

The Fall of the House of Meaning: Between Static and Slime in *Poltergeist*

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A good portion of the writing on *Poltergeist* (1982) has been devoted to trying to untangle the issues of its authorship. Though the film bears a directorial credit from Tobe Hooper, there has been a persistent claim that Steven Spielberg (credited as writer and producer) informally dismissed Hooper early in the process and directed the film himself. Dennis Giles says plainly, “Tobe Hooper is the director of record, but *Poltergeist* is clearly controlled by Steven Spielberg,” (1) though his only evidence is the motif of white light. The most concerted analysis of the film’s authorship has been by Warren Buckland, who does a staggeringly precise formal analysis of the film against two other Spielberg films and two other Hooper films, ultimately concluding that the official story bears out: Hooper directed the film, and Spielberg took over in post-production. (2) Andrew M. Gordon, however, argues that *Poltergeist* deserves a place within Spielberg’s canon because so many of his trademarks are present, and because Spielberg himself has talked about it as a complementary piece for *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). (3)

A similar argument can be made on behalf of Hooper, however, with respect to certain narrative devices and even visual motifs like the perverse clown from *The Funhouse* (1981). Other scholars have envisioned the film as more of a contested space, caught between different authorial impulses. Tony Williams, for examples, speaks of Spielberg “oppressing any of the differences Tobe Hooper intended,” (4) which is pure speculation, though perhaps one could be forgiven to expect a different view of family life from the director of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) than that of *E.T.* Robert Latham envisions a slightly more complex relationship, considering *Poltergeist* to be “an uneasy alliance between Spielberg’s confidence in the suburban project and Hooper’s corrosive contempt for bourgeois institutions.” (5) As we are not party to the exact nature of Spielberg and Hooper’s relationship and their individual contributions to *Poltergeist*, it seems to me ultimately unproductive to speculate about it except to note that the film has an obvious divided, inconsistent quality, which we may or may not attribute to contested authorship.

Many people have found *Poltergeist* confusing, such as the *Los Angeles Times* critic who complained that “You are never sure what the ground rules are.” (6) In 1934, the surrealist journal *Minotaure* carried an article by Jean Ferry on *King Kong* (1933) noting many absurdities and inconsistencies in that film. Ferry, however, argues that these are reconcilable with a surrealist mindset:

Through the absurdity of its treatment (an inept script with numerous incoherent details), its violent, oneiric power (the horribly realistic representation of a common dream, its monstrous eroticism) [. . .] the unreality of certain sets [. . .] or better still, in combining all these values the film seems to correspond to all that we mean by adjective “poetic” and in which we had the temerity to hope the cinema would be its most fertile native soil. (7)

I would suggest that something similar can be said of *Poltergeist*, that its own inconsistencies and points of incoherence may be recuperated by a certain kind of reading strategy. First off, let us observe that *Poltergeist* is heavily prone towards bifurcation. The film, for example, has two different climaxes, one with lots of flashing white lights and optical effects and the second with much muck and skeletons clambering out of the earth (it is almost irresistible to label them Spielberg and Hooper climaxes, respectively). The ghosts themselves transfer without much narrative justification from playful to vicious, very abstract to very embodied, and even have two completely separate and not obviously reconcilable

sets of motivations, that 1: they are attracted to Carol-Anne Freeling's (Heather O'Rourke) life force, which has distracted them from the light of Heaven and caused them to linger on earth, or 2: they are angry about the desecration of the cemetery in which they are buried by Mr. Teague (James Karen) and are taking out their rage on the Freelings. These differences are puzzling, though partially resolvable by examining that very scheme of dividedness, embodied by the twin threats present in the film, that of static and slime. Ultimately, these opposites prove paradoxically similar threats to meaning, which this essay argues to be the central issue in *Poltergeist*.

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 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 (Beatrice Straight), and learns from his boss, Teague, 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. 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.

Poltergeist is a richly polysemic text and may be approached in a variety of ways: as a commentary on suburban life, a polemic against television's pernicious influence on youth, a fable of the maternal unconscious, a revenge narrative for suppressed indigenous peoples, (8) a quasi-Marxist exposé of capitalism's excesses and the follies of unbridled consumerism, (9) a conservative text trumpeting the nuclear family's capacity to withstand even the harshest adversity, or even a deeply-buried divorce narrative. (10) And this list is by no means exhaustive. Without necessarily nullifying any of these readings, I wish to approach *Poltergeist* as a narrative of the threats to meaning and its ultimate collapse, signified by the fall of the Freeling house. I wish to challenge, particularly, Douglas Kellner's take on the film as a deeply conservative Reaganite text; on analysis, the film reveals surprisingly radical potential as a narrative celebrating the triumph of meaninglessness.

