

# PERNICIOUS PROPERTIES: FROM HAUNTED TO HORROR HOUSES

## AN INTERVIEW WITH EVERT JAN VAN LEEUWEN

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**Evert Jan van Leeuwen** is a lecturer in English-language literature at Leiden University, in the Netherlands. He researches fantastic fictions and counter cultures from the eighteenth century to the present. He is also interested in the international, intertextual dimensions of genres like Gothic, Horror and Science Fiction, and explores how they manifest in the British Isles, the Low Countries, and North America. He has recently co-edited the volume *Haunted Europe: Continental Connections in English Language Gothic Writing, Film and New Media* (2019) with Michael Newton and has written articles and chapters about American gothic authors Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, amongst others. In relation to this, he has also published *House of Usher* (2019) a book analyzing Poe's famous story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), Richard Matheson's related film script and the cinematic adaptation by Roger Corman in the context of the 1960s counter-culture.

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**Mónica Fernández Jiménez:** In an article published in the journal *Studies in Gothic Fiction* titled "From Hell House to Homecoming: Modern Haunted-House Fictions as Allegories of Personality Growth" (2015), you claim that "since the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 almost every writer of gothic, horror, and supernatural fiction has published a haunted house story" (42). It is not surprising that Sigmund Freud's concept of "the uncanny" —described as "a class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220)—comes to mind when talking about haunted houses, as they are familiar spaces. Or, for example, Rosemary Jackson's idea that with the emergence of gothic fiction in the eighteenth century we move from the purely marvelous to the uncanny, which she defines as "fears generated by the self" (14). However, there is another definition of the Gothic as the rejection of Enlightened rationalism, as per David Punter's famous study (5). The aesthetics of the houses that appeared in eighteenth-century European gothic fictions,

which in Walpole's case was a castle, point to the medieval past. These are very different from the houses that appear in American settings, which have no medieval past. The castle aesthetics is based on the medieval romances that inspired the first manifestations of the Gothic in the eighteenth century. How do you then approach the haunted house formula translated into the American setting?

**Evert Jan van Leeuwen:** That's a good question. I think I agree with how you present the history of the haunted house and the haunted castle in gothic fiction. David Punter, who you just mentioned, and who is probably the most influential, pioneering scholar of the Gothic, also explores the uncanny and talks about the uncanny as having to do with the ancient, with the secret, ultimately with the return of the repressed, which is a particular theoretical framework for approaching the Gothic. My interest in both that article and the book I am working on right now (an extended study for which that article laid the foundations) has to do more with the present and the function of houses and haunted houses, or horror houses as I call them, in the present. I think you are right to say that it is difficult to simply translate the classic British or Euro haunted castles into American culture because there is no medieval past. I also, to some extent, take a different route to other scholars like Dale Bailey, where I see the house not so much as a place where all sorts of things are hidden, where the house becomes a space where repressed desires and instincts are hidden away to then jump out at the protagonists in the story. I see the house from a different perspective as a space for discovery, in a positive sense.

I base my work not on a Freudian psychoanalytical tradition but on the humanistic psychological tradition, specifically Kirk Schneider, who wrote a book called *Horror and the Holy* (1993), the subtitle of which is *Wisdom-Teachings of the Monster Tale*. It is basically an application of humanistic psychology to the classic Gothic—*Dracula* (1897), *Frankenstein* (181) and those kinds of texts. His point is that horror, rather than being about the return of the repressed, he says, “slashes through life's surfaces... it cuts through all of our comforts” (2). That is the key aspect that I focus on, this idea that what horror actually does has not always to do with the repressed aspects of the individual psyche, but with more social, political, and economic facades through which we live our lives. And what horror does is basically break down those facades and to show us the world that we live in, as it really is. And that is based more on the humanistic psychological perspective, where the focus is not so much on characters going into their past and acknowledging and encountering repressed desires and instincts; it is about raising awareness in individuals about where they are, what their own personal ideas and ideals about their own life are, what they want to achieve, what kind of a person they want to be, what drives them as human beings. In that sense horror makes them aware of the tensions between social norms, social demands, and the constrictions that political, legal, and social institutions enforce on the individual. It drives them to ask questions about whether that individual is in fact in the right place. So rather than thinking about someone who is struggling, who is encountering feelings of anxiety or guilt, thinking about them

as neurotic or struggling with repressed desires and instincts that are coming into consciousness, it is more about how that individual, as an individual, as a self, struggles with the outside world. How the individual struggles with ideology and how they have to confront ideological aspects in their life and learn to become critical and independent from the hegemonic culture.

