Electric Literature as Equipment for Living: Haunted House Films

BARRY BRUMMETT

Following Burkean critical theory, this essay examines five examples of films about haunted houses to determine their symbolic potential as “equipment for living.” These films help audiences to overcome feelings of anomie and disorientation. The essay studies ways in which film content and the cinematic medium engage issues of chaos. It is argued that both content and medium subject the audience symbolically to paradoxical conjunctions of realms of time and space which do not ordinarily coincide. The essay demonstrates how such an experience serves the audience as equipment for living.

Scholars ask many types of questions about film: aesthetic, historical, psychological, sociological, etc. Those working with the critical theories of Kenneth Burke study film to determine how it helps people to confront their everyday, lived experiences. For one of the many dimensions of literature (by which Burke means discourse broadly conceived) is its function as “equipment for living” (Burke, 1941/1967, pp. 293–304, 1935/1965). Although Burke is mainly concerned with the study of literature in the traditional sense, he occasionally hints at the relevance of his methods for studying nonverbal or extraverbal communication media (e.g., architecture, music, films, etc.). One goal of this essay is to show that useful insights can result from an extension of Burke into other mass media. By situating Burke’s methods in relationship to other methods of media criticism, I shall show to Burkeans as well as to other media critics some fruitful possibilities for future research.

The critic treats discourse as symbolic medicine, and the essay should assay that medicine to discover how an audience might use the discourse. This paper will show how films about haunted houses can serve an audience as symbolic equipment to help them confront certain real life problems. Carroll (1981, p. 16) argues that “horror and science fiction are the reigning popular forms of the late seventies and early eighties.” A number of observers have noted in their own way that these films serve audiences because they “represent our collective nightmares” (Wood, 1978, p. 19). King (1983) implicitly describes these films as equipment for living, for “we make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones,” and “the ritual outletting of these emotions seems to bring things back to a more stable and constructive state again” (p. 13).

In part one, I shall show how Burke’s

Mr. Brummett is Visiting Associate Professor of Communication, at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.
critical system coincides with or departs from other methods currently popular in media studies. In part two, I shall explain why the particular method to be used in this study is appropriate. In part three, I shall apply that method to a sub-class of the horror genre: the film about ghosts, and specifically about ghosts in haunted houses. The ghost in the haunted house is an especially powerful mythic archetype (King, 1983, p. 50), and has been called the most powerful species of the horror genre (King, 1983, p. 259). This essay focuses on the haunted house film not only for reasons of manageable scope but because, as I shall demonstrate, the haunted house film illustrates particularly well how the content of the film and the film medium work isomorphically as symbolic medicine for a troubled audience. The essay examines five films, including three produced recently (The Shining, [Kubrick, 1980], The Amityville Horror [Saland & Geisiger, 1979], The Hearse [Tenser, 1980]), one produced in the sixties (The Haunting [Wise, 1963]), and one from the forties (The Uninvited [Brackett, 1944]). I will not look at films about ghosts which do not center around a specific house or structure, such as The Fog, nor will I look at every example of the haunted house movie, although I believe that other examples (e.g., Poltergeist) would show similar symbolic dynamics.

BURKE AND MEDIA CRITICISM

Burke argues that people find the symbolic resources they need to confront life by turning to discourse, and he argues that we find those resources in formal patterns (1931/1968), explicit themes (1935/1965), or classical discursive structures such as tragedy, comedy, satire, etc. (1937, Vol. I, pp. 41–118, 1941/1967). Discourse serves people as equipment for living (1) insofar as it articulates, explicitly or formally, the concerns, fears, and hopes of people (1935/1965, parts I and II; 1945/1962) and (2) insofar as the discourse provides explicit or formal resolution of situations or experiences similar to those which people actually confront, thus providing people with motives to address their dilemmas in life. A person who is worried about nuclear holocaust, for instance, might watch an apocalyptic program on television. The articulation of those fears in the program, Burke would argue, helps the person to encompass his or her fears, and the resolution of the drama in salvation or catastrophe provides the individual with motives of acceptance or rejection.

Let me briefly discuss three central tenets of Burkean criticism which do not encompass his entire system but which do illustrate how he dovetails with other systems currently used in media criticism. First, discourse serves as equipment for living insofar as it provides the public with motives appropriate to their situations. Burke indicted some public discourse during the Depression, for instance, for not providing people with motives appropriate to a changed and failing economic climate (1935/1965). Motives are related to, but distinct from, meanings, and it is the latter which much media criticism, principally that informed by semiotics (e.g., Fiske & Hartley, 1978), has tried to analyze in media texts.Burkean theory is thus broader in scope than is semiotics. To be concerned with motives is to be concerned with what Nichols calls pragmatics (1981, p. 94); it is to go beyond strict attention to the text and to consider the
context in which discourse is used, the problem of living for which the discourse provides equipment. Burkean criticism considers what discourse does for audience or author.

