

Synaesthetic Specters: Haunting Hill House on the Silver Screen

Elizabeth Mullen

► **To cite this version:**

Elizabeth Mullen. Synaesthetic Specters: Haunting Hill House on the Silver Screen. Image & narrative , Leuven : Instituut voor Culturele Studies, 2009, 10 (1), pp.119-132. hal-01259483

HAL Id: hal-01259483

<https://hal.univ-brest.fr/hal-01259483>

Submitted on 25 Jan 2016

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Synaesthetic Specters: *Haunting Hill House* on the Silver Screen

Elizabeth Mullen

Abstract (E): Through a combination of film and sound techniques, Robert Wise captures the invisible, unspeakable nature of the supernatural in his 1963 film, *The Haunting*, based on Shirley Jackson's novel. His approach is simultaneously synaesthetic, intertextual and grotesque, effectively situating the spectator's terror in his reception of the film.

Résumé: Dans *The Haunting*, un film de 1963 adapté du roman de Shirley Jackson, Robert Wise capture l'invisible, l'indicible nature du surnaturel en combinant techniques cinématographiques et sonores. Par une approche synesthésique, intertextuelle et grotesque, il fait naître la terreur du spectateur de sa seule réception du film.

Keywords: reception, synaesthesia, grotesque, sound, image, American gothic, Robert Wise, Shirley Jackson

Fear of what we cannot see or hear is nothing new, particularly in chaos-haunted America. From Father Hooper's infamous black veil to the ghostly presence in Number 124, fear of the invisible has been a constant in American tales of horror. Given their reliance on keeping the audience "in the dark," how can such tales be adapted to a visual medium like film? A close examination of Robert Wise's 1963 film, *The Haunting* (based on Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*), can shed some light on the question of how to screen the invisible and the dread it inspires.

Much has been said about the mastery of Wise's adaptation, and rare is the list of "top" horror films which does not feature *The Haunting*. Opinions vary as to what gives the film its power. For Daniel S. Duvall, Wise perfectly captures the unreliable perceptions of a protagonist who progressively loses her grip on reality (Duvall, p. 32), whereas for Michael A. Morrison, Wise's strength stems from his ability to concentrate and intensify the trapped, claustrophobic atmosphere of the novel and push it to its breaking point (Morrison, p. 26). But it is Danièle Grivel and Roland Lacourbe who truly pinpoint the source of the film's power to terrify: "Car La Maison du Diable suscite la perception d'un monde indicible, invisible, menaçant, côtoyant sans cesse le nôtre. Et Hill House est une porte de communication pour pénétrer dans cet univers d'effroi." (Grivel et Lecourbe, p. 113) [*The Haunting* arouses our perceptions of an unspeakable, invisible, menacing world, one which continually rubs against our own. *Hill House* provides an open door through which this universe of

fear can penetrate]. In other words, it is the spectator's sense of perception, not his or her understanding, which is heightened in the film. Couched in our familiar world, the perceived threat is both "invisible" and "unspeakable," and the resulting confusion serves to intensify his feelings of terror. Wise's genius lies in his ability to solicit several senses at once: seeing and hearing, of course, but also a certain sense of what has come before, both historically and cinematically. After all, beyond its ghostly connotations, "to haunt" means "to be continually present in; to pervade" (AHD, p. 597). But before examining how *The Haunting* conveys its invisible specters, we must first clarify exactly who or what inhabits Hill House.

Haunted by History

Unlike the more spectacular spectral manifestations to be found in such horror classics as *Poltergeist* or *Ringu*, the supernatural presence in Hill House is both pervasive and hidden. A quick look at the opening voiceover sequence in the film (based on the opening passage of the novel [1]) underscores the enigmatic nature of what possesses Hill House:

An evil old house -- the kind some people call "haunted" -- is like an undiscovered country waiting to be explored. Hill House had stood for 90 years and might stand for 90 more. Silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House and whatever walked there walked alone.

What strikes us in this opening passage is the contrast between Hill House's apparent solidity ("Hill House had stood for 90 years and might stand for 90 more") and the sense of malaise underlying its sturdy frame. Here silence becomes a living thing, "lay[ing] steadily against the wood and stone," and the house is inhabited by an invisible yet menacing presence. Moreover, from the start, Hill House's paradoxical effect on those who come into contact with it is also made clear. Physically daunting, Hill House nonetheless draws the spectator in by its very atmosphere of unexplained evil: who can resist the call to explore an "undiscovered country?"