The Face of Static

Superficially, *Poltergeist* is strung on the antinomies of static and slime, evanescence and abjection, though like a Derridean binary, the distinction between the two proves untenable on observation. I will proceed by outlining these two halves of the equation separately, and showing how both prove to be resident in the film's central symbol, the haunting television set. Gillian Beer writes that the ghost story is "a narrative of the usurpation of space by the immaterial," (11) and in *Poltergeist* this dynamic is heavily evident. Linda Badley provides a useful description:

As [Helene] Cixous suggests, the ghost's uncanny "presence" asserts to a "gap where one would like to be assured of unity," a black hole in the text of the symbolic order, swallowing it up. They are like Derridean

words: they kill meaning. Ghosts pretend to assert transcendence, but actually they speak to the nothingness, the death, of the things that they name. (12)

But if such a fear of nothingness is part of the fear of ghosts, it is surely also part of their perennial appeal – their subversive power to disrupt the symbolic order by challenging meaning itself.

In the famous opening sequence of *Poltergeist*, we begin by looking closely at the television screen – too closely, so that the image is fragmented by its pixilation. As “The Star-Spangled Banner” plays, we see a montage of images of patriotic Americana, like the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima and the Lincoln Memorial. A television station is going off the air for the night, and it screens these images packed with meaning, good or ill. Douglas Kellner writes that these images “[evoke] America’s heroic past. But the present is troubled.” (13) It seems more likely, though, that the cracks in the images indicate that there is something intrinsically faulty about these images, about representation itself. The images are soon replaced by a screen of roiling static, white noise that bathes the living room in its flickering light. We witness here the collapse of meaning, as we see the medium of television shorn of the necessity of representing anything. The film forces us to look deeply into the inchoate face of the static: like the mists of creation, it could become anything, but is presently blank, absent, yet terrifyingly present at the same time. As Garrett Stewart notes, (14) the static has a stroboscopic effect on the house around it, threatening to expand its meaninglessness into the world that surrounds it, while simultaneously laying cinema bare as an infinite set of moments of stillness.

The linkage of the ghost world to television functions on a number of levels. 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.” (15) As the sequence continues, Carol-Anne rises from her bed and walks down to the television, staring squarely into this field of static. She speaks to it: “Hello, talk louder, I can’t hear you.” Then, after a moment, she says, “Five. Yes. Yes. I don’t know. I don’t know.” And she reaches her hands out to touch the screen. Various moments throughout the film will find Carol-Anne staring into static-covered TV sets the same way, and this is always a moment of tension, for it seems so unnatural. We like to feel that we watch television to watch *something*; Carol-Anne is deliberately looking at the fascinating, awesome spectacle of nothingness fluttering behind those images. The film dares to flirt with concepts familiar from Georges Bataille: the pleasures of immolation, of nothingness, of self-destruction. In Bataille’s sense, Carol-Anne is exercising the pineal eye, the organ of not-knowing. As Martin Jay writes, normal sight “was a vestige of humanity’s originally horizontal, animal status. But it was a burden rather than a blessing [. . .] the pineal eye yearns to burst out from its confinement and blind itself by staring at the sun, that destroying sun ignored by rational heliocentrism.” (16) The static-faced TV is a compelling equivalent to Bataille’s solar anus, the sun that we look on only in order to extinguish our sight and our intelligence.

But what is static? Ron Kaufman gives an explanation going back to nothing less than the Big Bang. (17) 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 always there. So the static is always there.” (18) To watch television is to watch static; to watch cinema is to watch the moments of blackness between the frames, in Steven Shaviro’s apt term, “the wound at the heart of vision.” (19) They represent a gap or interval in Deleuze’s sense, a moment of non-perception

that nevertheless makes perception possible, again pointing to the fundamentally troubled and fragile qualities of meaning. In a later scene, Carol-Anne stares into the static of the kitchen TV. Diane notes that it's bad for her eyes and absently changes the channel to a violent war film. Carol-Anne does not at all react to the change; it as if her eyes are not fixed on content at all. She looks at the image and all she sees is static and the absence it represents underneath it. Appropriately, then, the Other Side becomes an *unsignifiable* location. The film cannot visualize it or even meaningfully characterize it, since it is precisely that which escapes or perhaps exceeds powers of depiction.