Second, the public derives its motives from the discourse rather than the discourse from its motives. Discourse does not reflect motives which people already have; it is the source of motives, the crucible in which motivations are formed in the act of symbolizing or articulating them. This position puts Burke squarely in opposition to classical Freudian psychology, for instance, for Burke argues (1935/1965, pp. 5–36) not that Freud discovered a vocabulary for motives which were already there, but that Freud invented a vocabulary from which people derived sexual motivations. A number of media critics have turned to psychoanalysis for their methods, and to the extent those methods are Freudian, Burke offers this counterpoint to them. However, those critics who make use of the post-Freudian Jacques Lacan’s contention that the unconscious is structured like a language (Heath, 1981, p. 79; Kuhn, 1982, p. 46) may find in Burke confirmation of that position. Those who make use of the Lacanian idea that symbolic action makes the subject (Kuhn, 1982, p. 47) might find a parallel approach in Burke’s belief that symbolic action makes the motives of the subject.

Burke’s belief in the active and creative rather than reflective power of discourse also dovetails interestingly with the several branches of Marxist media critique. The more fundamentalist Marxists who believe that the ideology of a text comes from the historical, material conditions of existence (Heath, 1981, p. 2; Nichols, 1981, p. 34) would likely be opposed to Burke’s view, which is that ideology is grounded in discourse which may or may not be appropriate for the historical, material conditions at hand. Indeed, Burke argues (1935/1965, 1937) that the critic’s task is, in part, to evaluate the extent to which currently popular forms of discourse give or fail to give to the public motives which equip them for living effectively in the prevailing historical conditions. On the other hand, some Marxists, following Althusser (1970/1971), have viewed forms of expression and media content as part of, rather than as derivative from, historical and material conditions (Volosinov, 1973). This strategy places those Marxists in agreement with Burke through stressing the “activity and effectivity of signification” (Bennett, 1982, pp. 50–53).

Burke focuses upon motives for action rather than just meanings within a textual system; he argues that those motives are developed in and taken from, rather than reflected by, discourse; these two principles lead naturally to a third, that motives may be generated by the properties of a medium such as its form or the logistics involved in experiencing it. For instance, he argues that because the words God, guard, and guide sound alike to the reader, they tend to generate linked motivations in discourse (1941/1967, p. 57). As noted earlier, Burke focuses on the ways in which the experience of reading or hearing verbal discourse generates motives in addition to those explicitly offered by the content of the discourse (1931/1968, p. 157). If the critic attempts to extend Burkean principles to other forms of mass media, then, he or she should also be attentive to how the forms, logistics, or ways of experiencing those media might generate motives in addition to the content of the media. That is the concern of the rest of this essay.
DISJUNCTIONS IN TIME AND SPACE

The business of this essay is to focus on the films to show their symbolic potential as equipment for living. But that task is assisted at the start by considering how previous critics have described the films’ audiences and the real problems which they bring to the discourse. In other words, for which problematic situation is the haunted house film symbolic equipment? “The danse macabre is a waltz with death,” says King (1983, p. 394) about the horror genre. Obviously, the ghost film is about “death, its abyss, its finality, its eternity and mystery” (Bayer-Berenbaum, 1982, p. 127). But such an observation does not tell us why people are attracted to horror or ghost films specifically, or about how the symbolic dimension of such films work. A subtler view of what ghost movies are about is expressed by those critics who note that the genre reveals an audience’s subconscious fears and anxieties to them (Perlmutter, 1979, p. 169). MacAndrew agrees, and she notes (1979, pp. 8, 213–223) that mirrors, a symbol of introspection into the subconscious, are commonly found in the Gothic genre. This seems true for the films under analysis here: We never see Jack Torrance of The Shining in his apartment without seeing him reflected in a mirror as well, and Wendy realizes the significance of Danny’s warning, “redrum,” when she sees it in a mirror as “murder.” In The Hearse, we never see the ghost of Jane’s aunt unless in a mirror or through a glass, and Eleanor in The Haunting is frightened by her own reflection in a mirror as she runs down a hallway. If ghost films engage subconscious fears, then a concern for how the films equip the audience for living is especially appropriate, and we should ask what sort of fears are particularly addressed by the genre.