That inspired me to take a new look at haunted houses as spaces in which characters go on a voyage of discovery, where what is behind the closed doors and in the basements and in the attics is not something inherently violent or destructive but something that can lead to growth, to insight, to awareness, and to the development of a stronger personality. I looked at that specifically in the context of haunted house fictions in which there are always characters who are the “effective protagonist” (see Dawson). They might not be the main character in the film or novel, but they are the character who actually grows throughout the story. Even though they may start out as more of a sidekick or marginal character, they end up surviving the house and, in a way, taking the central position. In that sense, rather than thinking about the Gothic being all about the fragmentation of the self and especially haunted houses being a space in which the self collapses, as in “House of Usher,” it is about the building of the self, about searching for wholeness. That is the theoretical basis I am coming from. The kind of texts that I have been analyzing are texts like *Rose Red* (2002) by Stephen King. He wrote the screenplay for the TV series.

Another example is *The House Next Door* (1978) was a popular American novel, in its time. It is about a house that has no past; it is brand new. In his introduction to the novel, King writes that it is a traditional gothic text; he talks about the bad place, and its history, and its past, which is really weird because the whole point of that house in the novel is that it is brand new. It is built in an affluent suburb of Atlanta, and the characters who live there say things like “we like our lives and our possessions to run smoothly” (19). That is one of the phrases. I think that novel does exactly what Schneider says the classic Gothic does, which is to slash through the surfaces of life. The characters in that novel are confronted with the ultimate spiritual emptiness of their lives, that are lived obsessed with material possessions and social status, making sure that their little suburban enclave is an in-crowd of people who go to the same club, play tennis with each other, have drinks at the club, lunch at the club, and visit each other and create an in-crowd based on economic prosperity and social status. In that sense political power is also involved; they basically create a closed community of the powerful. The house in the novel is built on those foundations. The land on which it is built is said to be too small and the wrong shape, not meant to be built on. But the architect sees that as a challenge. He wants to make his name, and wants to be known as this great architect who builds houses where no one else can. The theme of hubris comes into play, as the architect uses that challenge to make his name and become famous, rich, powerful, and influential. And so he builds the house where it should not be built. That is why everything goes wrong. The characters who move into that pernicious property move into the house for the wrong reasons. They are unmasked as people who aspire to wealth, social status, power, and influence rather than a good

life, ethically speaking. They are entirely focused and obsessed with the materialist consumer culture of the late 1970s. They see their value and the value of their lives in being the most successful consumers, being the most successful participants in that culture. They are what Herbert Marcuse describes in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). It is a book about a one-dimensional suburban community in which people strive to be as one-dimensional as they can be because for them that is actually the epitome of life. And that gives the novel a very clear satirical bent. It suggests that if those are your goals, the houses that you live in are really prisons and that houses as the ultimate symbol of material prosperity will be destructive. That is what happens to these characters, they are literally gobbled up, they are first possessed by their property and then consumed by the consumer culture they uphold, so it doubles back on them. That is one clear example of my approach.

**MFJ:** That is fascinating. George Saunders' short story, published in *The New Yorker* in 2012, "The Semplica-Girl Diaries," contains the same idea about perfect lives; but I would have never approached it as a gothic text because it is so postmodern in its style; so that is a lot of food for thought. I think your approach to the Gothic is a route that needs to be taken. Even though it is impossible to translate these medieval castles into the American setting, the house for some reason keeps appearing so we need to explore different roads. Regarding the formula in the specific context of the United States and in popular culture, how has it changed through time? I am thinking of the works of Hawthorne and Poe, but then of what Bernice M. Murphy has called "the suburban gothic" (2) arising from the anxieties of the mass suburbanisation of America starting in the 1950s, where the aesthetic of the house completely changes. The latter are plainer, if you will. But then we have contemporary horror films like Rob Minkoff's *The Haunted Mansion* (2003) where houses go back to the obviously not medieval but aristocratic decaying mansion model, which of course exists in the United States, but is different from the suburban Gothic tradition. We could conclude that we also have a tradition within the United States, and I would like you to develop a little bit on that.

