

VITOR FERNANDES

HORRIFICALLY AMBIGUOUS:  
A FORMAL ANALYSIS OF AMBIGUATING CINEMATOGRAPHY AND  
NARRATIVE ELEMENTS IN *ABSENTIA* (2011), *HEREDITARY* (2018), AND  
*THE LODGE* (2019)

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Dissertação de Mestrado em Literaturas Estrangeiras Modernas apresentada como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Mestre ao Programa de Pós-graduação em Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

ORIENTADOR: PROF. DR. CLAUDIO VESCIA ZANINI

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I would like to dedicate this work to the ghost  
who woke me up once climbing onto my bed  
and running its fingers through my hair.  
And I would also like to dedicate this to my  
mother—of course.

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And the film *Lights Out*, for being so underwhelming. The sheer disappointment it caused in me might be what led me to talk to Professor Claudio V. Zanini about the initial concept that later became this thesis.

“Le tout est de savoir s’y prendre, de savoir concentrer son esprit sur un seul point, de savoir s’abstraire suffisamment pour amener l’hallucination et pouvoir substituer le rêve de la réalité à la réalité même.”

Joris-Karl Huysmans

## RESUMO

Esta dissertação analisa os filmes *Absentia* (Mike Flanagan, 2011), *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018) e *The Lodge* (Severin Fiala e Veronika Franz, 2019) com a intenção de descrever como a cinematografia é usada para estimular leituras ambíguas e hesitação no espectador. O uso de ambiguidade está presente em muitas, se não em todas, as tendências cinematográficas de horror desde o surgimento do cinema; no entanto, o ciclo em que esses filmes estão inseridos—o polêmico *post-horror*—é descrito por suas características marcantes de uso de apreensão prolongada, ritmo lento e preterição por edição dinâmica e *jump scares* para criar narrativas contemplativas, portentosas e opressivas que privilegiam afetos negativos. Sem cooptar emoções direcionadas a um objeto ou usar resoluções claras, esse ciclo cinemático possibilita a proliferação da hesitação e estimula uma apreensão generalizada a respeito da natureza dos eventos retratados; assim, potencializa o desconforto de navegar entre o sobrenatural e a plausibilidade do mundo real. Considerando afirmações de que, com seu estilo associado a uma estética artística virtuosa, o *post-horror* desestabiliza o horror, propõe-se aqui uma discussão para situar o gênero na tradição do horror em um esforço de contextualização informado pelos trabalhos de teóricos como Noël Carroll (1990), Fred Botting (1996), Isabel Pinedo (1996), Tim Woods (2003), Kevin Wetmore (2012) e Carol Clover (2015); além disso, as características formais do *post-horror* são descritas de acordo com a obra de David Church (2021). Adotando uma abordagem qualitativa baseada principalmente na obra de Bruce Mamer (2009) e Peter Verstraten (2009), realiza-se uma análise dos elementos formais desses filmes para explorar as estratégias narrativas e cinematográficas empregadas para ativar um olhar subjetivo e sugerir falhas na percepção, um princípio estético que é explorado de acordo com a obra de Uri Margolin (2011). Por fim, a discussão proposta por Sternberg e Yacobi (2015) sobre não confiabilidade narrativa é apresentada para revelar as possíveis estratégias interpretativas às quais possivelmente recorrem os espectadores desses filmes para resolver ambiguidade e tensões textuais.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** cinema de horror do século XXI; narratologia; narrativas ambíguas; estudos de cinema.



## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the films *Absentia* (Mike Flanagan, 2011), *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), and *The Lodge* (Severin Fiala and Veronika Franz, 2019) with the intent of describing the use of cinematography to elicit ambiguous readings and hesitation in the viewer. The use of ambiguity has been observed in many, if not all, horror cinematic trends since the dawn of cinema; nonetheless, the cycle in which these films are included—the so-called post-horror—is described for its distinct characteristics of employing lingering dread, slow pacing, and for its lack of dynamic editing, and jump scares with the effect of creating haunting and oppressive narratives privileging negative affects. Without co-opting object-directed emotions or using clear resolutions, hesitation festers in this cinematic cycle, and the generalized apprehension over the nature of the events depicted potentializes the uneasiness of treading between supernatural and real-world plausibility. Considering the claims that post-horror unsettles the broader, originating genre for its arthouse aesthetic, a discussion is proposed here to place the genre within the horror tradition in a contextualizing effort informed by the works of theorists such as Noël Carroll (1990), Fred Botting (1996), Isabel Pinedo (1996), Tim Woods (2003), Kevin Wetmore (2012), and Carol Clover (2015); moreover, the formal characteristics of post-horror are described according to the work of David Church (2021). Adopting a qualitative approach based mainly on the work of Bruce Mamer (2009) and Peter Verstraten (2009), an analysis of the formal elements in these films is carried out to explore the narrative and cinematographic strategies employed to give rise to subjectivity and imply missteps in perception, an aesthetic endeavor that is considered in accordance with the work of Uri Margolin (2011). Furthermore, the discussion proposed by Sternberg and Yacobi (2015) on narrative unreliability is introduced to shed light onto the possible interpretive strategies to which viewers of such films might resort in order to resolve ambiguity and textual tensions.

