

**Gabriele Biotti**

London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research, United Kingdom

[gabriele.biotti@lcir.co.uk](mailto:gabriele.biotti@lcir.co.uk)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1690-1105>

**The Uncanny and the Ghostly Nature of the World  
in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980)**

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining* (1980) in its complex textuality, where ghosts, spectrality and repetition compulsion play a relevant role in defining the symbolic space of a contemporary gothic story about madness, fear, evil traces and perception. In a context where time is out of joint, and where evil laws try to frame human presences in a dimension of distress, spectral presences shape a ghostly world where fears and violence are defeated by a special mental strength, the 'shining'.

Keywords: Spectrality, archive, ghosts, time, otherness

This article proposes a reading concerning ghosts, otherness and the uncanny in Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining* (1980). The strong relation between the feeling of the uncanny and a radical strategy of artistic expression, aiming to show the absolute relevance of otherness, will be examined. The aesthetical elaboration of ghosts and spectrality, questioned in the film's narrative, explains how ghostly presences play a central role by strongly determining the film's meaning and, more generally, our relationship to speculative fiction. In the plot, ghosts intervene as presences that are progressively experienced as real for the three main characters, Jack Torrance, his wife Wendy and their son Danny. As spectators, we are led to believe that there is a real interaction between them and the human characters.

The film's interpretation reveals a space where spectrality shows the relevance of illusion and of the uncanny for our contemporary knowledge. From this point of view, the film recovers the Gothic tradition but, at the same time, it overcomes this dimension. As presences haunting human experience, ghosts "signal epistemological uncertainty and the potential emergence of a different story and a competing history" (Weinstock, 2013, p. 64). As another central topic of the whole text, the concept of the archive in its symbolic meaning will be

approached, to show that it is precisely from the archive that some questions concerning spectrality, ghosts and haunting, arise. Such questions are related to interpretation. As Julian Wolfreys argues,

To speak of the spectral, the ghostly, of haunting in general is to come face to face with that which plays on the very question of interpretation and identification, [...], at the very limit to which interpretation can go (Wolfreys, 2013, p. 71).

The presence of ghosts in the film is questioned, by showing their different meanings in the world of illusion to which we are confronted in our experience of spectators, film critics or film theorists. Ghosts and dramaturgical spaces are related in a common symbolic work for producing uncanny effects and for creating such a strong illusory dimension. At the formal-aesthetic level, ghosts express a rich symbolic dimension, so that the whole film's textual fabric is marked by a general uncanny construction, creating the possibility of a constant openness of the text itself. The film's interpretation produces meanings and defines a discourse concerning spectrality, proliferation and repetition as relevant parts of the film's narrative. As María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren argue, in the spectral dimension it is possible to show specific attitudes

towards the uncertainty, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and indeterminacy that characterize language and Being because of their inevitable entanglement with alterity and difference" (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013, p. 9).

*The Shining* contains a wide series of typical horror and fantastic situations and this is its most evident surface identity: in the film, many aspects of this narrative tradition are in fact represented. We can remember the film's main scenery, the Overlook Hotel, which is a haunted place; mental possession and telepathy: two characters, Danny Torrance and Mister Hallorann, the hotel cook, have the "shining" gift; ghosts, such as Lloyd, the bartender and Delbert Grady, the former hotel caretaker, are presented as they act as normal, real persons in everyday situations; doubles and duplication: Jack Torrance, one of the film's main characters, has his own double in Delbert Grady, which he tries to imitate in his killing; Danny Torrance sees several times the Grady sisters and he has a double in Tony, a fantasmatic child speaking in his mouth and in his mind; Jack Torrance goes mad deciding to execute homicidal actions; there is a confusion between past and present; reincarnation is suggested, as Jack could also be a reincarnation of previous hotel caretakers; in some dialogues, we find references to fairy tales and to cannibalism.

It is clear that the whole film is marked by horror cinema elements and by a narrative development where illusion and the fantastic play a central role. The uncanny is at the very heart of the story, being a decisive stylistic reference.