**EJvL:** If you take Poe's "House of Usher" (1839) as the big bang of American haunted house stories, we still have an allegory where the house becomes Roderick's head; it is his mind. The narrator is Roderick, he is journeying into his own mind. And he is nameless, that is important. One of the most significant things about Poe's story, and why it has become a story that is so often reinterpreted, reimagined, retold in all sorts of different settings, is that it has become a template: the architecture of the house becomes a way of describing a spiritual journey. I think that is really important for the American haunted house genre. Owning a house, especially in modern American culture, but in the nineteenth century as well, I think, was already a sign of being successful. It meant to have, not just a place to live, but a place in society, to be visible and meaningful. One of the things Roderick says in the story, when he has a sort of premonition, is "I *must* perish in this deplorable folly!" (403). The word folly has many meanings, one of which is a miniaturised house in a garden, a fake ruin that is there for aesthetic reasons,

that has absolutely no purpose apart from just being picturesque. I think there is an irony there. Poe was too much of a stylist not to realise that there is a pun in Roderick's phrase. What he realises is that he and his family are basically of the past. You could say it is a pastiche of the Gothic, in which Poe suggests that Roderick is living in his own mind, that he has completely enclosed himself, and that he is no longer living in the real world. In that sense there is no real world in that story, there is no world outside of the house. Roderick has basically disappeared from being. He has disappeared from lived experience. It is a very solipsistic story.

I think Hawthorne responded to that with *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), where he clearly, on the one hand, followed the tradition in which the house has a past. There is a legend, there are rumours of mysterious supernatural happenings going on. But what I like about *Seven Gables* is that it is actually set in the present; it is not about the past. The house has been there for generations, but it is all about the Pyncheon family, specifically Clifford Pyncheon, coming to terms with the present. Critics have dismissed *Seven Gables* as a gothic story because of its happy ending. In traditional gothic and horror novels haunted houses either gobble up their inhabitants or they fall to ruins, and in this particular story what turns out to be the real horror is really the villains' drive for power, affluence, social status and ownership of property and people. They want to have both legal control and material control of the assets, and that is really what is causing the ruin in the story. In his work on self-actualization, Abraham Maslow, the psychologist, said that what he calls self-actualizing people "live more in the real world of nature than in the man-made mess of concepts, abstractions, expectations, beliefs, and stereotypes that most people confuse with the world" (xii). And I think most of the Pyncheons in the story live that kind of a life. They are too obsessed with the man-made mess of concepts, abstractions, expectations, beliefs, and stereotypes that they think is what life is. The reason why it ends happily is that there are protagonists who grow out of that perception. The characters who die and the characters who come to a bad end clearly fail to do that, they hold on to the drive for power and control over others and use the house, its history, its status as a way of controlling others. Whereas the characters who leave, you can be critical of them because of going back to their land but I do not think it is about that. I do not think it is about Hawthorne having a go at his characters for leaving that house only to embrace an even more gothic mansion. It is about the fact that they have rejected the need to conform to the demands of their culture, and they are following their own wishes and their own desires. Phoebe and Holgrave marry because they want to marry not because they have to marry, not because other people expect them to marry; they do not have any vested interests in marriage. It is about the characters becoming much more independent and following their own particular desires and what is good for them. That makes it an important novel; maybe its happy ending was a bit avant-garde for the time. It did not fit within the American gothic genre, even though it dovetails with Radcliffe's endings. Hawthorne liked it; he felt that was his better novel and I tend to agree with him. *Seven Gables* for me is his most complete novel. I do not have issues

with it ending happily because I have seen the characters grow and I have seen the characters haunt the house and search through the house, open the doors, break down the boundaries, come together and grow as characters. I think that is important for Holgrave and Phoebe specifically, the younger characters in the text. They find each other through the house. I think that is an important moment where, in American culture specifically, the house becomes about the present and about looking forward into the future.