**KEYWORDS:** 21<sup>th</sup>-century horror cinema; narratology; ambiguous narratives; film studies.

## TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1 – Girls making a cake at the house party. ....	51
Figure 2 – Close-up of cutting board. ....	52
Figure 3 – Long shot of grief support group. ....	54
Figure 4 – Close-up of Annie in the support group. ....	55
Figure 5 – Low-angle shot of a cross. ....	56
Figure 6 – Daniel walking away out of focus. ....	59
Figure 7 – Point-of-view shot of Rosemary (Mia Farrow) climbing down a ladder. ....	64
Figure 8 – Secondary ocularization during Annie's monologue. ....	65
Figure 9 – View of Callie after relapsing into drug use. ....	76
Figure 10 – View of the underpass near Tricia's house. ....	83
Figure 11 – View of a spider web hanging from the wall in the underpass. ....	84
Figure 12 – View of Callie in the underpass. ....	86
Figure 13 – View of Callie's encounter with Walter Lambert. ....	87
Figure 14 – View of Walter out of focus in the background. ....	87
Figure 15 – View of the model house. ....	89
Figure 16 – High-angle view of the Graham house. ....	89
Figure 17 – View of the triangle burned on the floorboards. ....	91
Figure 18 – View of Charlie being watched by a cult member. ....	91
Figure 19 – View of Charlie being watched by a cult member outside her school. ....	92
Figure 20 – View of Peter being watched. ....	92
Figure 21 – The seal of Paimon. ....	93
Figure 22 – View of Ellen's necklace with Paimon sigil. ....	93
Figure 23 – View of Paimon's sigil etched on the pole. ....	94
Figure 24 – View of the dollhouse. ....	95
Figure 25 – View of the family lodge. ....	96
Figure 26 – View of the model living room with the dolls representing the family members. ....	96
Figure 27 – View of Laura crying while looking in the mirror. ....	97
Figure 28 – View of the gun on the tabletop. ....	98
Figure 29 – View of the family members kneeling in prayer. ....	99
Figure 30 – View of the doll falling to the ground. ....	99
Figure 31 – View of the dolls toppled down. ....	100
Figure 32 – High-angle shot of Grace and the siblings in the lodge. ....	101

Figure 33 – View of the siblings whispering by the dollhouse. ....	101
Figure 34 – View of Daniel's ghost behind the door. ....	104
Figure 35 – View of Ellen's ghost. ....	106
Figure 36 – Beam of light rousing Charlie from her desk. ....	108
Figure 37 – View of a woman performing a ritual near the Graham house. ....	109
Figure 38 – View of Grace talking to Richard. ....	111
Figure 39 – View of Grace seen through the frozen windshield. ....	112
Figure 40 – View of Richard's material on the suicide cult. ....	113
Figure 41 – View of Tricia being woken up by a ghostly figure. ....	115
Figure 42 – Daniel's ghost attacking Tricia. ....	117
Figure 43 – View of an attack from behind the shower curtains. ....	119
Figure 44 – View of Charlie's ghost. ....	122
Figure 45 – View of Annie perched on the wall. ....	123
Figure 46 – View of the writing on the mirror. ....	124
Figure 47 – View of snow angels. ....	126
Figure 48 – View of silhouette on the cabin's window. ....	127
Figure 49 – View of Annie pleading Steve to believe her. ....	130
Figure 50 – View of Steve's body in flames. ....	131
Figure 51 – View of Grace's preparation for self-flagellation. ....	133