Critics of supernatural discourse have noted consistently that the fears addressed are “a pervasive sense of disestablishment; that things are in the unmaking” (King, 1983, p. 9). The ghost film addresses “man’s fear of formlessness, chaos, and devolution” (Landow, 1979, p. 40). Our sense of “powerlessness and uncontrollability” (Wood, 1978, p. 19). The real life fears which people find exercised and then exercised in ghost films are a fear of things falling apart and a failure of the center to hold: “The horror story threatens us with a situation where our assumed patterns of significance and insignificance are skewed” (Stewart, 1982, p. 37). Ghost movies are about anomie and disorientation; death, “the ultimate loss of form, the final anomic situation” (Bayer-Berenbaum, 1982, p. 144), is merely the disguise which those real life concerns wear. Confirmation of disorientation is found in the films themselves, for they include at least one major character, often the major character, who is also on the verge of emotional or physical collapse. Eleanor of The Haunting is clearly neurotic and suffering guilt from the death of a mother who was under her care. In The Uninvited, Roderick says of Stella that she will never be well until this house is cured.” Her grandfather describes her as “not strong enough” and as suffering from a “general delicacy.” Jane Hardy in The Hearse has been undergoing analysis after a divorce and the death of her mother. Illness runs rampant in The Amityville Horror: George Lutz becomes ill shortly after moving in, a priest and a nun are stricken upon entering the house, and one of the children misses a wedding due to illness. Jack Torrance in The Shining is an alcoholic and drifter, having recently moved to Colorado from
Vermont with no clear career plans. These crumbling core characters are symbolic of anxieties which an audience might have. Such a troubled audience is invited to identify with the characters; our “welfare becomes increasingly implicated as the narrative sequence proceeds” (Stewart, 1982, p. 33).

We might refine our focus still further to consider what sorts of disorientation or disorder the haunted house film engages. Critics have noted that the content of supernatural discourse portrays the conjunction of realms which are ordinarily inalterably apart (Tatar, 1981). Our world is portrayed as invaded by “the alien Other, the altogether different, alien presence” (MacAndrew, 1979, p. 248). The horrible is shocking enough to consider in the abstract, but supernatural discourse shows horror in an “integral, inescapable connection to the world around us” (Bayer-Berenbaum, 1982, p. 21). Ghost films, particularly those with haunted houses, introduce the realm of death into the realm of the private and domestic, from which it has been banished from most comfortable American lives. The ghost films show, not just the ghastly spectre, but the spectre in a time and place where it does not belong and where one most fears it. Thus, the film engages not only the audience’s sense of disorientation, but a disorientation stemming from the copresence of realms or dimensions which ought not to be conjoined, the paradoxical conjunction of normally separate dimensions. The conjunction of the disjunctive might occur in many ways and on many levels, but I shall organize this study around two dimensions which show how the film medium is an integral part of the ghost movie’s “message” of disorientation. Those dimensions are time and space. We will see that the content of ghost films shows individuals suffering from conjunctions of realms of time and space which ordinarily do not occur together because the supernatural story typically involves “rejections of temporal and spatial limitation” (Bayer-Berenbaum, 1982, p. 33).

Carroll and Noble (1977, viz., pp. 143–184) argue that control over time and space are peculiarly and powerfully American obsessions. In sum, then, the troubling situation for which haunted house films seem to be prescribed is a situation in which the received order of time and space collapses. The collision in time and space of incompatible duties, social spheres, cultural allegiances, etc., is the real life exigency suffered by audiences who turn to this type of film. Examples of such uncomfortable situations might include: the urban family whose child is being bused into suburban space to go to school; the American worker who sees his or her job threatened by an immigrant from a radically different cultural and geographic space; the inner city neighborhood undergoing gentrification; the retiree whose values from time past are threatened by values founded in the present; the ahistorical young person who finds himself or herself enmeshed in the hallowed traditions of an old university or a well-established business, etc. Clearly, I am not in a position to say that a particular Mr. Jones goes to see _The Amityville Horror_ because his daughter must go to school thirty miles away in the suburbs. But if an audience suffers from anxieties stemming from conjunction of the disjunctive, then the haunted house film is a patent medicine for the alleviation of that problem.