This is true for *Rose Red* as well. I love Stephen King; I love his writing. I am a big fan. At the same time, I realise that almost nothing that he does is in any way original. Most of his stories are adaptations of existing texts; but maybe that is his power, to make his sources his own. And I think in *Rose Red* he makes *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) his own. For me *Rose Red* is all about characters learning and becoming aware of what their goals in life are, what they really want to do. The house becomes simply a playground for them to go on that journey of discovery. Those who fail are those who remain egotistical, who remain interested purely in status and power. The parapsychologist is quite mad from the beginning; but she goes drunk on power and the idea that she is going to finally prove to the rest of the world that her theories are true and that other people's theories are not true. She just wants to outdo everyone in her department; that is her goal in life. And so she suffers and eventually, of course, fails to achieve her goal. Emery Waterman, by contrast, starts off very much down in the doldrums. In the course of the story he learns to turn his face towards the future. He is a retro cognitive psychic, so in that sense he has got his face very much aimed at the past. There is a really important moment at the end of *Rose Red* where his dead mother comes out of the mirror and tries to grab him and pull him into the world of the dead and Kathy says "for once in your miserable life, fight her!!!" while he is screaming for help. So initially he still cannot do it on his own and then eventually manages to expel her back into the mirror and that is a really important moment for Emery, when he finally realizes that he has to take control of his own life and cannot constantly be looking towards the past. He has to acknowledge his own wishes, his own desires, and create his own path in life. And that is of course where King turns around *The Haunting of Hill House*. In Jackson's novel, poor Eleanor eventually drives into a tree. That is the negative exemplar entirely. She is ostracized and stunted in her growth by everyone else around her. The external forces around her stop her from being herself, from trying to achieve her own goals. And she has that moment in the novel where she realizes that she too "wants her cup of stars" (21), which I think is wonderful, when instead she acknowledges what she wants, but everyone else in the novel does not allow her to achieve her goal. They all want to control her; they all want to project an identity onto her, and that eventually leads her to commit suicide. At least that is how I read the novel. She is driven to despair. But King creates Emery, who manages to escape, who manages to defeat the house and start life anew with greater awareness of who he is, of where he is, and of what he wants to achieve in life. I think that is an important aspect of American haunted house movies that you really do

not see much in the classic Gothic. The idea that they are labyrinths that the characters navigate but then come out of rather than get stuck in. I think that is important.

**MFJ:** I totally agree. It made me think of these templates and metaphors about the body and the house. You mention in your article that the formula of Poe's short story implies that the house equals the head (42), which actually is how you have started your answer, talking about bodies. For me it is impossible not to think about the film *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). Many would say that this is not a gothic film. I am thinking again of Jackson and her attempt to establish clear-bounded categories for which she invokes, as I said, the notion of "the uncanny" (14). I am wondering what you have to say about the boundaries, or lack of which, of the gothic genre with regards to other categories such as supernatural horror or science fiction products that deal with body horror or house settings. Is this film gothic or not? You were talking about the present, the past, the body, the metaphors... and there is not one single template.

**EJvL:** You are right. It is unavoidable to have these genre debates; how we categorize a book or a film says much about how we understand the text. Maybe it says more about the viewer/reader than the text itself. Over the past decades, there has been broad agreement that Ann Radcliffe is a gothic author. Many of our definitions and understandings of what gothic conventions are were developed from late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century texts. But what do we do with *Frankenstein* (1818)? Is it gothic? Is it science fiction? Is it horror? That really depends on what the reader focuses on. If you are obsessed with the speculative science in the text, then it becomes science fiction. If you are fascinated with the trope of doubling and see Frankenstein and his creature as alter egos, then you can link it to Poe, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and it becomes a gothic text. Whether a text belongs to the Gothic, SF, speculative fiction, or fantasy has much to do with how the particular reader would understand those genres, but also what the interest of the reader in those genres is.

If you take *The Body Snatchers*, the most recent edition of which was published in the Science Fiction Masterwork Series, then it must be an SF text, but of course that is not true! It really depends on how you approach it, on how you read it because in many ways that text is a classic paranoid gothic text. It can be read in the context of Robert Miles' argument about the Gothic being about "the subject in a state of deracination, of the self finding itself dispossessed in its own house, in a condition of rupture, disjunction, fragmentation" (3). The text is probably one of the most uncanny texts that you could think of, where identity becomes such an ungraspable notion that you can no longer tell the difference between your real neighbor or the invaded neighbor, and you yourself start questioning whether you also may be invaded. Have you been taken? It is the ultimate paranoid gothic text about the boundaries between self and other disappearing, and people in that sense becoming almost clones of each other. You can read it in the historical context of the 1950s and relate it to the Cold War and