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2. KILLING AN EPOCH, KILLING A GENRE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE POST-SOMETHING?</b>	<b>17</b>
2.1. <i>IT'S ALIVE! AN OVERVIEW ON HORROR</i>	20
2.2. <i>MORE MODERN THAN MODERN: CONCEPTUALIZING POSTMODERNISM</i>	29
2.3. <i>A SPECTACLE OF SHOCK: POSTMODERN CINEMA AND POSTMODERN HORROR</i>	33
2.4. <i>POST-9/11 HORROR</i>	39
2.5. <i>HORROR AFTER 2010, OR POST-HORROR</i>	43
<b>3. CINEMATOGRAPHY, OR HOW TO READ A FILM</b>	<b>49</b>
3.1. <i>FORMAL ASPECTS OF FILMIC NARRATIVES</i>	51
3.2. <i>FOCALIZATION AND IMPLIED PERCEPTION IN FILM</i>	60
3.3. <i>UNRELIABILITY</i>	69
<b>4. CLOSE READING</b>	<b>80</b>
4.1. <i>THE REPRESENTATION OF THE UNCANNY</i>	83
4.2. <i>THE REPRESENTATION OF THE MONSTER</i>	103
4.3. <i>THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE OF VIOLENT PHYSICAL ASSAULT</i>	115
4.4. <i>THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE OF THE TRAUMA OF BIRTH</i>	128
<b>5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS, OR A QUEST FOR COHERENCE</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>139</b>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a child, I had paralyzing nyctophobia. I cannot recall when I first became aware of it, but I vividly remember my 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher, a very religious woman whose most memorable impression on me was the utter horror she inspired with her moralist accounts of demons and other unholy beings roaming the night. “The devil, much like thieves, only moves in the dark while everyone is asleep” she would casually say. I had an unshakable conviction that something could swoop down from the dark sky at any given moment to snatch me, climb down a tree, jump out of a dark corner, slip from under my bed... Waking up to find myself alone in the dark was utterly crippling. I am in awe of my poor mother for all the patience, compassion, and love she must have mustered all those nights to get up and come calm me down as I screamed for her help. Long and frightening were the moments when I frantically yearned for the darkness to recede and take away the monsters it harbored, and yet after the immediacy of my perceived danger was gone, it often left behind an aftertaste of curiosity, a morbid desire to take a peek—and this is it. The devil my former teacher raved about has no power here, so let us take a careful look at the beast.

An isolated country house has been used as the setting for many a horror and gothic story throughout the tradition of the genres, so it seems fitting that I, too, should choose this as the place to begin. I was born and raised in the countryside of the Brazilian state of *São Paulo*, where my grandparents had a farm, and that was the place where I spent many Saturday nights as a child. Let me paint you this picture—away from the town lights, the night was completely dark, save for when the full moon was out, then one could see as clear as day; away from the town noise, the night was completely silent, save for the occasional animal sound or the crack of a rubber tree pod. On those Saturday nights, my uncles and I would gather on the farmhouse veranda around my grandmother to hear the thrilling stories that she would tell about her father.

She would talk about the time when her father worked transporting cattle by truck: late at night one time, he stopped on the roadside to investigate a mysterious light under a tree; as he was about to get close enough to determine what the light source was, it shot up into the sky and illuminated the place like a spotlight. That night, her father—a man hardened by farm labor and hardship—cried without any apparent reason. Upon arriving home, a couple of days later, he found out that his mother had died on that very same night. She would offer no moral teaching, no explanation, for she herself did not know any further. There was no way of telling whether the story was real or not, but that was beside the point; the fascination and the awe

inspired by those accounts were real enough. My uncles and I heard those stories without interrupting even once; even breathing too loud felt like it might dispel the magic. Those moments of communion felt solemn, as though we were sharing a dark secret, as though we were gifted with glimpses into some occult knowledge.

As a child, it felt both terrifying and exhilarating to hear those stories, and as a teenager and young adult, those moments influenced the type of entertainment I consumed. Of all the genres, subgenres, and authors that elicit this type of reaction, over the years I have been most drawn and intellectually stimulated by the work of H. P. Lovecraft and his cosmic horror, and the works of literature and cinema that recreate this feeling of suddenly finding oneself face to face with awe-inspiring dark secrets that cause cognitive confusion and distress. Despite being an avid consumer of horror literature and cinema, I had never paid much active thought to the structure of these stories until on a fateful night two friends and I decided that we would gather weekly to watch a list of over 30 films considered *Lovecraftian*, that is, films that fit the description of cosmic horror. The weeks that followed changed completely my relationship with horror cinema and very likely planted within me the unrest that would eventually lead me onto this research.