Since we know the real life situation for which haunted house films are intended, we are in a position to choose a Burkean method designed to show how the film equips the audience for living in
the situation. One of Burke's methods is formal analysis (1941/1968, 1941/1967). He argues that form in discourse is "an arousing and fulfillment of desires" (1931/1968, p. 124) in the audience, and that one of the many ways in which this occurs is in repetitive form (1931/1968, pp. 125–126), which "is the consistent maintaining of a principle under new guises." We shall discover that the link between haunted house films and real experience is formal: specifically, film content, the audience's experience of the film medium, and the audience's experience of real life paradoxes are formally repetitive, they embody a formal reverberation from film to the audience's experience of the film to the audience's real life experience. Burke gives the name of "The Symbol" to any formal pattern in discourse which parallels a pattern of experience (1931/1968, pp. 152–153).

Attending to repetitive formal links among film, the experience of film, and experience in life will reveal the peculiar way in which haunted house films are equipment for living. First, they are equipment for living because they are popular, and one reason for their popularity may be the formal links: Burke argues that form appeals for its own sake, that people are drawn to formal patterns (1931/1968, pp. 142–143), an argument similar to Nichols' claim that people experience "pleasure in recognition" of patterns in film (1981, p. 41). Second, and of more intrinsic interest for media critics, this formal method calls attention to the formal ways in which, for this horror genre, the medium itself enforces the ability of the film to equip the audience for real living. The medium does this by serving as a formal bridge between the fictive, imaginary film content on the one hand, and the real world on the other; the medium is a real experience but in an imaginary, fictive context, a symbolic halfway house, if you will.

Because the medium embodies the same formal repetition found in the film and in experience, the medium serves as a sort of rhetorical conduit to channel motivations directly and powerfully from the film to real experience. Thus, although the same characteristics of experiencing the medium occur with every other sort of film, these particular characteristics of temporal and spatial paradox do not have formal appeal until the audience sees a film like these about haunted houses. Thus, Nichols (1981, pp. 98–100) argues that all film content addresses paradox; but haunted house films formally address the very paradoxes of time and space which the audience is just then experiencing, which are formally the same paradoxes which they confront when they leave the theatre.

Media critics have offered many explanations for how film can involve an audience as if it were real (Benjamin, 1955/1969, p. 233). Nichols, for instance (1981, p. 12), argues that perception of cinema and everyday perceptions are much the same process. The Lacanian concept of "suture" has been used (Kuhn, 1982, p. 53) to show that the viewer is invited to take the place of the source of the image, to stand in for the camera (Kuhn, 1982, p. 59; Nichols, 1981, pp. 38, 159; Baudry, 1980, p. 61). This study confirms those views structurally, by showing how in this subgenre of film, formal similarities from content to cinematic experience to real experience transfer motivations in the same direction. Those similarities are unintentionally summed up in this remarkable description by Baudry: "If the eye which moves is no longer fettered by a body, by the laws of matter and time, if there are no more assignable
limits to its displacement . . .” (1980, p. 30). He could be talking about a ghost; he is in fact speaking about the viewer of film; and he is describing the formal properties of distortion and paradox which people often experience in everyday life.

Let us now examine formal links between film content and experience of the medium. We shall then consider in the last part of this paper how the motivations of film and medium engage real life experiences.

**DISORIENTATIONS IN TIME**

**Content**

The content of haunted house films includes the conjunction of epochs of time which are ordinarily separate. Specifically, the past recurs; a ghost is the embodiment of the past, and frequently plays out some drama from the past, but the ghost is manifested in present time—thus the paradoxical conjunction. The temporal anomaly of a recurring ghost is subtly echoed by other aspects of haunted house film content, the echo functioning as repetitive form within the content. Haunted house films introduce a strong current of cyclical time into the typically linear experiences of ordinary life. For instance, at least one of the major characters in each film also recurs in some sense: The ghost hunters of *The Haunting* remark that Eleanor closely resembles the “companion” who hanged herself in Hill House. Stella is the daughter of a ghost who haunts Winward House in *The Uninvited*, and is thus a biological recurrence, as is Jane Hardy who looks like her dead aunt in *The Hearse*. George Lutz looks exactly like the homicidal maniac who preceded him in the house in Amityville. Jack Torrance in *The Shining* feels like “I’d been here before,” and we see in a photograph at the end that he was at the Overlook Hotel in the 1920’s.