This concept, closely related to the psychoanalytic theory and its developments, operates in the film both at the narrative and the symbolic level. Nicholas Royle (2003) writes that the uncanny affirms the power of art “to make strange, to defamiliarize, to make unfamiliar all sorts of familiar perceptions and beliefs” (p. 5). As a specific symbolic concept, the uncanny “has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality” (p. 2). In *The Shining*, a strict connection between the uncanny and spectrality is affirmed: the specter is determined as a figure which, contradictorily, should “not be assimilated or negated (exorcized), but lived *with*, in an open, welcoming relationality” (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013, p. 33). This is what happens in the plot: progressively, ghosts appear to haunt a daily experience of familiar normality and a constant uncanny production finds coherence in a symbolic and narrative spectral space. In his cinematic adaptation of Stephen King’s novel, elaborated together with Diane Johnson, Kubrick has worked to confuse and make more problematic our perception of spaces, situations and chronologies; during the narrative development, we are less and less able to have a clear mapping of the Overlook Hotel spaces, organized in a labyrinthine structure. Playing on the ambiguity and confusion of space, Kubrick brings the spectator into another dimension beyond habitual perceptions, where anything can become possible and plausible. We enter the inside of another world, where normal logic is suspended. Some sequences, where this spectral dimension is relevant, will be analyzed, to show how the film’s textuality produces a reading of our contemporary relation with a ghostly symbolic space. Quite early in the narrative development, Jack Torrance remains alone with his personal ghosts and obsessions. From the moment he experiences a serious personal crisis, a ghostly space, a breach, opens up and specters begin to make their appearances.

This is already suggested in the very first sequence, before the character’s definitive crisis. Over the water, in a mountain landscape, the camera moves forward to a big rock near the water, where the rock itself is reflected. This shot has a great relevance because it also informs us of the foundational strength of duplication inside the film. *The Shining* is already announced as a film of reflections, of duplication, of a fictional world finding roots in the uncanny and the fantastic. Then a car proceeds along the road. At first, we see it far away; our gaze is then progressively focused on this car. The mountain landscape all around is imposing and the notes from Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* amplifies the effect of a great and solemn upward movement. At a certain point, the camera stops following the car on the road by suddenly deviating from the main trajectory. A proliferation of possibilities opens up in the film and a radical doubt is built in the very first sequence. The sequence also clarifies, in the very beginning, that in the film some shots could remain totally unsolved, unexplained: here, we are not sure about who is the owner of this strange point of view. The general look from above suggests that an overlying, and potentially powerful, point of view

is shaping the general narrative. Such ghostly gaze, here anticipated, will also close the film. The impressive landscape seems to hide something unseen: evil presences maybe, a sense of menace, a fear that something could go wrong.

*The Shining* is the story of an American family. A man accepts a winter job as a caretaker in an isolated mountain hotel. The man, who thinks he can finish to write a novel during the long stay, discovers an unknown mental space. A disturbing liminality, anticipated in the opening sequence, progressively breaks into the family and slips the main character into madness. From an apparently normal situation, an upsetting feeling of disturbance finds its way into the plot. This is confirmed in a passage of the job interview sequence: when the manager, Mister Ullman, informs Jack of a tragedy that happened in the hotel years before (a precedent caretaker having killed his family), he is not surprised or disturbed; it is like the hotel's spectral and evil identity has already captured him: his reaction is that of someone being fascinated.

Growing progressively in the story, Jack's madness means the total lack of order, of rules, of a general reference: the beginning of a moment where all ghosts become "real". The ghost is a figure of ambiguity, of liminal instability between different dimensions: "its own status as discourse or epistemology is never stable, as the ghost also questions the formation of knowledge itself and specifically invokes what is placed outside it, excluded from perception" (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013, p. 9). What had remained hidden in the opening sequence, is now slowly coming to light through the main character. Jack slowly becomes no more able to write his novel and to be responsible as a caretaker.

Jack's son, Danny, has been presented in the very first part of the film as a psychic child, with a singular gift, the 'shining'. In parallel with the job interview, Danny and his mother Wendy are in their house's dining room; while the woman is reading a book, he already converses briefly with Tony. Tony is a spectral child who talks inside him as a double or a mysterious friend. Danny can also see in his mind something evil that happened at the hotel, and also something that will happen again in the future. While his father is at the hotel to accept the job, Danny, in his home bathroom, is shown while talking with his double in front of the bathroom mirror. In this short conversation, Tony anticipates that Danny's father will accept the job; Danny is also experimenting painful mental visions of blood from the hotel's elevators and the scary faces of two little sisters. The fantastic defining the whole film is strong and amplified: we have already accessed a first door and our perception has been introduced to a fantastic dimension, where reality turns into doubt. The feeling of 'being-at-home' is replaced by an experience of estrangement, of sliding into a different dimension. The uncanny has already begun to undo the borders between the known and unknown. An experience of spectral liminality is presented and, later in the story, will be confirmed through Danny's experience of exploring the

hotel's spaces. Before ghosts begin to appear in the hotel, the film's textuality is already

capable, beyond the opposition between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life, of thinking the possibility of the specter, the specter as possibility (Derrida, 1994, p. 12).