This list featured films such as *Pontypool* (Bruce McDonald, 2008), *The Banshee Chapter* (Blair Erickson, 2013), *Mr. Jones* (Karl Mueller, 2013), *Honeymoon* (Leigh Janiak, 2014), and *The Void* (Jeremy Gillespie; Steven Kostanski, 2016), and what they all have in common is that very little explanation and backstory is offered to help the audience resolve the mystery and ambiguity of the plot. For most of the narrative, no definitive support is presented either in favor of supernatural events or insanity, insofar as the feelings of distress and horror stem from the unanswered questions and the awe of facing hidden truths that threaten the way reality is perceived as much as the horrific scenes these films depict. Upon consistently watching these films, I realized that they had a much deeper effect on me and my friends; we would spend hours discussing possible interpretations and what the elements were that favored either the supernatural or the psychological explanation, as opposed to the instances in which a film out of this scope eventually found its way into our playlist, and the conversation covering our impressions would be much briefer. This, of course, never meant a demerit for films with a clearer narrative line, or that they lacked complexity; however, it was clear to me that some element present in the former and absent in the latter made the narrative engage differently with the audience. Thus was born the question that moved me to write this work: *how are narrative*

*strategies employed in this specific cinematic genre to elicit this different modality of engagement?*

An initial comparison of these films highlights the importance of ambiguity in these stories: a shifting yet persistent balance between notions of possible/impossible realities is maintained throughout the narratives, making the audience experience uncertainty. As such, narrative ambiguity and hesitation will be central aspects in this research. This paradigm is reminiscent of Todorov's fantastic model (1973), which postulates that when there is an encounter with what can prove to be either marvelous or horrible, the narrative resources at use prevent the reader from firmly deciding whether to accept the new world view that is presented. In Todorov's seminal work (1973), one of devices highlighted in this process is the use of imperfect verb tenses, which denotes the character's uncertainty before the events depicted. This begs the question, what are the possible cinematic counterparts that indicate hesitation and uncertainty?

The use of ambiguous monsters, events, and endings can be found in many examples of the Gothic and Horror. Still, for the pervasiveness of this alienating strategy both in the narrative and across the films listed under it, the so-called *post-horror* genre seemed to be the perfect object for an analysis of ambiguity. Despite the heated debate over the term's acceptance and elitist connotations, as well as the legitimacy of its use as a descriptor for an actual genre, I chose to employ the proposed concept of *post-horror* for its potential of aggregating a recognizable cinematic trend and corpus of films; as such, a theoretical overview of this controversial genre will be proposed in accordance with the work of David Church (2021). Additionally, a review of previous trends will be offered to place this genre within a tradition of horror and Gothic narratives, resorting chiefly to the work of Montague Summers (1969), Noël Carroll (1990), and Fred Botting (1996). We will also explore the classic Hollywood narrative mode and the changes seen through postmodern and post-9/11 cinematic cycles to grasp how much post-horror subverts generic tropes, with some attention being dedicated to the arthouse aesthetic that the genre is claimed to employ.

Since this alleged new genre encompasses a long list of films released over the past few years, a comprehensive analysis would prove an insurmountable task; therefore, the films selected for this study must meet the following criteria: (1) Release date between 2010 and 2022; (2) Presence of a supposed supernatural force at work; (3) Suspense and horror derived from a clash between what can be accepted as real. Hence, three films have been selected to compose the scope of this research: *Absentia* (Mike Flanagan, 2011), *Hereditary* (Ari Aster,

2018), and *The Lodge* (Severin Fiala; Veronika Franz, 2019). In *Absentia*, a grieving widowed woman and her younger sister cannot tell whether the husband was abducted by an invisible monster; in *Hereditary*, the protagonist cannot tell whether her mental illness is developing into a more serious case or whether her family is being haunted. In *The Lodge*, after being taken to an isolated lodge to spend the days leading up to Christmas together and bond, two siblings and their father's new girlfriend grapple with indications that they might have died in their sleep due to a gas leak.