King points out that haunted house films are always grounded in a history (1983, p. 167). The characters are told that the Overlook Hotel was built in 1907 on an Indian burial ground, that Windward House has stood for 200 years, that Hill House was built generations ago by the eccentric Hugh Crain, that the Amityville House stands on a spot where witchcraft was practiced long ago, and that Jane Hardy’s house has been in the family for generations. The placement of the story within an historical perspective means that the characters, who belong to present time, become part of the distant past and future. The characters are living out their ordinary three score and ten years, but that ordinary time frame is paradoxically coextensive with an epoch extending far into the past and future. Jack Torrance in *The Shining* is told by the ghost of the former caretaker Grady, “You’ve always been the caretaker.” Looking to the future, Torrance wishes “we could stay here forever, and ever, and ever,” echoing the invitation extended to Danny by the spirits of the Grady girls. Jane Hardy, in *The Hearse*, feels as if she has known the ghost Tom “all my life,” and wishes that “I could just stay here forever.” Eleanor wants to stay at Hill House forever, and at the end of *The Haunting* her spirit achieves that wish; but she has always been at Hill House, as we discover from her resemblance to a statue of the companion. The present merged into the past and future occurs in *The Uninvited*, too: Stella, of ordinary years, has a “Sleeping Beauty quality” about her. We are told at the start that the nearby sea contains the sound of “life and death,
and eternity, too." Roderick and Pamela are taken backwards in time when they first step into the house insofar as they vividly remember scenes from their childhood in a similar house, with "mother sweeping down the stairs." An altogether different "mother" will sweep down upon them soon.

The content of haunted house films shows the present in uncomfortable conjunction with the past and future; it shows time as cyclical, as recurring. But the recurrence itself is also in strange conjunction with an intensified sense of the linearity of time, as charted by events. For the ghosts not only recur, they recur predictably, unavoidably, at specific times: the Amityville House is disturbed at 3:15 promptly every morning, the ghost of Carmel weeps in Windward House just before every dawn, the spirits of The Hearse and The Haunting can be counted on every night without fail. Ordinary people in usual circumstances can alter or avoid the progression of many events; the haunted experience time as relentlessly linear, as moving inalterably on to the next apparition, and that linearity occurs in paradoxical conjunction with the cyclical time in which the spirits themselves move.

Medium

The disorientation created in the films' characters by colliding dimensions of time is duplicated to some extent for the audience by the medium itself, thus implicating the audience in the characters' dislocations. Film is one of the most cyclical of media. The feature recurs, haunting the theatre regularly at 1:00, 3:00, 5:00, 7:00, and 9:00. The audience has it in their power to make the experience recur cyclically for them, by going to the theatre and staying there. But cyclicity occurs for the one-time viewer, too. The audience's appreciation of cyclicity in the film itself is heightened by the medium's use of dramatic irony (Booth, 1974, p. 255); we know that the ghosts will recur when the characters do not, and therefore we experience the cyclicity more poignantly. Audiences know that there will be ghosts because they know what sort of film it is. We may here invoke another type of Burkean form, syllogistic patterning (1931/1968, p. 124), in which the audience comes to consciously expect or predict how the curve of the discursive progression will go; this concept may also be related to Nichols' notion of "desire" (1981, p. 74). The Uninvited's narrator further sets up our expectations by mentioning the tradition of ghosts in the neighborhood in the first thirty seconds. Danny's early vision of blood pouring out of an elevator shaft, a vision which he seems to forget, is remembered by the audience of The Shining, and thus we are prepared for the recurrence. In The Hearse, the camera shows us pointedly that Jane's aunt's ghost will not allow the music box to stay by the bed, a realization denied to Jane. The ghostly rustling of the real estate papers in the kitchen of the Amityville house, plus the flashbacks to the murders, tell us that the Lutzes will be haunted. The narrator for The Haunting refers to "whatever walks there," forewarning the audience. Thus, conventions of the medium set the audience up to experience the cyclical recurrence of ghosts more intensely than the characters themselves do.

Just as characters in haunted house films also experience the conjunction of the present with the distant past and future, so the audience in the theatre experiences such unsettling conjunctions as integral to the medium. Obviously, the medium allows the audience to "experience" either centuries or minutes within
two hours of real time. The past, present, and future also need not follow each other in that order. The Lutzes’ tour of the Amityville house is interspersed with flashbacks for the audience of the previous murder; we see the past and present as dovetailing visually. The ordinary march of past, present, and future can be altered. In *The Shining* we first see the aftermath of Danny’s episode in Room 237 where he sees his father embracing a rotting corpse; then we see the episode itself.