Soon enough, Carol-Anne vanishes wholeheartedly into the world beyond the television, losing her embodiment altogether and becoming wholly pure. At first she is able to speak with her parents through the television but she becomes harder and harder to contact as she disappears more and more into the regressive environment of the Other Side. If the opening sequence carries a heavy dose of Lacan's mirror phase, her fate is the mirror phase being undone as she is torn increasingly away from the symbolic order. The Other Side, a location of pure spirit and abstract disembodiment, has its affinities with Lacan's imaginary, but we also ultimately find that it constitutes a bath in the real, as it proves a slimy, abject environment linked with the mother's womb. In the film's first, optical effects-driven climax, Diane, coached by the midwife-like medium Tangina, must duplicate the labour process by jumping into the Other Side and reissuing her daughter into the world.

It is Tangina who gives us the clearest motivation for the spirits and the best characterization of their static spirit world:

Carol-Anne is not like those she's with. She is a living presence in their spiritual, earthbound plane. They're attracted to the one thing about her that's different from themselves: her life force. It is very strong. It gives off its own illumination. It is a light that implies life and the memory of love and home and earthly pleasures, (20) something they desperately desire but cannot have any more. Right now, she's the closest thing to that, and that is a terrible distraction from the real light that has finally come for them [. . .] Inside this spectral light is salvation.

So it seems that Carol-Anne now resides in a kind of limbo between earth and heaven. And she is there not because of her evanescence (with her blond hair, frequently dressed in white, she looks angelic and otherworldly from her first appearance) but for her materiality and the material world that it implies. Carol-Anne's captors are "earthbound spirits," and we will ultimately learn that their fault is in not being evanescent enough, in retaining too much of a link to their remains, the disturbed bodies that lie underneath Cuesta Verde. This is not information available to Tangina, however, and her famous line "This house is clean" becomes ironic, and certainly casts some doubt on Tangina's famed mediumistic capacities, in light of the fact that the house is resolutely not clean. Or if it is, it is shortly to become very dirty again, as the haunting comes to take on a much more abject character.

Ectoplasm and Abjection

A curious weakness of Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, probably the definitive psychoanalytic treatment of the horror film, is its lack of treatment of ghost films, even though it covers nearly every other horror archetype. This is perhaps because, compared to the vampire, witch, werewolf and other the classic monster-types, the ghost does not so much invite treatment in terms of the abject, since ghosts are often so pure and clean and traceless. Katherine A. Fowkes' points about the lack of abjection in the comic ghost carry over its more horrific variants to a considerable

degree. (21) If the ghost narrative thrives on the uncertainty and hesitation of Todorov's fantastic mode, the abject tends to overthrow this tendency by providing absolute certainty. In the years leading up to *Poltergeist*, however, the genre grew increasingly abject in its character. The major transitional film in this regard is probably *The Amityville Horror* (1979), with its bleeding walls and swarms of flies, and the trend would be firmly entrenched by *Ghostbusters* (1984), which revived the arcane spiritualist term "ectoplasm" to refer to the sticky slime left by the passing of the abject spectre (it also is responsible for turning "slime" into a verb). Chronologically between these films is *Poltergeist*, which may be the best representation of all, as it narrativizes the transfer from the evanescent spectre to the abject one.

Diane returns from the Other Side physically marked by her experience by a shock of white hair. Only once she tries to dye it do the ghosts reemerge. The cleanly optical quality of the previous vortex is replaced by something fleshy and corporeal, a yawning hole of a distinctly anal character, threatening to drag the characters into the back end of creation. It is an abject scene and if the film suddenly becomes dominated by the abject, corpses and all, it is not because the abject is absent in early scenes of *Poltergeist*. Actually, it is everywhere, and all the more striking for being played against the clean and sterile qualities of suburban life (which adds additional irony to Tangina's rhetoric of cleanliness).

Abjection, despite some injustice done to the word over time, does not simply refer to sticky and unpleasant substances. As outlined by Julia Kristeva, the abject is "the place where 'I' am not, the place where meaning collapses" (22), a definition broad enough to encompass the static-realm into which Carol-Anne vanishes (better still, Kristeva even referred to the abject as a 'land of oblivion'). (23) More usually, abjection is associated with the body and is often embodied by bodily wastes like hair, urine, feces, tears and blood, and ultimately with corpses, those things which test the boundaries between self and other and the status of the symbolic order. As Kristeva writes, "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." (24)