In all three films, the protagonists are portrayed as unreliable from a narrative standpoint, with diegetic cues signaling that their experience should not be accepted at face value. Whether it is the use of psychedelic substances, response to trauma and grief, mental illness, or lack of the proper medication, the viewer has reason to question what is seen before any sign of ambiguity is presented. Nonetheless, more than simply considering these indications of mental instability, our objective is to explore the formal elements that either confirm their experience or lead the viewer to seek a rationalizing explanation. Considering Johann Schmidt's discussion (2009) about narration in film, cinematographic devices such as camera operations, the use of soundtrack, editing, and filmic focalization have been described as important aspects for a formal analysis of cinematic narratives. As a result, in our effort to make sense of how these films portray characters, monsters, and events to instill the viewer with a sense of hesitation over whether the impossible, supernatural events are real, we will consider the use of cinematography and film narratology, informed by the work of Bruce Mamer (2009) and Peter Verstraten (2009).

In considering the possible use of misperception towards aesthetic effect, as proposed by Uri Margolin (2011), we will appreciate the contribution of film narratology and cinematography in combination with the concepts of *ocularization* and *auricularization*, proposed by François Jost (2004), to suggest the source of perception in a given scene. Additionally, the integration mechanisms proposed by Meir Sternberg and Tamar Yacobi (2015) will serve as the theoretical background with which ambiguity in the films will be analyzed. According to Hayward, "ambiguity [...] can come about as a result of more than one focused reading: that is, there is not a single preferred reading" (2017, p. 18) thus, by carrying out a qualitative analysis of *Absentia* (2011), *Hereditary* (2018), and *The Lodge* (2019) one or more integration mechanisms will be suggested as the preferred strategies for resolving ambiguity within the films.



Finally, in our intent to analyze the common use of cinematography and narrative devices in these three films, the approach suggested by Urbano (1998) will be employed to select scenes serving the same function for the progression of the narrative. The author defends that the intended effect of the horror genre cannot be achieved with one strategy alone and describes four that he claims to work best together, namely: (1) the representation of the uncanny, (2) the representation of the monster, (3) the *mise-en-scène* of violent physical assault, and (4) the *mise-en-scène* of the trauma of birth. For Urbano (1998), these strategies work because of the possibility of playing with what is seen. Horror films get to achieve the intended level of engagement and tension from the audience because of the possibility of keeping information hidden from the protagonist and sharing it with the audience, or doing the opposite. This entails the process of producing scenes that elicit that very characteristic feeling in horror films that the protagonist is facing the wrong direction and the threat is right behind them, or that the protagonist is inadvertently going towards their doom.

This thesis is composed of four chapters besides this introduction. In chapter 2, we will cover the common elements and tropes of the Gothic and Horror genres, monstrosity, and representation of the monster. We will also present our working definition of postmodernism, its paradigm shift and influence on postmodern horror films. Additionally, we will explore the common elements of arthouse modernist cinema, the classic Hollywood narrative mode compared to postmodern horror cinema, as well as post-9/11 horror cinema's themes and defining characteristics. Finally, we will discuss the post-horror genre and its aesthetic differences.

In chapter 3, we will discuss film narratology and cinematography to explore the conventionalized language of cinema, its signifiers, and aesthetic effects. The concepts of ocularization and auricularization will be discussed, as well as the effect of soundtrack to enhance the intended effect in a scene. We will additionally discuss the aesthetic use of misperception and the use of Sternberg and Yacobi's integration mechanisms (2015) to approach ambiguating elements in the narrative. Finally, we will review Urbano's four strategies (1998) to present our framework for selecting the scenes that will be analyzed. In chapter 4, we will offer an expanded synopsis of each film and an analysis of selected scenes to discuss how the combined use of soundtrack and cinematography could provoke hesitation in the viewer; finally, in chapter 5, we will review the findings of this research and point out the common strategies seen in all three films.

## 2. KILLING AN EPOCH, KILLING A GENRE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE POST-SOMETHING?

Postmodernism, postmodern cinema, postmodern horror, post-9/11 horror, post-horror; These are five concepts that are going to be pivotal in the development of this chapter and will thus permeate the discussion in this study. The reader will immediately realize that these five terms have one common constituent: the prefix *post*. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *post-* as: 1) after, subsequent, later; 2) subsequent to, later than (POST-, 2022). Based on this definition, it is possible to assume that, embedded in these notions is a chronological relationship of supersession, replacement, but also a close relationship of dependency, one might even dare say origination: etymologically speaking, these concepts exist in connection to, and always evoke the preexisting concept. While contextualizing postmodernism in his doctoral dissertation, Claudio Zanini states that the prefix in the term might lead one to believe that the new epoch's inception lies in the death of modernism (ZANINI, 2011, p. 66). While one could make a case that postmodernism in the realm of aesthetics and art all but replaced modernist trends, and that postmodern cinema and postmodern horror followed suit, Woods (2003) suggests that the relationship between one tendency and its *post*-counterpart is complementary, albeit tense, as we will see in later sections.