Finally, the film audience experiences linear time as do the characters of the films, both in an unusually intensified sense and in disorienting contrast to the cyclicality of the hauntings. As the characters become aware of what is happening to them, the audience’s position of dramatic irony lessens, and “audience time and narrative time collapse into each other” (Stewart, 1982, p. 34). The audience is marched lock-step towards the next, feared manifestation, as are the characters. But for the audience, linearity is heightened by conventional reminders of time: both *The Shining* and *The Amityville Horror* are punctuated by titles giving the day or time of day as time moves forward. Cinema can be relentlessly linear. “The reader can experience the relief of waking, simply by closing the book and turning on every light in the house” (Sullivan, 1978, p. 24), but not so the movie-goer, for whom “there is no possibility of ‘skipping ahead’ of the rattling of chains” (Stewart, 1982, p. 34). The film’s audience is made uncomfortable by the intrusion of a more intense linearity than that which is felt every day: “The narrative structure of the horror story exaggerates and displays the sequentiality of all narrative structures; hence its adaptability to . . . the sequential shots of the film” (Stewart, 1982, p. 33). Unless one chooses to hide under the seat, the big screen moves one relentlessly forward to the big scream.

Both the film content and the medium itself subject the audience to time which is both more cyclical and more linear than usual, the cyclicity and linearity of time are paradoxically in conflict with each other. In addition, both film and medium take the audience out of periods of time as normally experienced, sometimes reversing the flow of time or placing the audience, as the character is placed, in a period of time different from that which is ordinarily experienced. Thus, the audience is subjected to temporal paradoxes resulting from the conjunction of normally disjunctive realms—formally the sort of thing which the audience might be experiencing at another level in their everyday lives. But haunted house movies achieve paradox on another dimension, that of *space*.

**DISORIENTATIONS IN SPACE**

**Content**

Just as haunted house films show the conjunction of contradictory time frames, they also depict the disorienting and unusual conjunction of planes of space. To start with, in every case the haunted house is isolated in the country with no near neighbors: the Overlook Hotel is near the summit of a mountain and shut off from the nearest town in winter, the Amityville house has no close neighbors and has a river on one side, Windward House in *The Uninvited* is initially approached by Roderick and Pamela’s climbing up a cliff face, and Jane Hardy’s house is by itself outside a small town. Hill House of *The Haunting* is described this way in the inimitable
words of the sepulchral Mrs. Dudley:
"No one lives any closer than town; no
one will come any closer than that. So no
one will hear you if you scream. In the
night. In the dark." To these isolated
rural settings come the main characters
who are, without exception, urban or
suburban. Jane Hardy in *The Hearse,*
for instance, is pointedly called a city
dweller by the local minister, sheriff, and
attorney. Thus, urban and rural space sit
in uncomfortable conjunction; the main
characters are in a place that is strange
and unnatural to them. In addition,
every film but one depicts the main
characters moving their livelihood to the
house, thus juxtaposing normally sepa-
rate work and living spaces: Roderick of
*The Uninvited* moves his office from
London to the haunted studio, Jack Tor-
rance's occupation as caretaker makes
the Overlook both home and workplace,
the ghost hunters of *The Haunting* are
actually at work and are being led by a
professional psychologist, and George
Lutz moves his office to the Amityville
house's potting shed. The exception is
Jane Hardy, the schoolteacher, but she is
on summer vacation and is planning by
the end of the film to stay in the house
permanently. A final juxtaposition of
different spaces has to do with the ghosts
themselves, for although they are visible
and can act in everyday, normal space,
they are simultaneously of another space
or dimension: they can float through
walls, materialize in different places
without traveling between them, and dis-
appear entirely from everyday space.
Thus, in several ways, haunted house
films show the conjunction of spaces
which in the normal order of life would
be kept apart.

Haunted house films also depict
another sort of spatial conflict having to
do with movement in space. On the one
hand, the main characters are haunted
because they have made the conscious
decision to move to the house in question.
Spirits do not suddenly arrive at a house
which has been quiet for years; rather,
people have acted so as to place them-
svlves in a position to be haunted. On the
other hand, the free movement which
brought the characters to the house
comes into direct conflict with the fact
that every main character has made a
deep commitment to stay in the house:
they cannot leave. Movement and re-
striction in space thus conjoin paradoxi-
cally in haunted house films. Roderick
and Pamela of *The Uninvited* "both put
in everything we have" to buy the house.
A similar economic commitment under-
lies the Lutzes' move to the Amityville
house, for the economic sacrifices which
they must make to buy the house not only
tie them there but portend "tuna casse-
role for a year." The house draws the
Lutzes further into itself economically
when it "steals" fifteen hundred dollars
from George's brother-in-law which he
must then cover. Jane Hardy in *The
Hearse* is emotionally committed to her
aunt's house because she is going there
to recover her mental health, and an-
ounces later that she plans to stay there.
In *The Haunting*, Eleanor has practi-
cally stolen her sister's car which she has
helped to buy; it is not clear when she
arrives at Hill House whether she can
go back to her home. Indeed, she does not
return at the end of the film, but haunts
Hill House herself. The Torrance fam-
ily is committed physically to staying in
the Overlook Hotel because they are
snow-bound. They are also committed
financially, for Jack remarks on several
occasions that he has promised his
employers to stay for the winter, and that
should he return to Boulder, a carwash
would be his only career prospect.