In his adaptation of the novel, Wise anchors this malignant presence in the history of the house. Directly after the opening credits, in a long explanatory voiceover sequence, an unnamed narrator (later revealed as the ghost-hunting anthropologist, John Markway) relates the history of the house's puritanical founder, Hugh Crain. His first wife's untimely death in a carriage accident occurs

just before she sets eyes on Hill House for the first time. We are told how the second Mrs. Crain meets a similar fate, in this case falling down the stairs under dubious circumstances ("I've been unable to find out how or why she fell, although I have my suspicions..."). Her demise is followed by that of Crain's daughter after years of solitude in Hill House, attended only by a negligent village girl. The narrator suggests that has ignored her aged charge's cries for help, preferring to dally on the porch with a local youth. This companion, in turn, loses first her sanity then her life, hanging herself from the library tower. This series of ill-omened deaths serves as a basis for the house's local reputation as an evil place; one where the servants will not linger after dark.

The story of the companion's neglect, ensuing insanity and suicide also "haunts" the narrative, drawing parallels between the companion and the film's main character, Eleanor, whose bedridden mother also died in a moment of inattention on Eleanor's part (though without the local youth). From the start, Hill House's macabre history seems poised to repeat itself.

Upon further consideration, however, we realize that Hill House's haunted history goes further back than its venerable founder and his ill-fated relatives. We must not forget that Hill House is firmly placed in the granite heart of New England, and thus carries within itself the Gothic resonance characterised not only by Hawthorne and Melville, but also by the original European colonists. Lauric Guillaud has pointed out how, in addition to their puritan outlook, these settlers brought with them their own fears of the unknown:

Les colons portent inconsciemment en eux le climat de "malaise" dans lequel avait vécu l'Occident de la Peste Noire aux Guerres de religion, ainsi que l'obsession de la mort, omniprésente dans les images et les paroles de Européens au début des Temps modernes (scènes de martyre, innombrables Jugements derniers, évocations de l'enfer, danses macabres, épidémies démoniaques, etc.). Anglais, Allemands ou Hollandais, surtout d'origine rurale, qui s'installent en Nouvelle-Angleterre, n'évacuent pas l'héritage du passé du jour au lendemain (interprétation des signes célestes, croyance dans les revenants, peur de la nuit, hantise du complot). (Guillaud, p. 15)

[Subconsciously, the original settlers carried within themselves the climate of malaise which had permeated the Western world, from the Black Plague to the Wars of Religion. Equally present in each was an obsession with Death, omnipresent in European images and speech at the beginning of Modern times (images of martyrdom, countless Last Judgments, depictions of

Hell, dances macabres, demonic epidemics, etc.). English German and Dutch settlers in New England, mostly of rural origin, could not rid themselves of the heritage of their past overnight ("reading" signs from heaven, belief in beings come back from the dead, fear of night-time and dread of conspiracies)]

In other words, Hill House's inhabitants are haunted not only by the fear of being left, literally and figuratively, "in the dark," but also by underlying layers of superstition dating back to the very origins of the American psyche. In the film, several characters refer to the house's New England heritage, underscoring its importance.

The strong Biblical presence of the patriarchal, puritanical Crain is brought to the fore in Wise's mise en scène. After the "accident," in an oppressive low-angle shot the camera pans from Crain reading from a massive Bible to his grim-faced young daughter, who looks downward out of the frame then tries to turn away. Crain's hand forces his daughter's attention back to her mother's dead body, revealed as the camera slowly pans backward. In the scene's final frame the viewer's gaze travels from the outstretched body of Mrs. Crain in the extreme left foreground to Abigail, her unsmiling daughter, resting finally on Crain's large hand clutching the Bible in the upper right corner of the frame, dominating the scene. The hand seems to be pushing her downward with the Bible, closer to her dead mother's corpse, and thus to her own fate.