In the film's first part, some time after the Torrance family has settled at the hotel, we see Jack sitting on the bed, looking at his son in the opposite space of the bedroom. Jack is here "trapped in a half-life between sleeping and walking [...], stuck between resting or rising" (Luckhurst, 2013, p.55), in a sort of 'space between'. A big mirror shows Jack's reflection. In the same shot, we see two persons, the real man and the illusory one. The appearance of Danny in the family quarters, presented as himself, as unique, produces a surprising effect and it seems here that he can dissolve this illusory and fantasmatic world where Jack has already entered. A mirror produces a feeling of uncanny knowledge and suggests a progressive dissolution of unity.

The doubling effect, in a more general alteration of a perspective of the unique, progressively takes place in the film's narrative strategy, where doubles proliferate. In the first part, Mister Ullman is always presented in couple with his assistant. Mister Hallorann, like Danny, owns the 'shining' and communicates with otherness. Delbert Grady finds a double in Jack and the little sisters are always together and very similar. Human and spectral doubles, in an indistinct way, proliferate by creating a more general effect of disorientation and confusion: that of a general trance state, an hallucinatory symbolic space of uncanny perception. We are asked to organize all this haunted material: to step inside a world where coherence is no more assured and where the world is at the same time illusory and perfectly believable. What was invisible has now become visible: fantasies, hallucinations, nightmares, in a constant transgression of the boundaries between reality and fantastic. This is coherent with one of the main narrative developments: the film shows the splitting of Jack's identity and the crisis of his interior life. The rational man slowly becomes a monster, a killing beast. All that what was hidden, like instincts and impulses, has come to light. Through the film's main character, *The Shining* expresses the uncertain limit between reality and fantasy, between what is real, apparent, and what is unseen, between rationality and a fantastic dimension. As Nicholas Royle (2003) argues, it is "impossible to conceive of the uncanny without a sense of ghostliness, a sense of strangeness given to dissolving all assurances about the identity of a self" (p. 16).

The analysis concerning the self and otherness, reality and spectrality, as key topics in the film, is conducted through a theoretical consideration of the symbolic notion of the archive. In this sense, the spectral archive is a central reference of

Kubrick's film. In *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida (1996) correlates the archive with the notions of domiciliation and power. He gives the following definition of it:

the meaning of 'archive', its only meaning, comes [...] from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded [...]. On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that *place* which is their house [...], that official documents are filed. The archons are first of all the documents' guardians [...]. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives (p. 2).

There is a clear relation between domiciliation, residence, home, on the one hand, and power and interpretation of documents, on the other. The archive is not just a domiciliation, but also a place in which documents have *meaning* as recognized documents. Derrida writes:

With such a status, the documents [...] are only kept and classified under the title of the archive by virtue of a privileged *topology*. They inhabit this uncommon place, this place of election where law and singularity intersect in *privilege* (p. 3).

The archiving process is inseparable from a privileged topology for all that can be classified. This domiciliation takes place "At the intersection [...] of the place and the law" (p. 3). By virtue of this privileged assignation, the archive finds another of its reasons in the fact of gathering together. Again in Derrida's words, the archive presupposes a consignation in order:

to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity (p. 3).

As a synchronic system, the archive can configurate meanings and discourses, but secrets and plurality would menace even the possibility of consignation, of a theory of the archive itself. Any possible constitution is marked by a different and contrary movement. In any archival consignation there is a contradictory drive: an aggression, a destructive tension. This drive "is at work, but since it always operates in silence, it never leaves any archives of its own. It destroys in advance its own archive" (p. 10). The archive's logic itself is, in its possibility of consignation, by otherness, by any secret or heterogeneity. And no archive can be thought without the presence of its otherness.

There is no archive without the threat of a death drive, an aggression to its stability. This aggression drive can be defined as a "ghostly space", where the ghostly presence's repetition and circulation is active and clearly affirmed. *The Shining* is built within this ghostly space: an evil archive has its laws in the

hotel's spaces and the character of Danny conveys a contradictory drive, even if he is not exempt from a frightening ghostly experience.

The film's final sequence is an emblematic fragment for its ambiguity and for its textual function: the role played by spectrality in the film's narrative is here clearly stressed. All the facts have already happened and the narration is over: in the final state of his madness, Jack Torrance has tried to chase and kill his son inside the hotel's maze. Danny has deceived him with a ruse: instead of continuing his escape run and leaving traces on the snow, he has moved backwards on his steps, without leaving more footprints. With no more clear traces to follow, Jack has lost sight of the child and has died frozen inside the labyrinth. Danny has found the exit and has re-embraced his mother. The still image of frozen Jack Torrance could be the film's final sequence, because it seems that there is nothing left to tell in this story.