The spirits who haunt the houses
themselves experience a clash between
free movement and restriction. In every case the spirits have done something, have engaged in some (usually evil) free action, which brought them to the house as spirits, just as the human characters have done something freely that brought them to the house. But once committed as ghosts to haunt the houses, the ghosts usually are restricted to a narrow range of places within the house where they may manifest themselves: Room 237, the Gold Ballroom, and occasionally the hallways in *The Shining*, the hallways and nursery in *The Haunting*, the studio, stairs, and nursery in *The Uninvited*, the basement and bedrooms in *The Amityville Horror*. Although the ghosts in *The Hearse* also appear in a black hearse outside the house, they only appear when Jane is going to or from the house, and the hauntings center on particular places within the house: the attic room and the bedroom. Because Burke would urge critics to look for puns as indications of symbolic equivalence (1941/1967), we might also be justified in seeing the haunted *hearse* as an equivalent of Jane’s haunted *house*.

The last conjunction of disparate spaces in haunted house films is between the individual as a separate, discrete entity on the one hand, and the house itself as an impersonal, separate space on the other. MacAndrew (1979, p. 13) points out “the most famous of all Gothic devices: the identity of the castle or house with its owner.” In haunted house films, the house and the haunted characters merge into each other; the house becomes identified with the characters who are, as noted earlier, ill, distraught, or disintegrating in one way or another. The personal collapse of the characters is thus mirrored in the problems of the house, and those problems stem from the intrusion of the ghost into the kind of place/space where the ghost is most horrible.

The special terror of the haunted house arises from the fact that “our homes are the places where we allow ourselves the ultimate vulnerability” (King, 1983, p. 266). The film therefore depicts the special “horror of the house gone back to nature” (Stewart, 1982, p. 41), to undomesticated space. Interestingly, Tatar (1981, pp. 169–170) points out that in German, “uncanny” is *unheimlich*, literally, “unhomelike.” The motivation given to the audience by the haunted house involves a sort of double collision of inappropriate spaces: the individual becomes identified with the house, but the house itself (the mirror of the troubled individual) is a quintessentially domestic space which has been invaded by spirits from a quintessentially anti-domestic space.

The spatially paradoxical house is repeatedly identified with the psychologically/spatially confused characters in the films: The Amityville house looks like a jack-o’-lantern face, with the attic windows eerily glowing like demonic eyes; the illness of the house is transferred to its occupants, who are themselves often physically ill. Father Delaney’s mental collapse accompanies his vision of the physical collapse of the church in which he is saying Mass, and George Lutz’s near descent into homicidal mania is matched by the house itself bleeding from the walls and stairs. In *The Uninvited*, the haunted studio depresses anyone emotionally who enters it, and the troubled Stella explicitly identifies herself with Windward House: “You talk about destroying that house; you’d be tearing me apart.” Eleanor of *The Haunting* feels that she belongs to and is part of Hill House, and so she literally becomes at the end. Jack Torrance in *The Shining* expresses his “love” for the Overlook Hotel repeatedly, and the ostensible motive for violence
later on is that Wendy and Danny want the family to leave it. Jane Hardy in *The Hearse* is explicitly identified with the house, for a little girl tells her, “it’s haunted, and you’re a ghost.” The haunted house’s peculiar horror, a domestic space invaded by something from a space beyond, is reflected in the spatial/psychological identification of the house itself with troubled characters whose minds are invaded by emotional or physical torment.

**Medium**

The audience in the movie theater is subjected to juxtapositions of incompatible spaces in ways similar to the experiences of the characters in the films. 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, and “the dark . . . provides the basis for our most primordial fears” (King, 1983, p. 182). Baudry (1980, p. 32) argues that the film takes “place in a closed space and those who remain there, whether they know it or not (but they do not), find themselves chained, captured, or captivated.” Audiences thus experience the same paradoxes of free and restricted movement encountered by characters and ghosts. Audiences freely choose to enter the theatre, but the logistics of movie-going entail a sort of restricting commitment. One has paid to see the film, and the money cannot be refunded. One usually sees films with others, who may not wish to leave. It is inconvenient to leave the theatre during the film: the babysitter is not expecting you, it’s dark, it’s a long drive home. The dramatic nature of the film commits one to stay and see what happens.