A later scene featuring a young Abigail Crain takes place in the nursery, her bedroom. A spotlight highlights a large cross and an embroidered Bible verse hangs above the canopied bed. An arched doorway bisects the room, bearing the inscription stencilled in Gothic script, "Suffer the children, " taken from Jesus's famous exhortation to "suffer the little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me"(Matthew 19:14). In this scene a path of light draws a diagonal line from the word "children" through the cross to the little girl in the bed, a reversal of the line drawn from corpse to girl to Bible in the earlier scene. The camera pans away from the inscription as a nurse removes a doll from little Abigail's grasp and replaces it with an unwieldy Holy Bible. Her religious upbringing literally weighs on her, repeating in essence Crain's earlier gesture and tying the house to its puritan past. The narrator's revelation that Hugh Crain has gone abroad and died, leaving Abigail to grow up in that house (and that room) does nothing to alleviate the oppressive patriarchal presence. In fact, in the film's only overt special-effects sequence, we witness Abigail's gradual transformation from young girl to old woman, her head pressed against the pillow in a closeup shot that allows for no glimpse of the world beyond the confines of her coffin-like bed.

These layered impressions of life in Hill House haunt our reception of the film as surely (and as insidiously) as Abigail's ghost haunts the house. When in later scenes the protagonists return to the nursery, a room Markway calls "the cold heart of the house," the earlier images of Abigail's childhood and later her lonely death color our reception of the scenes.

Similarly, contemporary and modern viewers bring to *The Haunting* the memory of previous horror classics. The spectator's perception of the film passes through the prism of the cinematic past, from James Whale's 1932 gem, *The Old Dark House* to Hitchcock's 1960 masterpiece, *Psycho*. This intertextual perception is not merely visual: spooky music and strange sounds combine with sharp contrasts of light and dark, jagged lines of perspective and skewed camera angles in *The Haunting* to play into our collective cinematic consciousness, but without the familiar figures (monsters, maniacs and supernatural creatures) that usually allow us to identify and understand what we are experiencing.

By analysing the film's opening scene, we can begin to see how Wise combines cultural and cinematic history with sound and film technique to convey the nature of the evil presence in Hill House. From the very start image and sound intertwine. As the voiceover intones "an evil old house, etc." Humphrey Searle's haunting score begins and we see the dark silhouette of a gothic manor, imposing both by its dominance of the frame and by its stylized outline. The low-angle shot places us at the foot (and the mercy) of the house as the lengthy list of credits unfolds. The smoky, scary calligraphy of the film's title zooms towards us at the exact pace of a corresponding acceleration and change in tone of the music. As it builds to a slow crescendo, bits of the house are illuminated from the outside and the intricate stonework of the façade is revealed and rendered ominous by the anxious undertone of Searle's musical score. A light goes on in an upper window as the narrator begins the story of Hill House.

From this point, the film illustrates the voiceover narration. As the voice mentions the arrival of Hugh Crain's young wife, the scene cuts to a long shot of a carriage moving toward the camera along a serpentine road, highly reminiscent of the carriage scene in *Nosferatu* (and almost every vampire film that follows it), except that in the foreground our view is partly blocked by a jutting tree trunk on the left side of the frame. As the narrator describes Hill House as "a house born bad," the music's urgency increases and the carriage passes out of the frame; the camera goes from filming the horses drawing the carriage to a closeup shot of the horses' rearing heads. The camera follows the heads' movements, waving crazily about, only to settle on a medium close-up of the tree trunk. As the narrator recounts the first Mrs. Crain's death in the carriage accident, the camera cuts to a slowly

revolving carriage wheel on the left side of the foreground, centering the shot on a large gash in the trunk. Finally, the camera cuts to another broken carriage wheel, this time on the right side of the frame. A lifeless hand flops down in front of it and the scene dissolves into an interior shot of the house.

As spectators, we go from observing to experiencing the scene. The music guides us even as we are jostled around along with the camera, settling finally on an image we cannot immediately take in (the closeup of the wheel, the trunk and the hand). Similar techniques are used in the filming and scoring of the second Mrs. Crain's death, where we tumble down the stairs with her without ever seeing the source of her panic. We repeat the experience with the companion's suicide, observing first her crazed expression in a high-angle shot as she climbs the spiral staircase, a noose neatly coiled on a silver tray. Her dangling feet in the left foreground echo the first Mrs. Crain's dangling hand, as camera and musical score hurtle down the winding railing, taking the spectator along for the ride.