But the film continues with one more sequence, a sort of strange extension. It is something like the film's final secret. Our gaze is brought back inside the hotel. No one is there anymore. A final series of shots mysteriously shows the hotel's empty spaces and we cannot even be sure that these shots can be situated, narratively and chronologically, after the previous sequence.

First with a dolly, then with two crossfades, one last time the camera runs through the hotel spaces and approaches progressively a photograph on one of the hotel's walls. The black and white picture is exactly in the middle of a group of other photographs. Already before the first crossfade, we recognize Jack Torrance in the middle of a party. Seemingly, he has mysteriously been archived and contextualized inside an iconic space after his murderous madness and final death. Why? What archive are we talking about here? And what is the meaning of this 'archival process' operating inside the Overlook Hotel?

After the first crossfade we see the man standing up in the middle of a group of other persons, in the hotel's party hall, photographed in 1921 during the 4th of July feast, as the second crossfade shows this date in the lower part of the photograph. Strangely, this man was there, being also the character of a story taking place around 1980: an impossible time and an impossible chronology are proposed. In the picture, many other figures surround him or stay behind his figure: a festive but gloomy atmosphere seems to reign and the whole representation has a spectral dimension. No trace of discordance, here: just a never ending feast of spectres. They could be the same spectres we have already seen in the party hall in a precedent collective sequence, when Jack had entered in that space animated by people of the past. Possible secrets or heterogeneities are here out of the archival system: they are left out of a global photographic system, in which secret traces are hidden. The general spectral archive hides traces of otherness: here, there are no traces of Danny or of Mister Hallorann, whose psychic minds have defeated the spectral archive and the evil repetition compulsion.

Who is watching all this? Is there anyone going around the hotel's spaces? It is possible that there are some ghosts and one of them may have just approached that group of pictures: the dolly in the final sequence can also be the cinematic subjective of a ghost. This unassignable gaze creates a strongly contradictory effect in the general construction: these shots are not narratively motivated and probably they do not express a human point of view. Coherence seems to fail here, as a gothic story has come to an end: a general uncanny feeling has been produced by the many specters disseminated in the Overlook Hotel's spaces. Not only have we seen them as figures but we have also see situations according to their spectral point of view. A similar shot, with no human point of view, is that following Danny's tricycle while the child is exploring the corridors.

Ghostly presences create a blurring between objective reality and subjective fantasy, as ghosts are presented in the film's development as tangible and objectified presences. Delbert Grady not simply speaks with Jack, but also touches him to clean his jacket in the long sequence in the red and white bathroom and he opens the food storage's door to free Jack from his imprisonment. Jack is destined to be archived in this system of repetition and the ghostly archive, where there is a place for him, occurs in a Gothic story that

does not present the ghosts as his subjective vision, but as objective, solid masses occupying space. There is nothing particularly 'ghostly' about their presentation (Falsetto, 2001, p. 127).

The film's general narrative is built on the progressive contrast between two characters, Jack and Danny. Scene after scene, as the first sinks into his madness, the second perceives with increasing frequency what is normally destined to remain buried, unknown and not perceived by normal persons: past murderous facts that already happened in the hotel and the anticipation of future dramatic events. He acquires the awareness of his father's madness and he must face it with his mental ability. Despite being also a terrifying experience to deal with, the child's gift represents a decisive challenge to evil: a decryption strategy of obscure death forces. In one of the sequences where Danny explores the hotel's corridors riding his tricycle, he is first anguished by a sudden appearance of the Grady sisters; but then, only with his own resources, he can convince himself that ghosts are not finally true but only fantastic and momentaneous presences.

Jack's madness leads him to try to imitate other precedent hotel caretakers and killers. Under the hotel's mysterious evil forces, he would like to become part of this ghostly world where repetition mechanisms are the absolute law. As the hotel's ghostly identity controls the man's autonomy, Danny progressively becomes his opponent. He doesn't play this game and he is not 'coded' by this system. With the 'shining' revealing what is normally hidden, he can perceive evil



forces in painful experiences, visionary moments of absolute otherness, as in the mentioned sequence in front of the bathroom mirror or during his explorations of the hotel's spaces. The child experiences painful visions and sees ghosts but he is able to overcome all of this: he can give meaning to all this.

