous list of export items” (Friedberg 134). Even the impact it has on the spectator’s body may outlive the theatrical experience. A horror film like *Poltergeist* is an especially pertinent example. In fact, one study on the effect of horror films on children addressed the question of long term phobias produced by exposure to these films found that *Poltergeist* was the single most mentioned film. One respondent reports: “After seeing *Poltergeist*, I couldn’t sleep knowing the TV was here. I stayed up *the entire night* watching the television to make sure it wouldn’t come to life . . . The next day, I immediately told my parents and asked them to remove the set” (Canton 291).

Cinema, finally, is rooted in the material and the evanescent at once, but instead of regarding these opposites as mutually exclusive it operates in the place of their collapse. This dialectic not only functions within the apparatus but also works within the spectator’s very materiality. Film at once wrests the spectators from their bodies, making them ghosts themselves only half-present in the events they view, and anchors them in their bodies, making them subject to involuntary visceral reactions and abject bodily emissions. *Poltergeist*, confused and tangled in its implications, untidy in plot and theme, emerges as a pertinent example of this dialectic for the precise reason of those inconsistencies – a true film of collapse.

Conclusion:

Playing Cards Unto Eternity

There is another matter I feel a need to address with regard to *Poltergeist*, one thoroughly peripheral to the film itself. An urban legend that holds that *Poltergeist* and its sequels are cursed, based on several deaths among its cast members. A popular version claims that the actors who played the children are all dead (Roeper 124), which is two-thirds true: Dominique Dunne was murdered by her boyfriend in 1982, several months after the film's release, and Heather O'Rourke died suddenly in 1988 from an undiagnosed intestinal inflammation while filming *Poltergeist III*. Both actresses are buried in the same cemetery, a macabre reflection of the film's obsession with burial grounds. Also, Julian Beck and Will Sampson both appeared in *Poltergeist II* and died within the next few years, though neither of their deaths were unexpected. This scarcely adds up to much, and Richard Roeper notes "I've never heard a decent explanation of just who is leveling this curse – ghosts who are unhappy about the way they're portrayed in the movies, perhaps?" (124). The point I wish to raise is that there is a sense in which Dominique Dunne and Heather O'Rourke *aren't* dead, at least no more than Spencer Tracy, who will always have a semblance of life through films like *A Guy Named Joe*. Film and home video will forevermore allow viewers to commune with the famous dead.

The subject matter of the *Poltergeist* films certainly does much to explain the transformation of these coincidental tragedies into this urban legend. But enough of the

legends surrounding the movies concern death and even survival after death to suggest a trend broader than the horror genre. There is, for example, the persistent story of a stagehand who hanged himself on the set of *The Wizard of Oz* and can be glimpsed on the road to Emerald City. Perhaps the strangest example concerns *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), the most implausible of all ghost films. An unexplained image in the back of a scene (which is actually a cardboard cutout of Ted Danson's character, a prop from an excised subplot) spawned an urban legend that, even at this late date, has inspired many dozens of posts on the Internet Movie Database's *Three Men and a Baby* message board. I quote from a letter printed by Roger Ebert on August 27, 2000:

If you start the tape at 1:01:13 the camera pans across a window behind Ted Danson and Celeste Holm, who are walking into a room, and at a spot by the window curtains, the rifle that was presumably used in the killing of a young boy . . . At 1:02:53 . . . where the gun was 40 seconds earlier, there is a young boy standing whose feet do not appear to be touching the floor. The figure of both the gun and the boy are very clear and unmistakable. I was told that a boy was killed in the very room where the filming took place, and that no one has an explanation for the apparitions that appear in the background of this scene.⁶⁵

Clearly the ghostliness of cinema is not merely an academic concept but one that lives in popular culture! Let us recall the words of Maxim Gorky: "It is as if they have died and their shadows have been condemned to play cards in silence unto eternity" (408). Film is again a storehouse for the unhappy dead, and even though this is a legend born of the video age that naturally blurs the boundaries of media, it essentially taps on the spectral nature of film. Film is what has died and come back. *That-has-been . . . and is now again.*

⁶⁵ At risk of insulting my readers' intelligence, I'll note that, like most Hollywood studio films, this one was shot on a sound stage, and that none of this is actually true.

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