These introductory scenes haunt the rest of the narrative on both a visual and auditory level. The pounding drums we hear as the first Mrs. Crain's carriage comes up the twisted path to Hill House beat with the same tone and rhythm as the pounding against Eleanor's and Theo's door in the first "haunting" scene. When at the end of the film, Eleanor's car hits the (same) tree and spins out of control, the careening camera motion mirrors that of the first "accident" and both scenes end with the victim's lifeless hand outstretched in the foreground. Michael Morrison has commented on the extraordinary circularity of the narrative and on the recurrence of circular imagery throughout the film, tracing it from the round eye of the salmon served at dinner to the magnifying glass Markway uses to examine Hill House's floor plans: "this motif is so insistent that it becomes a kind of visual correlative for the circular structure of the narrative itself"(29).

The final scene of the film proves his point. We return to a low-angle shot of Hill House darkly silhouetted against the night sky, but this time it is Eleanor's voice we hear in voiceover, and the description of the house is also slightly altered: "Hill House has stood for 90 years and might stand for 90 more. Within, walls continue upright, bricks meet, floors are firm, and doors are sensibly shut. Silence lies steadily against the wood and stone. And we who walk here, walk alone." The narrative has come full circle, seemingly unchanged other than the addition of another haunting presence, destined to continue until, as Luke suggests, the house is "burnt down and the ground sown with salt."

Ambiguous Apparitions, Unstable Narration: the Devil in the Details

The formerly skeptical Luke 's fervent condemnation seems to signal the end of all doubt as to the evil nature of the house. Yet much of our opinion is based on the impressions of a decidedly unreliable narrator, Eleanor. Our first glimpse of her at her sister's house is of a shy, repressed, anxious woman with little experience of the real world. Upon arriving at Hill House, she is singled out for supernatural visitations, and it is her name which ends up scrawled on the wall in the corridor. However, as in the famous saying "just because you're paranoid doesn't mean people aren't out to get you," the fact that Eleanor is mentally vulnerable does not prove that Hill House isn't haunted. As spectators we are torn between our assessment of Eleanor's mental state and our experience of Hill House through her perspective.

This ambivalence is clear in one of the film's most famous scenes, the "hand" scene. Eleanor passes a sleepless, terrified night in the dark, listening to a series of strange noises with only her friend Theo's hand gripped tightly in hers for comfort. In voiceover, we hear Eleanor's jumbled thoughts as she ponders the various strange noises which fill her head. When the tension becomes unbearable, she screams aloud, and Theo flips on the lights -- from across the room. Eleanor's anguished cry, "God, God -- whose hand was I holding?" (163) mirrors the spectator's confusion.

While novelist Shirley Jackson always maintained that the evil inhabiting Hill House is not simply a figment of neurotic Eleanor's imagination, as spectators we are well aware of her fragile mental state. We are privy to her thoughts in voiceover at key points in the film, revealing her increasingly unsteady grasp on reality. Actress Julie Harris's extremely expressive face and body language also play a role in our perception of the character. Harris's Eleanor is literally a bundle of nerves, twisting and cringing before her departure from the prison of her sister's house, only to dance and sway as she comes further and further under the "spell" of Hill House. For Duvall, in Hill House as in the Overlook Hotel, that spell is linked to the layers of evil which permeate the house's history. Like Jack Torrance, Eleanor's tendency toward insanity is exacerbated by her contact with the house (37).

In his reading of Eleanor, Schneider says that "we may be confident that there is no natural/scientific explanation for what has gone on at Hill House, but considering Eleanor's impressionability and hypersensitivity, we cannot be sure whether the terrifying occurrences are supernatural, psychological, or some bizarre combination of the two" (Schneider, p. 10). Markway's

explanation after the accident which kills her echoes this sentiment: "Call it what you like, but Hill House is haunted. It didn't want her to leave and her poor, bedevilled mind wasn't strong enough to fight it."