The first corpse we see in *Poltergeist* is that of Carol-Anne's canary. On this discovery, mother Diane says, "Shit, Tweety, couldn't you have waited for a school day?" (25) Diane wishes to shield her daughter from the facts of death, and the fecal motif continues as she tries to flush it down the toilet, but is interrupted by a shocked Carol-Anne. (26) What follows is a parody of the burial rite, as they bury the bird in a cigar case in the back yard. What the characters do not realize yet is that they live in a graveyard, one violated by Teague's duplicitous capitalism, (27) and that there are already corpses beneath their very feet. "Why do the dead return?" asks Slavoj Žižek. "The answer offered by Lacan is the same as that found in popular culture: *because they were not properly buried* [. . .] The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite [. . .] This is the basic lesson drawn by Lacan from *Antigone* and *Hamlet*." (28) At the faux-funeral, Robbie asks "When it rots, can we dig it up and see the bones?" and soon enough a backhoe will indeed disinter the cigar box, foreshadowing the revelation that a disturbed burials were a cause for the haunting of Cuesta Verde. The ghosts' major activity is to contest and battle the structures of the symbolic that the funeral itself represents – a struggle in which, I might add, they are nearly totally successful.

Kristeva also links the abject to food, writing that "food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection." (29) *Poltergeist* is astonishingly fixated on food and consumption, from the brand-name chips that the dog steals in the opening sequence to the pickle that the older daughter Dana (Dominique Dunne) suggestively munches and the waffle that Robbie (Oliver Robbins) feeds the dog

under the breakfast table, to the beer, coffee and liquor that adults consume elsewhere in the narrative. Carol-Anne buries Tweety with three strips of licorice “for when he’s hungry,” suggesting that the dead experience hunger – this will turn dark as the animated tree tries to eat Robbie and a lashing tongue appears from the anus-vortex, trying to drag the characters into it.

The most memorable episode involving food has an extremely Lacanian character, linking food to ultimately the disintegration of the flesh in a way that reflects Kristeva clearly. Marty, one of the trio of parapsychologists who enter the narrative midway through, goes to the kitchen in search of food. 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 horrifying parallel disintegration of his own face, hands ripping flesh from his face till bones peek through beneath, foreshadowing the revelation of the skeletons beneath Cuesta Verde’s veneer of normalcy. 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.

Barbara Creed writes that “Most horror films construct a border between what Kristeva refers to as ‘the clean and proper body’ and the abject body, the body which has lost its form and integrity.” (30) In *Poltergeist*, the Freelings are clean and white and well-scrubbed suburbanites contrasted against the violated corpses beneath their feet, but, in parallel to Marty’s vision in the mirror, undergo a less dramatic but more lasting degradation of their bodies through the stress of their daughter’s disappearance. “You look like shit,” the ever-diplomatic Mr. Teague tells Steve at one point. Everywhere in the diegetic world, the abject threatens to swell up and overwhelm the symbolic, dragging it down in the muck, as it were.

Even the television possesses a considerable abject potential. Though it contains the evanescent purity of static, it is itself an object, a clunky material one (more material than cinema, the invisible point of comparison throughout the film, as in the pixilation seen in the film’s opening moments). As mentioned before, Diane tells Carol-Anne not to look at the static, stating that it is bad for the eyes. At *Poltergeist*’s cultural moment, there was a considerable vogue for the idea that television was *bad for you*, even physically, though this idea is as old as television. 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? (31)

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. 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. (32)

Mander speaks of the television set as a source of x-rays, an argument explicitly figured in terms of abject 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.” (33)

It becomes evident that the neat distinction between evanescence and abjection cannot stand, and that the television constitutes a locus of their collapse, an object simultaneously physical with abject potential and opening a door onto a world of the evanescent, which is itself abject. On the evidence of other films like *Videodrome* (1983) and *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (1982), one could make a strong *prima facie* case for *Poltergeist*'s cultural moment as a pinnacle of mass anxiety over cinema's *bodily* effects on its viewers: the three films, from art horror to blockbuster to lame slasher sequel, have remarkably consistent themes of corporate exploitation, abjection and television's degrading *physical* effect on the viewer. The idea of television as a doorway to a ghost world would, of course, get perhaps its most famous enunciation in *Ringu* (1998), a film which owes much to *Poltergeist* and *Videodrome*.

The re-eruption of Diane and Carol-Anne out of the “Other Side” coated in a viscous red substance that equally looks much like red currant jelly (34) and equally suggests afterbirth and ectoplasm. In its old usage, ectoplasm referred to a viscous substance said to ooze from spiritualist mediums' orifices, usually nipples, mouths, genitals and noses. It was usually said to be luminous yet paradoxically destroyed by light, which generally prevented it from remaining for close scientific analysis. Be this as it may, it was the most physical product of mediumship, part spiritualism's late, corporeal turn, and was thus the cause for scientific analysis from scientists like Gustav Geley, Wilhelm von Schrenck-Notzing and Charles Richet, who, in 1894, coined the term from the Greek for “exteriorized substance.” As Linda Badley writes, “the very concept of ectoplasm, like the concept of anti-matter, was mind-boggling. It was the tangible, visible representation of ‘spirit,’ the word made if not flesh then something close to it. Ectoplasm destroyed the most basic distinctions between mind and body, medium and message.” (35) As previously noted, the term gets rejuvenated and modified around *Poltergeist*'s moment, and this seems entirely appropriate, since that same troubling of the distinction between flesh and spirit is at work in *Poltergeist*, and in the abject itself.