The juxtaposition of differing types of space occurs when the three dimensional audience watches the two dimensional films. Indeed, the audience haunts the film as well; we see things, and see them from spatial perspectives, which are not shown to ordinary human characters in the film. We see love-making scenes in *The Amityville Horror*. Oblique camera angles in *The Haunting* put the audience in places where people could not ordinarily stand. The audience soars over rivers, roads, and hills at the start of *The Shining*, and in *The Hearse*, the audience is sutured into the actual spatial position of the ghosts who walk the hallways. It is the ghosts, but also the audience by way of the camera, who walk up the stairs and into the bathroom while Jane showers, and it is the audience that bursts out of a closet and lunges at Paul, killing him.

The camera puts the audience into a spatial perspective which the characters do not have even when it does not turn us into ghosts. We see the rocking chair moving in *The Amityville Horror* when the characters do not, and we see door knobs turning at night. The audience for *The Haunting* is given a close-up view of the wallpaper in Eleanor and Theo’s room which the characters do not have. and we see the pattern there turn into a face. In *The Hearse*, we see the ghostly chauffeur next to Jane in bed and in her closet a second before she does. In *The Uninvited*, we see the ghostly flipping of the physician’s record book when the characters do not; we see Mary Meredith’s ghost creeping up on Stella before she does. The effect of the medium in haunted house films, then, is to subject the audience to spatial dislocations similar to those experienced by the characters: three dimensional audiences psychologically enter two dimensional space, we see things, and from spatial positions, which no character in the movie possibly could, and we are taken
in and out of the space occupied by the ghosts themselves.

**SPECULATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS: MOTIVES**

A number of critics have disagreed over the motives suggested by ghost films. Sullivan (1978, p. 130), for instance, argues that the films ultimately affirm chaos, disorientations, and dislocations. King (1983, p. 395) argues that horror films are quite conservative in their reaffirmation of life as ordinarily experienced. The disagreement dissolves when we consider that different films provide audiences with different motives for employment in real life. The motive given by the haunted house films is either acceptance or rejection of spatial and temporal paradox in life: some films exorcise the spirits (*The Uninvited*), some move the main characters away from chaos but leave the disorder intact (*The Shining, The Amityville Horror*), some suggest that the main characters are trapped by their haunted houses and cannot escape or defeat anomic (*The Haunting, The Hearse*). Note that the most optimistic motives are given by the oldest film: *The Uninvited* motivates its audience, near the end of the Second World War, to expect victory over chaos. But in our world, where paradox may sometimes stem from efforts to incorporate differences into a pluralistic society, *order* may portend uniformity, even oppression. The most pessimistic motives are given by *The Haunting*, produced in the era of the Cuban missile crisis, and *The Hearse*, produced during the collapse of détente. Given Burke's tenet that discourse generates rather than reflects motives, the media critic who would serve as social critic should particularly be on guard in the mid-1980s for haunted house films which would further the public's eager if passive acceptance of the apocalypse, of the collapse of time and space in a human-made holocaust. In a world of deadly disorder and paradox, the public does not need the motivation supplied by films which trap their audiences hopelessly within chaotic time and space, chained to visions of evil in the basement.

The "compromises" offered in *The Shining* and *The Amityville Horror* may offer the best motives for the 1980s. These films affirm that paradox is real and cannot be eliminated, which is realistic. They show that although living through paradox is costly, it need not be fatal, which is constructive. The troublesome aspect of these films is that the motive they offer is one of *escape*. Such a motive may not always be relevant given most people's options: in real experience we often cannot drive away from paradox, as do the Lutzes and Wendy and Danny Torrance.

Allow a final speculation. We have seen how formal reverberations from film to cinematic experience to real experience allow haunted house films to serve as equipment for living. If the reader will reflect on one's own experience, he or she will recall that haunted house films engage one's reality in a particularly vivid way. We do not leave *Raiders of the Lost Ark* expecting huge spiders or drooling Nazis; but we do leave haunted house films fearful of what we will find on our stairs. Could it be that films which do embody formal links among content, cinematic experience, and real experience possess particularly strong rhetorical power to interject motives from film to real experience long after the bridge of sitting in the theatre has collapsed? Content, cinematic experience, and real experience are all so richly complex that this study has by no means
exhausted all the formal links that might be embodied in other genres. Future research might therefore address the issue of whether films which really "grab" an audience, affecting them right out of the theatre and onto the streets, do so for reasons of repetitive form. Such a direction for research would be a fruitful ground for cooperation between Burkan and other media critics.

REFERENCES