Actual, hard evidence of ghostly activity is fairly sparse in Hill House. Previously-opened doors slowly close, a given spot in the house feels cooler than it should, and cryptic messages appear scrawled on the wall. On only two occasions is a "haunting" experienced simultaneously by Eleanor and Theo. In the first, a series of noises, ranging from thunderous booming to tiny scratching sounds, can be heard in the hall outside the bedroom, as a Medusa-headed doorknob seems to turn slightly, as if someone (or something) were trying to get inside. The women cling together in terror, wondering aloud what might be causing the noise and what "it" could want, but when the men arrive to save the day, they claim to have heard nothing aside from the women's screaming. In a later scene, when the company are all assembled, the noises recommence, another doorknob wiggles a tiny bit and, in the only visibly supernatural moment of the film, the door seems to bend inward as if it were rubber. None of these events is particularly terrifying in itself, yet *The Haunting* is consistently listed as one of the most terrifying films of all time. The key to this conundrum lies in Wise's use of detail.

In describing the power of the novel, Stephen Jay Schneider calls on Jack Sullivan's oft-quoted remarks to clarify the nature of the haunting in Hill House: "Reversing M.R. James's dictum that a ghost story should leave a narrow 'loophole' for a natural explanation, Jackson wrote stories of psychological anguish that leave a loophole for a supernatural explanation" (Quoted in Schneider [p. 10], who was quoting Keesey [p. 307] who in turn was quoting from Sullivan [p. (195)]. Robert Wise expands this loophole without letting the spectator get a clear look through it. Paradoxically, by providing an abundance of skewed sensory detail, Wise prevents the spectator from taking in the scene before him and heightens his fear of the unknown. This technique is particularly clear in the first "haunting" scene, on the visitors' first night in the house.

A thorough examination of all the techniques used in this passage would fill a novel; what follows is far from an exhaustive list of Wise's methods. What nonetheless strikes the viewer throughout the nearly 7-minute sequence is the layering of various elements of sound and image. The scene opens with a dissolving shot of the exterior of the house, melting from the image of an anxious Eleanor into a forbidding chiaroscuro establishing shot of the front of the house. Eleanor's upright form dissolves into that of a partly illuminated tower, keeping the same line within the frame. The music creates an atmosphere of foreboding and bridges the gap between the two images, even as

Eleanor's last voiceover remark, "He won't know that I've locked it [the door] -- but against what, Eleanor? Against what?" hangs in the air -- a question seemingly answered by the appearance of the house in the next frame.

The scene dissolves again, this time into the superimposed image of a carved wooden doorway, culminating in a grinning Medusa-like face at its apex. Underneath it we can see the dimly-lit front staircase in a low-angle shot which follows the contours of the triangle created by the wooden doorway. This is the same staircase we have seen in the opening explanatory sequence, where the second Mrs. Crain meets her death. The superimposed wooden carving fades, leaving only the dark staircase and the front hall. The feeble light reflects on grotesque, unrecognizable forms and casts bizarre shadows as the music continues its high-pitched warning strains. The scene dissolves yet again and a rectangular shape takes the place of the bottom stair. The music melts into a steady throbbing noise as the image morphs once more, without totally abandoning the puzzling shape in the lower foreground.

A lamp goes on in the extreme left foreground of the frame, and we see that the rectangular shape is a carved stone fireplace. Light glints off a series of vertical rods -- almost like candlesticks -- but as yet we do not recognize them as parts of Eleanor's footboard. To the left of the globe of the lamp, a suspended carving of a human form hangs at a slight angle to the rest of the frame. An ornate curtain cuts a diagonal line between the lamp and the fireplace, creating a partial separation between the two. For the spectator, it feels as if we are about to be led over some kind of threshold. We hear Eleanor's querulous voice calling "All right mother, all right" as her head rises up in the center of the foreground. The entire sequence up to this point has taken 26 seconds. As spectators we are primed for the fear and confusion to come.

In the ensuing sequence Wise's camera makes 70 cuts, pans 11 times and zooms more or less violently on four separate occasions. Sound effects include rhythmic pounding, hollow clattering, hesitant tapping, vehement battering, and a high-pitched kind of half-scream, half-laugh. Verbal commentary alternates between Eleanor's interior monologues and her bits of dialogue with Theo, while the musical soundtrack is completely absent until the haunting presence is gone. Camera positions run the gamut, from extreme closeups to long shots, and, in addition to the shots of Theo and Eleanor, angles from every possible direction focus on mirrors, bits of the fireplace, geometric doorjambs, weirdly hybrid animal carvings, eerie wallpaper, and the previously mentioned Medusa-

headed doorknob. Combined, these elements produce a feeling of incomprehension, disorientation, and fear; while simultaneously (over)stimulating the senses.