the Red Scare, and then maybe it becomes more of an SF invasion text. But if you focus on its gothic tropes of erasing and fragmenting identity, and dissolving the boundaries between self and other, then it becomes a classic gothic text. I think most texts in the fantastic genres are hybrid in this way. It is all a matter of degree: how much does one particular genre trope dominate and how much does another. I guess it is most often taught as an SF text because its publisher branded it as such, and the original film version is typical 1950s SF. But the 1978 film version has a definite gothic vibe, even if it stars Leonard Nimoy (from Star Trek). I have also seen J.G. Ballard taught on gothic courses. Ballard is the master of inner-space fiction. You could say that the Gothic and inner space fiction are very closely aligned. “House of Usher” is, if anything, an inner space fiction. So, it is very difficult to come to some kind of a definitive answer about whether the text is X or Y, SF, gothic horror or fantasy. But it is a really important debate to have because it teaches us much about how we categorize and thus understand these texts, and about what our interests in these texts are.

If you incorporate *The Body Snatchers* into a gothic course, it would work perfect with Stephen King’s *Dreamcatcher* (2001). What happens in *Dreamcatchers* is that aliens invade the earth; it is very 1950s. But they do not do it in UFOs or weird shuttles. They invade the minds of people. They are like clouds, not little green men. There is a wonderful moment in which the main character, Jonesy, has been invaded by an alien and King writes at length how Jonesy’s self, his core identity, hides away in his own mind. King then creates an inner mind as if it is an office space. He hides away finally because the alien is taking over his brain. He has to run and he closes his office door and he is in a tiny little office with a desk and things and he is hiding, looking out of the window, and the alien is right outside. And this is where King’s SF novel turns into a gothic text; he clearly turns to “House of Usher,” this whole idea of the head being a house. He literalizes it in the context of the story, where he simply constructs a mind as if it is a house with rooms and offices... there is a library with lots of files. And the challenge for Jonesy is to dare to step outside where the alien is so he can find the right files, which of course are metaphors for his memories and his knowledge, in order to defeat it because initially he is cowering away and hiding away in the secret corner of his own mind. By actually turning that into a space with doors, windows, walls, furniture, things to hide behind, filing cabinets to find things... he allows the story to become an allegory of someone who has to overcome his fears and confront his greatest anxieties—although in this case it is an alien called Mr. Gray (think of grey matter, the brain). I think that is what Poe does. I think that is what he does in *Dreamcatcher*, a novel that really starts out as a classic 1950s alien invasion novel and then slowly transforms into a gothic thriller because Jonesy’s head becomes the house of Usher. The haunted palace. I think that is where the two really overlap.

### Open Q&A session

**Soffia Martincorena:** I really love your vision of the Gothic as a way of raising critical awareness about our positions in the world and I think that can really allow us to see the Gothic as

something contemporary and relevant for us and not as something having to do with castles and monsters. You have said at the beginning that you are interested in the present and in the function of haunted houses in the present. Considering this, I have a question about Poe's "House of Usher" which deals with the fact that we cannot seem to stop reading it despite being really old. You already explained that this text is a template for many American obsessions like owning a house, and that explains a bit of its relevance. It has had so many adaptations like the silent movies of the 1930s, the Roger Corman adaptation about which you wrote a book, or even a 2020 film entitled *The Bloodhound*. There are musicals and theatre adaptations, lots of graphic novels... You can think of hundreds of different examples. What is there in this text that makes it so compelling? Not only for contemporary audiences but for audiences all throughout the years. I think your analysis of Roger Corman's movie is about how Roderick Usher is a symbol for the counter cultural 1960s. That is an example of the translatability of Poe's text into the present and a myriad different contexts. So, what is it in the text that makes it so compelling, so relevant, so thought-provoking for us and for us to think about our present and our past and the relationship between them, which is often expressed in gothic terms?