Regarding post-9/11 horror, it is safe to say that the absence of a 9/11 horror tradition indicates that the prefix in this instance refers to the event as a turning point: what came before existed in a world without the impact and further implications of the terrorist attacks in New York, and what came afterwards could not be disassociated from it. Finally, we must ponder what post-horror might allude to: David Church (2021) informs that the term was coined in 2017 in an unpretentious conceptualizing attempt in the article "How post-horror movies are taking over cinema" by Steve Rose (2017), a columnist for *The Guardian*. Church's work (2021) and the critical coverage analyzed by him seems to point out that enough differences in affect and reception set this film trend apart from what one might call traditional horror; nevertheless, can one take the use of the prefix to indicate that this trend supersedes the originating term? Does it imply the death of horror?

This chapter aims to contextualize and describe the five aforementioned terms to present their defining characteristics in hopes of shedding light onto their connection with the originating concept present in the inception of the word used to describe them. Considering that the corpus of films to be analyzed here does not employ aesthetics and formulaic elements

conceptualized *ex nihilo*, it proves necessary to understand the tradition to which these films adhere or from which they pull away to subvert. Whereas the aim here is not to review the bulk of horror cinema, some cycles and trends in horror films spanning decades will be addressed. Employing a qualitative methodology of theoretical review, this chapter will focus on some unifying characteristics of horror to enable our analysis of the corpus, allowing the identification and theoretical approach of overarching aesthetic strategies. Considering the characteristics that film theorists and critics ascribe to the subgenre thus far named as post-horror, these we will cover:

- (i) Uncertain, open-ended resolutions;
- (ii) Ambiguous narratives;
- (iii) Slow paced rhythm;
- (iv) Absence of a totalizing narrative that centers all of humanity against an all-consuming threat, i.e. good versus evil;
- (v) Absence of a unified moral;
- (vi) Elements such as nihilism and despair;
- (vii) Claustrophobic ambience;
- (viii) Negative affects;
- (ix) Arthouse style techniques.

Regarding (viii), in the context of the discussion presented here, the term “affect” should be considered from the perspective of affect theory. In her contribution to the work *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins* (1995), E. Virginia Demos describes affect as different from emotion and drives, but rather as a central aspect of human motivation (DEMOS, 1995, p. 17). Furthermore, Frank and Wilson maintain that as primary motivators of actions, affects precede cognitive processing and have the potential to amplify drives and emotions (FRANK; WILSON, 2020, p. 14). In summary, while the drive to breathe, eat, survive, and reproduce provides “information about motivation [it offers] very little impetus to actually move”. The authors thus claim that “we act (learn, think, remember, crave, attach) in relation to fear or surprise, enjoyment or shame [...]” (FRANK; WILSON, 2020, p. 14). As a result, whereas “affect is rarely experienced in its ‘pure’ state” (FRANK; WILSON, 2020, p. 4), it underlies emotion and instills reaction. Consequently, the reader should consider that, while at times the term emotion might be conflated with affect in this work, the use of the latter specifically describes a more subjective, generalized sensation without the association of organized reason. Ergo, the emotion characteristically promoted in works of horror, as we will

see in the discussion of Noël Carroll's work (CARROLL, 1990), presupposes the existence of an underlying affect in a cognitively organized response to threat, disgust, or other constituent elements of fear; in turn, we consider that negative affects describe a raw sensation without apparent object or logical reason.

In the first section, we will discuss the Gothic tradition and monstrosity to point how gothic and horror narratives stress established systems of value, flushing out cultural anxieties in the flesh of the monster. Additionally, the nature of the monster and its representation will be addressed. In the second section, we will cover the paradigm shift introduced by postmodernism to define our use of the term and to underscore what cultural and theoretical discussions took place to give rise to the postmodern horror film. In the third section, we will explore the use of modernist, arthouse cinema style in horror productions, and horror narratives in classic Hollywood films to underpin the differences seen between these previous traditions and postmodern horror cinema. In the fourth section, we will describe post-9/11 horror cinema, its themes, and its defining characteristics. In the last section, we will discuss post-horror and the aesthetic differences that lead some critics and theorists to claim that it could be considered a new genre.