Various times and years, 1921, 1970 and 1980, cross each other and overlap in the same place, where not only there are ghosts, but also a *spectral time* develops, full of contradictory developments: more than one Delbert Grady (1921? 1970?), more than one caretaker trying to kill his family. Jack's insanity is born and grows in a context where paradoxically time is no more in its joints and past time lives again. The appearances of the Grady sisters, that of Delbert Grady and that of Lloyd the bartender are produced by this mechanism. Jack can only be archived inside the hotel's photographic collection, among many others. This storage confirms the hotel's tradition (and 'memory'): a repetition of evil and criminal actions. The archival dimension of this collection of past traces, still living in the hotel's haunted time and space, is a condition for power, foundation and institution: the evil foundation and rules, connected with a memory of death that does not cease to be. In the archive system, repetition rules normalize and neutralize tensions and differences. We cannot see any signs of violence, murder and madness in that final picture, only a feast. But another story has also been told: that of Danny.

The child enters in the evil's tradition, memory and archival process. In the labyrinth, he doesn't leave traces on the snow. His presence cannot be archived and ruled by evil forces because his traces escape the archival law, defeating any scheme of repetition compulsion.

Jack is 'written' in time repeating and he is definitively ruled. He has been photographed, put in a framework and classified, becoming a ghost among others. Danny, in his exposure to the spectral world, generates an 'archival disease': divergence determines his identity in relation to the spectral archive, from which he is not finally captured. Jack finds rest inside a framework and becomes part of an evil tradition: his story and identity are registered. Danny, assaulted by evil forces, escapes from the same evil foundation by breaking the unity of the system.

*The Shining's* narrative is founded on ghostly presences haunting the hotel's spaces. They are not only related to Jack's altered perception, as also his wife Wendy experiences visions of ghosts: real world and ghostly dimension are strictly tied together. The evil archive is the place where ghosts are still alive and in the entire hotel ghostly rules and the evil law become possible: the Overlook Hotel encodes such ghostly presences in a system, a system of repetition compulsion, the only possible identity process in that haunted space. But the film also reveals the archive's internal contradictions.

Between consign and breakaway, between coded space and freedom, some questions can be asked: what kinds of uncanny configurations is the spectral

archive creating? Since the archive is always of a contradictory constitution, how can we manage this notion?

*The Shining* gives shape to an experience of spectrality. But ghostly presences, in the plot, are not only symptoms of the fantastic tradition, being recovered and reinstalled in the contemporary context. They also give meaning to a symbolic space where the general text, the film itself, is radically haunted by the uncanny. As Nicholas Royle (2003) writes, “To be haunted, to be in the company of ghosts is not necessarily a cause for fear or panic. It is something to affirm: it is the very condition of thinking and feeling” (p. 53). Not only can ghosts shape a Gothic paradigm, but they also have to do with the fact that there is no discourse, reading or teaching “without a logic of mourning that haunts or can always come back to haunt” (p. 53). *The Shining* is an example of a ghostly space of knowledge, where spectrality asks to be read “as a figuration that *does* theory” (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013, p. 9), as spectrality is the concept showing “the tension between the desire to understand and the openness to what exceeds knowledge” (Davis, 2013, p. 58). A contradictory space of spectral, haunted knowledge is shown by a film where coming to terms with understanding spectrality remains a definitively open question.

The world itself, together with our capacity to read and understand it, are radically questioned. Not only *The Shining* tells the story of a constantly active otherness, but it is also a film where an interpretation work can never be fixed permanently. Through a revisitation of the Gothic tradition, Kubrick questions our contemporary lack of references in the ghostly dimension of knowledge. This leads to the conclusion that “*The Shining* puts into question the very idea of actuality. If, as the film posits, there are different planes or levels of experience, what difference is there between objective reality as it is usually understood and the subjective experience and visions of individual characters?” (Falsetto, 2001, p. 130). As Roger Luckhurst (2013) remarks,

Twentieth-century horror is secular in a way the Gothic is not, because the Gothic clings to a Christian metaphysic of good and evil, justice and punishment. Secular horror instead offers a glimpse of the absolute black nothingness that lies beneath the maze of appearances, a revelation that there is no transcendent reality, only the final death of meaning (Falsetto, 2001, pp. 87–88).

*The Shining* constitutes an example of this non-transcendent dimension in which many questions remain open, together with our work of interpretation.

A final critical remark is necessary: the film’s ambiguity is strong and we cannot even be sure of such ‘final death of meaning’; we can just read critically all the traces inside a ghostly narrative and reformulate again and again some questions: are we really sure that ghosts triumph in the end? And how can we be sure of the sign that such ghosts assume? And it is clear, in the end, that Danny

Torrance can be considered as the final winner, even if his experience itself is constantly haunted by evil forces. As Derrida (1996) points out, "truth is spectral, and this is its part of truth which is irreducible by explanation" (p. 87).

As a philosophical experience, the film shows tensions between narrative and time, dream and awakening, the archive and the exception, tied together in an extremely rich and subtle textuality.

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