**EJvL:** I was obsessed with that film and with Vincent Price as a teenager. I never thought about it that way at the time but I thought Price in the role of Roderick was most fascinating; I was completely in awe. When I watched *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), there is that famous shot of James Dean going "aaaaghh, you're tearing me apart." I was like "I've seen that before!" Price does exactly the same thing; he is like "aaaaghh!" Then I realized that what makes him so fascinating is not that he is a disturbed old man; it is his experience, it is what he has experienced, it is the complete angst of a meaningless existence. That is what attracted me to it. You know, I actually am a big fan of Disney's *The Haunted Mansion* (2003). I watched that thinking it was going to just be a piece of fluff. A film based on a theme park ride? I mean what is that? And it has Eddie Murphy, not a famous horror actor. I do like Murphy a lot; I grew up with him and love films like *Beverly Hills Cop* and *The Golden Child*; so Murphy's presence got me interested. I think the film is really subtle, I think there are many little jokes and ironies there. The prophetic lady in the glass, Madame Leota, draws Jim Evers towards her and says "whom do you seek?!" And he says "I am seeking a way out of here!" which is all he is interested in. And then she says "then you must look within." That is straight from "House of Usher"; that is what you have to do. You have to journey into your own mind and look deep within your soul. David Elkins, who is a humanistic psychologist, has said that outside organized religion the concept of the soul is extremely meaningful still. Even people who do not believe in God and the afterlife or anything like that still talk about "soul." He says, when we talk about soul, "we must go down into the depths of our being" (44). In his work, Elkins explains that when we talk about soulful experiences, or soul music, this is not about the vibrant, easy, happy-go-lucky, the things that come without any effort. It is about the things we struggle for; it is about the things we work hard at, the things we doubt, and about overcoming that struggle,

overcoming that doubt (see part 1; chapter 3). That is what *Haunted Mansion* is all about, despite its silly facade, because the film begins with Jim Evers saying “it’s love isn’t it,” and at that moment it is just an advertising slogan, he is trying to sell a house. He is using love and these really important words and phrases in a human’s life as advertising slogans. Initially he talks in advertising slogans. When they arrive in the house, he sees the graveyard and he says “this [is a] historical sprawling manner with spacious grounds” and his wife says “hey, that’s a good! Put that on the listing” and of course it is the daughter who says “and leave out all the dead people!” And so, what Jim Evers and his wife need to do, of course, is learn to look into their hearts, to find a spiritual meaning to life rather than just making lots of money by selling big houses, which is initially what they are obsessed with. He is late for his own anniversary because he is too busy selling a house; even when he talks to his wife initially in the film, he is pretending to sell a house. So even that film, which is a Disney comedy based on a theme park ride, reproduces the kind of tropes that you find in so many haunted house films and novels in America. In many ways it has to do with rejecting materialist ideology by trying to find a spiritual path and spiritual fulfilment. It is about well-being rather than welfare. That is what makes it such an important text because Poe’s story is about that angst, the angst of a meaningless existence.

**SM:** I agree, that is what makes it universal in a way, its capacity to reach out of its context and to speak to people from all ages.

**Laura Álvarez Trigo:** I was wondering if you had any comment regarding the aesthetics of the house because you were speaking about the different adaptations of “House of Usher” and that got me thinking about the houses, which look very different. If we think about the gothic mansion as compared to the aristocratic decayed mansion, how does that affect the horror?

**EJvL:** When I think of American haunted houses, and I am limiting myself to the twentieth century, they are not castles, they are nothing like the classic Gothic. But most of the time they are also not your brand spanking new condominiums; they are the ultimate suburban villa where you have the broad road, and some nice grass, and the sidewalk for the pedestrians, and then wonderful lawns... When I think of the house in *The House Next Door* or *Rose Red*, they are a kind of industrialist’s dream. It is mock Gothic. It is still just a big sprawling mansion in a very urban environment. And the house in *The People under the Stairs* (1991) is that kind of a house, or the house in *Halloween* (1978). It is not a haunted house but it is a horror house. And what fascinates me about many of those modern houses, which are freestanding with a lot of grounds around—therefore, isolated—is that people are living together but there is so much space around them, and their houses are so large and roomy that they are still isolated because they can simply ignore the rest of the world.