Furthermore, ectoplasm was historically a means of depiction. Very often ectoplasmic mediums would shape the substance into images, especially the faces of the dead. Ectoplasm works to transform the medium's body into an “uncanny photomat, dispensing images from its orifices.” (36) Karen Beckman also reports that *The American Heritage Dictionary* also offers as a definition for “ectoplasm”: “*Informal*: An image projected onto a movie screen.” (37) So when one looks at ectoplasm that fails or refuses to form into an image (as it no longer does in the word's contemporary incarnation), what is one looking at? Something very much like television static, a medium of representation minus the representation. Mind-boggling, indeed.

It should be clear that the binary of evanescence and abjection cannot stand. Static and slime (both in their own way abject) finally reflect the same fear of meaninglessness, the same trouble to the symbolic order. The haunted TV, whatever it might symbolize in any other kind of interpretation of *Poltergeist*, stands as a potent symbol of that collapse: a physical, potentially abject object which contains the meaninglessness of infinite static.

Switching Off: Collapse and After

It is with collapses, on a number of registers, that *Poltergeist*'s ending is concerned. The final destruction of the Freeling house is in the form of a spectacular implosion. 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*.'

Poltergeist shares the sense of erasure, that the house has been not only contested but wiped from existence. But one detail tantalizes – as the house is pulled apart by a swirling vortex, the last image we see is a big white dot that pulses in midair, glowing and lingering after the house is gone. It resembles the image that would sometimes be left on an older picture tube when the television was turned off, a last luminous trace of the images that were once present, now stripped of all meaning. In this it echoes the image with which the film began, that of a television channel going off the air.

In Poe, the story cannot outlast the destruction of the house. The symbiotic relationship between Roderick Usher and his house (both as a location and in terms of lineage) mirrors a relationship between the house and the story itself. In his *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), Jean Epstein boldly underlines this with the outgrowth of stars behind the model of the house that shapes into the Usher family tree, as if the universe itself collapses alongside the House of Usher. Can the same be said of *Poltergeist*? The film does not end with the destruction of the Freeling residence, but everything that follows is a narrativization of the process of a film ending; rather than the promise of meaning being reinstated, it just keeps on unspooling. The closing sequence is worth close analysis.

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 motif, 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) (might it be Hooper's contribution?), 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." (38) The sign in *Poltergeist* works similarly to herald our forthcoming exit from the cinematic environment, which will indeed "miss us."

But the departure is simultaneously a welcome to another location. The magician-sounding name "Dr. Fantasy" on the marquee reaches way back into cinema's origins as a magician's novelty act, with the

audience as his friends, being welcomed into a new environment (movies have marquees too, after all). But between these two written signs that promise 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. It is a lengthy, difficult shot, a *cinematic* shot, 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. 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 it is equally unsignifiable. 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. It is a clunky and physical object. 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, as if 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, is centered in the frame, and the screen slowly fades to black. The star, a crude and flashy grabber of attention, remains in the back of the shot, perhaps signaling that what it represents finally wins the day.

What does Steve’s final act mean? 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.” (39) One strong register of the ending is open-endedness. William Paul perceptively argues that *Poltergeist*, with its serial endings, marks a move away from the absolute closure that was previously expected in horror films. (40) If the ending is an occasion for laughter, it must be uneasy laughter. All in all, there is nothing openly anodyne about the film’s last scenes. The Freeling family flees Cuesta Verde bludgeoned, defeated, and more scared than ever; the symbolic order now lies in pieces, and the fear goes on.

The bulk of the film is about the destruction of meaning for the characters; the ending is about the destruction of meaning for the viewers. Steven Shaviro writes that “All cinema tends away from the coagulation of meaning and towards the shattering dispossession of meaning, the moment of the razor slicing the eyeball in *Un Chien Andalou*.” (41) Pauline Kael’s review of *Poltergeist* seems to recognize something of the same dynamic: “You’ve become the director’s target: you’re subjected to thrills, bombarded by them [. . .] the director puts you into the position of being a connoisseur of special effects [.