Wise alternately leads and misleads the spectator, first seeming to give us legitimate clues to the scene, then overwhelming us with fast cuts to distorted, ambiguous elements like the grotesque carvings mentioned above. At times, Theo and Eleanor indicate the path of the noise ("It's down near the other end of the hall; it's against the front of the door") while at other times their remarks contradict camera and sound. After claiming in voiceover that she is going to scream, Eleanor covers her mouth instead, and on three separate occasions Eleanor says "it's only a noise," when everything in the scene proclaims the opposite.

Confusing contrasts can be seen in the camera work as well. Mirrors reflect the protagonists (or their absence) a dozen times, and closeups of the women or the carvings mirror each other, appearing first to the right, then to the left of the frame. There seems to be no correlation between the rapid cuts and the noises, while the camera zooms seem on the contrary to follow closely the sounds' twisted trajectory, taking the viewer under door frames, above stained glass windows and along carved panels. Nothing in the images shown indicates any kind of origin for the sounds heard. For the spectator, the scene feels a bit like being inside a pinball machine without being able to blink.

In short, while many critics tout Robert Wise's ability to terrify in this film "without showing anything," in fact Wise terrifies us by showing too much. It is as if he dangled before us a dizzying series of details from a painting without ever granting us the spectatorial distance to encompass the whole: we see (and hear) without understanding. Mirroring Luke's sarcastic remark at the end of the scene, we as spectators become "Miss ESP and Bridey Murphy" [2]: senses saturated, we are unable to come to terms what we have experienced, but cinematic history haunts us all the same.

Synaesthetic Haunting and the Grotesque

What makes *The Haunting* work as a horror film, then, is the way it combines image, sound, and cinematic intertextuality, drawing on the spectator's expectations and knowledge of horror film. While Robert Wise's masterful use of music and sound clearly reflects his training as a sound editor, it is only part of the story. Wise's film is not the first to make good use of sound: few can forget the disturbing strings in *Psycho* or the hypnotically irritating zither in *The Third Man*. Nor is Wise the

only filmmaker to leave evil to his audience's imagination: the 1942 classic *Cat People* is another example. What Wise does, however, is to use a synaesthetic approach in his treatment of image and sound, giving equal semantic rank to each.

While the concept of synaesthesia is more commonly applied to literature or, ironically in this case, psychiatry, it fittingly describes the process by which the sum of sensorial data becomes more than its individual parts. Gino Casagrande explains this phenomenon in terms of metaphor:

Linguistically, in synaesthesia there is no actual displacement of the "real" sign as in metaphor. Here neither of the two real signs displaces the other. However, the signs do enter into a form of simultaneous and synergetic association, and by so doing create a virtual image that constitutes a global semantic transposition of each and all "real" signs involved ... As such, synaesthesia is a kind of semantic metaphoric fusion of two or more sensory perceptions. (Casagrande)

In this way the barriers between aural and visual are overcome. This idea is not a new one when it comes to the cinema. As Michel Chion has pointed out, sound and image are not separate territories: they are more like canals, passageways, what he calls the *trans-sensoriel* (Chion, p. 116). These passageways also connect current perceptions with past film experiences, creating a synaesthetic intertextual link between classic tropes and techniques and the ones on the screen.

Galayev hints at a similar relationship, defining synaesthesia as going beyond the sensory into the realm of the imagination:

*The literal etymological deciphering of the synaesthesia concept as a co-sensation does not correspond to the reality of this phenomenon. Synesthesia is rather co-idea, co-image, co-feeling and not *doppel Empfindungen* but *doppel Vorstellung*. It is a product of creative imagination ... This kind of synaesthesia is a form of non-verbal thinking, as is visual and musical thinking. Audio-visual synaesthesia forms relationships between visual and musical thinking. (Galayev, p. 202)*

By linking synaesthetic experience to the imaginative, the nonverbal, Galayev comes closer to the effect *The Haunting* has on the spectator. It has been earlier noted that one of the terrifying elements of watching (and hearing) Wise's film is that we cannot come to terms with what we see and hear: we are unable to analyze and define what we experience according to preestablished categories.