## 2.1. *IT'S ALIVE! AN OVERVIEW ON HORROR*

As a genre, horror spans across various media and art forms (CARROLL, 1990, p. 12): video games, books, graphic novels, films, artistic performances, and the list goes on. As such, it is productive to shed light onto the specific aesthetic and affective dispositions that bear relevance for this work. Thus, in this section, we will conceptualize art-horror, monstrosity, and the gothic tradition that bore the genre as it is known today in hopes of providing the necessary context and theoretical breadth that will bridge and bring together the cinematic cycles that led to what film critics currently call post-horror.

According to Montague Summers, the gothic novel is said to have flourished in England during the 1790s (SUMMERS, 1969, p. 14), with Noël Carroll claiming that specialized criticism agrees on tracing the dawn of the literary tradition to the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764, by Horace Walpole (CARROLL, 1990, p. 4). Led by the English gothic novel, the German Schauerroman, and the French roman noir (CARROLL, 1990, p. 4), the genre attracted the audiences for “its romantic unrealities, its strange beauties, [and] its very extravagances”, enticing readers with the possibility of escaping literary representations of everyday reality (SUMMERS, 1969, p. 12). The longstanding fascination with the genre means that extensive is the span of the gothic tradition in time, and prolific is the number of works that can be sorted under this label; as such, this discussion does not set out to cover every account of gothic literature and film, or to explore the genre to completion. Instead, in the following paragraphs, we propose an informed overview of the most defining aesthetic principles that have guided authors and created a recognizable atmosphere that can be seen in works from Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe to Tim Burton and Guillermo del Toro.

The atmosphere evoked in works of the gothic tradition can be described, resorting to the work of Fred Botting, as “gloomy and mysterious” (BOTTING, 1996, p. 1). This aspect is manifest in the settings that became recognized as the Gothic *loci*: desolate landscapes, mountainous locations, dark forests, ruined castles with hidden passageways, abandoned abbeys, and graveyards (BOTTING, 1996, p. 1); the places where the gothic story unfolds are many but, according to Botting, their shared trait is that of being bleak, alienating, full of menace (BOTTING, 1996, p. 2). Despite the connection of the genre with medieval architecture and narratives linked to a feudal past associated with barbarity, superstition and fear (BOTTING, 1996, p. 2), Botting’s considerations on the setting of gothic stories in the modern city during the 18<sup>th</sup> century indicate that the disposition for creating the same atmosphere and feeling was still present: natural and architectural elements are put to use with components that

evoke gothic grandeur (BOTTING, 1996, p. 2), the buildings are as oppressive and awe-inspiring as the mountains, houses are as alienating as the castles, urban sprawls are as desolate as the wilderness, and the streets are as dark and labyrinthine as the hidden passageways and forests; the undertone of violence and menace is reproduced, sometimes overtly. Nonetheless, the author highlights that “the traces of Gothic and Romantic forms [...] appear as signs of loss and nostalgia, projections of a culture possessed of an increasingly disturbing sense of deteriorating identity, order and spirit” (BOTTING, 1996, p. 74). In *Absentia*, despite taking place in the suburbs, the surroundings are mostly empty of human activity, moreover, the eerie underpass near the house is reminiscent of the hidden passageways of yore; in *Hereditary*, the family home is removed from the city, not only placed in the suburbs, but also amidst the woods; in *The Lodge*, the story unfolds in a lake house, isolated geographically from neighbors and from any protective agents or help because of the extreme weather. These places are desolate and alienating, and the soundtrack used in these productions accentuate the menacing atmosphere, as will be further discussed in later sections.

If the passage of time and the changes in society emptied the gothic motifs, *loci*, and monsters of their ability to produce terror and horror, the genre quickly adapted; considering that the progresses in philosophical, scientific, and psychological systems beget the interrogation of received rules and values, as well as “the identification, reconstitution or transformation of limits” (BOTTING, 1996, p. 5), gothic fiction always finds new objects with which to exorcize the fears and anxieties born to the new eras (BOTTING, 1996, p. 7). Botting points out that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the trappings of the genre see a rise in terrors and horrors much closer to home, with ghosts, doubles, and mirrors that challenged the distinctions between “inside and outside, reality and delusion, propriety and corruption, materialism and spirituality” (BOTTING, 1996, p. 74). In this context, the mysterious and gloomy atmosphere can easily be interpreted as allegory for the internal condition of the characters, with external manifestations being read as a reflection of psychological disturbance (BOTTING, 1996, p. 7) or, in Carroll’s words, a haunted psyche (CARROLL, 1990, p. 5); moreover, the physical menacing space being explored can be altogether swapped for the “recesses of human subjectivity” (BOTTING, 1996, p. 7). As observed by Carroll, “[there] was a shift from physical fright, expressed through numerous outward miseries and villainous actions to psychological fear. The inward turn in fiction emphasized motivations, not their overt terrifying consequences” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 5).