. .]” (42) For Kael this is a cause for criticism, and indeed there are effects sequences in *Poltergeist* (Marty’s sequence before the mirror, for one, and the parade of ghosts down the stairway in the living room) that exist with only a smidgen of narrative justification or explanation. The ending of the film discloses that these were part of *Poltergeist*’s thematic strategy from the beginning, an element in its vociferous assault on meaning.

Family Matters

The critic who has probably written the most on *Poltergeist* is Douglas Kellner, so I feel a special need to address his work specifically. His writings on the subject go as far back as 1983 (43) but seem to get a definite treatment in his 1996 article “Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush.” One immediate point to make is that his interpretation of *Poltergeist* is fairly auteurist in nature, and he frequently ropes in examples from other Spielberg films to support his points. (44) He writes, for example, “Unlike more critical Hollywood filmmakers who dissect dominant myths and question dominant values (Altman, Scorsese, Allen, and so on), Spielberg is a storyteller and mythmaker who affirms both the opposing poles of middle-class values and lifestyles and a transcendent occultism.” (45) But surely any close analysis of *Poltegeist* will find it to be more ambivalent than simply affirmative – does Kellner detect no cynicism, for example, in the sequence where Diane rolls a joint while Steve reads a biography of Ronald Reagan? And even if one accepts that *Poltergeist* is best considered as part of Spielberg’s canon, might not the various shades of cynicism detectable in *Minority Report* (2002), *Catch Me If You Can* (2002), *Munich* (2005) and *War of the Worlds* (2005) require us to revisit his earlier work a new eye?

In Kellner’s view, *Poltergeist* simultaneously provides an uncynical, laudatory view of middle class life and allegorizes the perceived dangers to it (downward mobility, loss of home and job, the invasion of the suburban life by “others” – ghosts, or the working class represented by the uncouth construction workers). Elements of his analysis seem indisputable, but what about Kellner’s claim that “The film has a traditional happy ending as the family leaves the home, pulls together, survives the disaster, and checks into a friendly Holiday Inn”? (46) It would never occur to me to call the ending of *Poltergeist* happy, or indeed traditional. The Freeling family has lost everything they own, Steve has lost his job. The family home and all of its possessions have vanished into another dimension, and furthermore, it is clear that their happy home was always a tainted location, built on lies and corpses. In what way is this a happy ending? Kellner’s final assessment of *Poltergeist* as a conservative horror film rests on our accepting it as such, but how can we possibly do so? It seems more likely that the ending is the culmination of the motion that has been at work throughout the film towards the dissolution of meaning (which admittedly may be thought of by some among us as a happy ending, though certainly not in the traditional sense Kellner means).

The point that Kellner emphasizes is the unity of the family unit. *Poltergeist* is in the select group of horror films that contain no deaths, and while the Freeling family is threatened with dissolution throughout the narrative (supernaturally through Carol-Anne’s disappearance, more realistically through Dana disengaging from her family to spend all her time with friends), their unity remains till the end. If you like, the house of Freeling (the location) falls but the house of Freeling (the family) survives. Kellner writes that, “Films like *Poltergeist* show good families being attacked by monsters, and thus serve as ideological defenses of middle-class family, which transcode cinematically the conservative profamily discourses of the 1980s.” (47) Kellner locates this against narratives from the 70s like, ironically, Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, that depict families as evil forces themselves, rather than the

victims of evil forces. The Freelings, finally, are good people, and their beleaguered family dynamic survives where all else perishes. It is as Andrew Gordon writes: “The Freeling family is too nice.” (48)

But Gordon’s statement contains a double meaning he may not have been aware of. They are *too* nice . . . nice to a superficial, unreal extreme. Their façade of the perfect suburban nuclear family, 2.5 children and dog in tow, is just that . . . a façade. Gordon sees this as a weakness in the film, though it actually contributes to his reading of the film as a coded divorce narrative. Dealing with a subject too painful to be confronted directly (if not divorce, then the dissolution of the symbolic structure of the family unit), it flaunts its unreality its subtle ways. For instance, Dana is absent from the narrative to an even greater extent than Carol-Anne, disengaged physically and psychically from the family unit. Where the vanishing of Carol-Anne is a major crisis, Dana’s parallel disappearance is all but ignored by both the film and its characters. However, Dana conveniently pops up during the final crisis exactly at the right moment to be ushered out of Cuesta Verde with the rest of the family. If the final unification of the family feels forced, that is because it *is* forced.