This interpretation leads to the conclusion that, while *The Haunting* is traditionally considered a part of the genre the French call the fantastique, Wise's treatment of the film has more in common with the grotesque. In fact, Geoffrey Galt Harpham's definition of the grotesque could have been written for Wise's film:

[T]hough our attention has been arrested, our understanding is unsatisfied. Grotesqueries both require and defeat definition: they are neither so regular and rhythmical that they settle easily into our categories, nor so unprecedented that we do not recognize them at all. They stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles. (Harpham, p. 3)

In the case of *The Haunting*, our attention is arrested time and again and on several levels at once, exponentially increasing our lack of understanding. Incomprehension quickly becomes fear: known elements become unfamiliar and the invisible becomes all-encompassing, pervading every frame. We are left in the suspended, unresolved state that characterizes the grotesque.

In short, intertextual synaesthetic confusion haunts Robert Wise's film, leading the spectator to call into question the meaning of what he has witnessed and to be terrified by what lies just outside of his ability to perceive. For the spectator, less is more (terrifying) and more is less when it comes to understanding what haunts Hill House. What can be said of *The Haunting's* reception is that "whatever walked there" by no means "walk[s] alone": it is haunted in turn by its cinematic past.

Bibliography

- The American Heritage Dictionary [AHD], Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1991.
- CASAGRANDE Gino, "Synaesthesia and 'The Wheel of the Five Senses' in Longthorpe Tower." (2004) <http://www.gicas.net/wheel.html>.
- CHION Michel, *L'Audio-vision : son et image au cinéma*, Paris, Nathan, 1990.
- DUVALL Daniel S., "Inner Demons, Flawed Protagonists & Haunted Houses in *The Haunting* & *The Shining*", *Creative Screenwriting*, July/August 6 (4), 1999.
- GALAYEV, B. "The Problem of Synaesthesia in the Arts", *Languages of Design*, 1, 1993.
- GRIVEL Danièle and LECOURBE Roland (eds), *Robert Wise*, Paris, Edilig, 1985.
- GUILLAUD Lauric, *La Terreur et le Sacré – La nuit gothique américaine*, Paris, Michel Houdiard, 2003.
- HARPAM Geoffrey Galt, *On the Grotesque – Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982.
- JACKSON Shirley, *The Haunting of Hill House*, New York, Penguin Books, 1959.
- KEESEY Pam, "The Haunting and the Power of Suggestions: Why Robert Wise's Film Continues to 'Deliver the Goods' to Modern Audiences." Alain Silver and James Ursini (eds) *Horror Film Reader*, New York, Limelight, 2000.
- MORRISON Michael A., "Journey's End: *The Haunting*: From Book to Film", *Studies in Weird Fiction*, Spring 12, 1993.
- SCHNEIDER Steven Jay, "Thrice-told tales: *The Haunting*, from novel to film...to film." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 30, Issue 3, 2002.
- SULLIVAN Jack (ed), *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural*, New York, Viking, 1986.

References

[1] The novel's opening is similar: "*No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone*" (Jackson, p. 3).

[2] In 1952, after hypnotic regression, a Colorado housewife claimed to be the reincarnation of Bridey Murphy, a 19th century Irishwoman from Cork. While under hypnosis, she gave detailed accounts of her life in Ireland, though she had never been there. When her story was published many of her claims were investigated and found to be questionable, but enthusiasts continue to defend the legitimacy of her story.

Agrégée d'Anglais, **Elizabeth Mullen** teaches English at the Université de Bretagne Occidentale in Brest, France. Conference lectures include *Weekend on the Wild Side: New Perspectives on Boorman's "Deliverance"* (International Gothic Association, Aix-en-Provence, 2007) and *Adaptation and the Southern Grotesque: Flannery O'Connor's 'Wise Blood' as Seen by John Huston* (Journée d'Etudes, Université de Poitiers, 2004). Her doctoral dissertation, under the direction of Gilles Menegaldo, will focus on the dialectics of language and malaise in American film adaptations of the 1960s and 70s, with particular emphasis on the Gothic and the Grotesque.

Contact : emullen_guenno@hotmail.com