In *The People under the Stairs*, which I think is a fascinating film, the house does not have locks to keep people out, it actually has locks on the outside to keep people in. I thought that was a really important symbol. The family who lives there are not only trying to keep the evil world out, they are trying to keep whoever is in from going out, from meeting others. Their daughter has never been outside and when the kid who infiltrates the house says “Don’t be scared, you never seen a brother before... I mean a black dude... there’s black folks in this neighborhood,” she is like “neighborhood?” She has never heard that word. And Fool explains: “a neighborhood, you know, outside.” This is really important in the film that in that suburban area, where everyone lives in these big, huge, beautiful, sprawling kind of suburban homes, they are all living alone, they are all isolated, they are alienated from each other, whereas the kid who infiltrates the house, who comes from the ghetto, constantly lives with other people. He actually is living in a community. One of the wonderful things about that film is that his community eventually ends up at the house to literally strip away all the things that these two people who live there have built up in defense against the real world. They are literally showing these people that they exist and cannot be ignored. The mantra of the two people who live in that house is “hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil.” Basically, ignore the world. If you ignore the world, if you pretend it is not there, if you lock yourself in, then life seems grand. But, of course, they are real estate brokers and they own half the ghetto and they are exploiting the people there for their own welfare. That is part of the theme of that particular film. But they can only do that if they ignore the reality of those people’s lives. They can only keep exploiting them if they are blind to the misery of their lives. And so the small kid who manages to infiltrate manages to unmask it, and in the end his entire community comes to his aid as well. I think that is a really important aspect. So, for me that is when I think of the aesthetics of the American haunted house, its isolation, through what John de Graaf has called “affluenza.” These families and the families who live in these houses have become so materially prosperous that they are able to build castles for themselves, isolate themselves, and ignore the rest of the world. And so these houses look beautiful, they are new, they have wonderful gardens, huge garages and they look like everyone’s dream house, but actually they are a hell house. They are prisons and people have imprisoned themselves in them. And I think that is key to the aesthetics of many modern American houses, that they actually look so much like the home we all want to own. They are not ruined castles and some of them do not even look creepy. They actually look really inviting and you think “wow, if only I could live there!” But then the films tell you the drawback of that, the dangers of becoming completely isolated and self-imprisoned inside a gilded cage.

**Heather Lukins:** I want to revisit what you were saying about the house as the site of trauma and the house as body. I was thinking about how the house has developed through the Gothic into the horror genres. You were saying that the house is a place for discovery rather than about things that are already hidden, that sort of reversal of the frontier narrative that happens

within the American house. Why is it do you think that trauma has to come into the house, why is it never out there already? I was thinking about the film *Poltergeist* (1982) and particularly how the house demolishes itself at the end. And then how that relates to the breaking down of boundaries of families, as in *Pet Sematary* (1983), where originally the trauma is out there and then it just sort of collapses in on the house and the family, particularly with the kid who is running around with a knife. Why do you think that is that there is such a focus on the trauma invading the house and the family?

**EJvL:** I think there is an important historical context which goes back to Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799), where the protagonist suddenly wakes up and he is in the middle of the wilderness and then he ends up under a pile of corpses. That is a really horrific text. When I watched *Poltergeist* as a teenager all I could think about was the kid with the braces, because I had braces and all I thought about was whether my braces were going to grow like that. Then when I watched it later on, I suddenly realised that the film, despite all its sensational aspects, is really about an estate that has been built on an Indian burial ground, which is a classic gothic trope. If you think of *Pet Sematary*, that joins those two well together. I would think of another film like *The Fog* (1980) by John Carpenter, which is about a town being built with stolen money. I think, ideologically, this is the underbelly of Manifest Destiny. If you think of American civilization historically as beginning on the East Coast and then slowly sprawling West, I guess that is quite accurate. They went out West. So clearly, that is part of it. You can think of it as progress in the sense that the wilderness was paved and tarmacked and cities and houses were built but at the same time, of course, it is about a complete rejection of the actual landscape, and the actual people, and the actual animals that live there. So in many ways it is not just a psychological aspect; narratives like *Edgar Huntly*, or *Poltergeist* can be read as revenge narratives. They are like those eco-horrors where you have nature's revenge on mankind. They are powerful horror films at the moment. I think the idea of these external threats attacking the so-called nuclear family in their wonderfully comfortable home are a revenge of the original authentic landscape and its peoples and its animals who say "look, we didn't move where you are, you moved where we are! We're here! We're living here! You can... you know, you can displace us violently but then we will seek revenge!" And I think that is a narrative that you find in Frontier Gothic. James Fenimore Cooper is important. But there is a tradition, of course, of gothic Westerns that is rather underexplored. I looked into gothic Spaghetti Westerns, which are actually Italian of course, but there are also some gothic American Westerns that pick up on that idea, that there was actually a real kind of dark unrecognized aspect moving American civilization out West. And Americans are still being confronted with it, I think. many of those films are very much about that. That is maybe where haunted houses and more of an ecological kind of angle would work well together if you want to explore that. It literally is the Western wilderness striking back at artificial society.

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