There other curious moments where the façade of the perfect family cracks, including one which to my knowledge no critic has ever mentioned. When Steve is giving the names and ages of his family members to Dr. Lesh, he says “There’s my wife, Diane, she’s 31 . . . 32, I’m sorry. My oldest daughter Dana, she’s 16 . . .” For these dates to work, either Dana is not Diane’s child (she is never specifically referred identified to as such) or Dana is the product of an underage pregnancy. Either way, this subtly undermines the image of the Freelings as the perfect nuclear family. Never mind the fact that Diane’s parenting seems decidedly questionable in the early scenes of the film, especially in her ecstatic (rather stoned-seeming) reaction to the ghosts’ early, playful incarnation, including putting a football helmet on Carol-Anne and letting the ghosts drag her across the kitchen floor. Indifferent to the paranormal displays that so excite Diane, Carol-Anne complains that her mother forgot to cook dinner, and Diane says “We’ll go to Pizza Hut, okay?” All of this combines to code her as a mildly negligent mother, not to mention profoundly naïve in the face of the real threat that the ghosts prove to represent.

Kellner also refuses to engage the metaphorical meaning of Mr. Teague and his offenses deeper than the superficial. Kellner describes him as “a greedy capitalist who puts private property above all” and notes that his name may play on Frank Norris’s McTeague, familiar to filmgoers from *Greed* (1924). (49) The film’s revelation about Teague does away with the understanding of suburbia as a bastion of middle-class goodness under siege from evil forces; it is *inherently* a faulty place, cursed from its inception and built on lies. Teague, the symbolic father to all the extended family that is Cuesta Verde, is ultimately responsible for everything that happens in the narrative – he is finally punished by being forced to watch Freeling House vanish into the Other Side alongside many other Cuesta Verde residents. His dream suburb fall to tatters as his horrible secret can no longer be kept. Steve Freeling, his best sales rep, responsible for 42% of sales in Cuesta Verde, has even misspent his professional life working to perpetuate this monstrosity – perhaps this is the reason the ghosts single out the Freeling family for torment – and ends up with nothing to show for it. Everywhere in *Poltergeist* structures of the symbolic are failing and institutions fall to ruin.

Even if the family survives, *Poltergeist* can hardly be described as an unqualified endorsement of middle class ideologies or suburban ideals. At the very least, the shocking, unsettling qualities of the film, its depiction of a world on the verge of collapse into meaninglessness, outlives whatever anodyne tendencies one might locate in it. It seems appropriate that, in a study of the effect of horror films on children, *Poltergeist* was the single-most mentioned film in terms of triggering long-term phobias. Doubtless this is

because it starts out with sweetness and light before unleashing horror and destruction. One respondent said: “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 television set.” (50) This seems a powerful testament to the film’s lasting ability not to soothe but to disturb.

Will-o’-the-Wisp

Finally, we return to the question of authorship. It seems very likely that the limitations I perceive in the existing scholarship on *Poltergeist* are rooted in the problem of authorship; scholars are unable to look beyond the question of its divided status, or to consider it outside of Spielberg’s canon. The film’s status as a space of contested authorship actually adds to the qualities I have outlined thus far. It refutes the defining, meaning-making power of authorship. For Michel Foucault, the author function exists as a strategy in the limiting “the great peril, the great danger with which fiction threatens our world.” (51) It is designed to ensure safe limits and boundaries, everything which the abject exists to destabilize. Far from a self-evident and natural conception, authorship works as part of a larger system that shapes and constraints meaning. It is a testament to the continuing power of what Foucault deems the “author function” that when an anonymous or contested work like *Poltergeist* appears, the grand critical project must be to decide “who is the real author?” before anything else can be said about the text definitively – even to the extremes that Warren Buckland pursues. Let us instead embrace *Poltergeist*’s contested status, as a work outside of the author-function, and deem this authorlessness to be consistent with the assault on meaning that is the film’s internal project. Salman Rushdie describes *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) as “as near as you will get to that will-o’-the-wisp of modern critical thought: the authorless text”; (52) *Poltergeist* is surely a strong contender for the same prize. *Poltergeist* is just what it depicts; it is a wraith.

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1. Giles, Dennis, "Conditions of Pleasure in Horror Cinema," *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett, eds., (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2004), 48.
2. Buckland, Warren, *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster*, (New York: Continuum, 2006), 154-173.
3. Gordon, Andrew M, *Empire of Dreams: The Science Fiction and Fantasy Films of Steven Spielberg*, (Lanham, N.C.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 94.
4. Williams, Tony, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*, (Madison: Fairleigh Dickson University Press, 1996), 225.
5. Lathan, Rob, "Subterranean Suburbia: Underneath Smalltown Myth in the Two Versions of *Invaders from Mars*," *Science-Fiction Studies*, Vol. 22 (1994), 203.
6. Qtd. in Gordon, 97.
7. Ferry, Jean, "Concerning King Kong," in *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, Paul Hammond, ed., (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000), 162.
8. It is an *astonishingly* common mistake, even in academic sources, to say that Cuesta Verde was built over an old Indian burial ground. It was actually a conventional cemetery. This reading may still have a certain amount of validity, though; consider that Cuesta Verde has a Spanish name but no non-Caucasian inhabitants that we see.
9. "Cuesta Verde," the film's setting, is Spanish for "It costs green."
10. Andrew M. Gordon's take is perhaps the most auteurist of all, completely dependent on details of Spielberg's biography.
11. Beer, Gillian, "Ghosts," *Essays in Criticism*, No. 28 (1978), 260.
12. Badley, Linda, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 42.
13. Kellner, Douglas, "Poltergeists, Gender, and Class. Horror Film in the Age of Reagan," *Cinema and the Question of Class*, David E. James and Rick Berg, eds., (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 222.
14. Stewart, Garrett, "The 'Videology' of Science Fiction" in *Shadows of the Magic Lamp: Fantasy and Science Fiction in Film*, George Slusser and Erik S. Rabkin, eds., (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 168.
15. Sconce, Jeffrey, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 127, 131.
16. Jay, Martin, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 226-7.
17. The "cosmic" quality of static does much to justify the strong outer space motif in *Poltergeist*. 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." 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.
18. "Television Static: Bringing Radiation into Your Home or Why TV Will Give You a Headache," <http://www.turnoffyourtv.com/commentary/static.html> (accessed August 4, 2008).
19. Shaviro, Steven, *The Cinematic Body*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press), 51.
20. This line does much to justify the buried sex and food motifs in the film as establishing the physical nature of the world which the ghosts envy.

21. Fowkes, Katherine, *Giving Up the Ghost: Spirits, Ghosts and Angels in Mainstream Comedy Films*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 58-9.
22. Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.
23. Ibid, 8.
24. Ibid, 3.
25. This sequence suggests Wordsworth's poem "We Are Seven": "A simple child . . . what should it know of death." Significantly, both texts ultimately deal with a child spending excessive amounts of time in a cemetery.
26. Carol-Anne's consistent role is preventing the dead from going where they are supposed to – the bird from going down and the ghosts from going up, to the Real Light.
27. 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." "Italian Westerns and Kung Fu Films: Genres of Violence," in *Graphic Violence on the Screen*, Thomas R. Atkins, ed., (New York: Monarch Press, 1977), 55.
28. Žižek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 23.
29. Kristeva, 3.
30. Creed, 11.
31. Spigel, Lynn, *Make Room For TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 51.
32. Mander, Jerry, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, (New York: Quill, 1978), 171.
33. Ibid, 172.
34. Linda Badley's phrase again evokes food. 46.
35. Badley, 44.
36. Gunning, Tom. "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations," in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, Patrice Pietro, ed., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 58.
37. Beckman, Karen. *Vanishing Women: Film, Feminism, and Magic*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 78.
38. Clover, Carol J., *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 201.
39. Badley, 46.
40. Paul, William, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 413-6.
41. Shaviro, Steven, *The Cinematic Body*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 54.
42. Kael, Pauline, *Taking It All In*, (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1984), 351-2.
43. "Fear and Trembling in the Age of Reagan: Notes on Poltergeist," *Socialist Review*, No. 54 (1983), 121-134, and "Spielberg's Ideology Machines: "Poltergeist and the Suburban Middle Class," *Jump Cut*, No. 28 (1983), 5-6.
44. Kellner briefly addresses this question in "Poltergeists, Gender and Class," describing the film as an amalgam of Spielberg's and Hooper's styles and concerns: "This film exhibits Hooper's flair for the suspenseful, odd and horrific, and Spielberg's affection for the middle class, fuzzy-minded occultism, technical skill, and nose for the market." 237-8. One gets the general impression that we are supposed to think of Spielberg as providing the film with its ideology and Hooper as a craftsman executing it.
45. Ibid, 229.
46. Ibid, 228.

47. Ibid, 220.
48. Gordon, 100.
49. Kellner 1996, 227.
50. Canton, Joanne. "‘I’ll never have a clown in my house again’: Why Horror Movies Live On," *Poetics Today*, V. 25 No. 2 (2004), 291.
51. Foucault, Michel, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Donald Bouchard, ed., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 118.
52. Rushdie, Salman, *The Wizard of Oz*, (London: BFI, 1992), 95.