Characterized by its excess, the Gothic genre underscores a persisting fascination with exploring and stressing the cultural boundaries of modernity and humanistic values (BOTTING, 1996, p. 1). In this sense, the genre “condenses the many perceived threats to these values, threats associated with supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption” (BOTTING, 1996, p. 1). Turning away from neoclassical standards, the Gothic genre rejected symmetry, clarity, and unity of purpose to favor “an aesthetics based on feeling and emotion and associated primarily with the sublime” (BOTTING, 1996, p. 2). This effect is often achieved with scenarios and situations that evoke awe and outright fear which, according to Botting, “[activates] a sense of the unknown and project an uncontrollable and overwhelming power which threatens not only the loss of sanity, honour, property or social standing but the very order which supports and is regulated by the coherence of those terms” (BOTTING, 1996, p. 5). For Summers, this nature of evoking the sublime, quickening the soul with the thrill of the encounter with that which transcends the everyday life is at the core of the Gothic, and this transcendence is anchored in supernaturalism and mysticism (SUMMERS, 1969, p. 18).

Initially prominently marked by fragmented narratives of mysterious events, gothic fiction is described by Botting as a channel in which “imagination and emotional effects exceed reason. Passion, excitement and sensation transgress social proprieties and moral laws. Ambivalence and uncertainty obscure single meaning” (BOTTING, 1996, p. 2). The gothic story is a territory of the supernatural in which the physical laws are challenged, for even when the sensational scenarios prove to be a product of an overstimulated imagination, the genre transgresses the limits of reality and possibility (BOTTING, 1996, p. 4), putting characters—usually women—through exhilarating ordeals and bringing the audience along down a path riddled with terrifying violence and adventurous freedom (BOTTING, 1996, p. 4). Though the stimulation of the imagination is key in this regard, Summers maintains that the gothic narrative is built on long-drawn suspense, even a sense of hesitation, insofar as the critic states that the audience of gothic fiction “must be held in expectation” (SUMMERS, 1969, p. 55). In this regard, we can also highlight Bloom’s remark that “the horror is doubly effective because of its unspoken origin (the horrors rarely have ‘explanations’)” (BLOOM, 2012, p. 219).

The importance of hesitation takes us into the realm of the Fantastic, conceptualized by Todorov (1973), a genre in which the reader cannot be sure of whether their footing lies on the solid ground of realistic representation or on the whirlwind of the supernatural. According to Botting, the exaggeration of the sensational events in the gothic novel exhausts curiosity,

preventing the reader from leaning too much into the belief in the *Beyond* (BOTTING, 1996, p. 43). The mysterious atmosphere is dispelled with naturalizing explanations, sometimes underwhelming, and as a result, order is restored (BOTTING, 1996, p. 43). Although this strategy was arguably a compromise not to expose the contemporary reader to barbaric credulity in superstition (SUMMERS, 1969, p. 135), this narrative dynamic became engendered as the *Explained Gothic*, following Summers' (1969, p. 139) categorization. Based on Botting's (1996) reflection on the Gothic and on his reading of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, published by Ann Radcliffe in 1794, we can draw the conclusion that the gothic tradition has been a hearth kindling ambiguity from its early days.

Making a case for the novel's enlisting in the ranks of the Explained Gothic, it is possible to highlight the fact that its "satirical dismissal of ghosts indicates the proper attitude towards the supernatural" (BOTTING, 1996, p. 44), claiming them to be a product of overindulged imagination and the superstition of the lower classes. Thus it should be possible to speculate that if the awe of facing some creature escaping our grasp on reality must clash with the rationalization of the events, then the tension between cognitive processing and raw affect rests in the center of the mysteries strived for in the narrative of the Explained Gothic; that being the case, some measure of unreliability is surely at play, for the reader must integrate and make sense of the conflicting accounts of supernatural sightings and psychological/natural explanations while the interplay of hesitation lingers.

Having pondered on this discussion, we can trace some of the defining characteristics of the gothic tradition to be the intention of evoking feelings of the sublime in connection with terror and horror. Breaking away from classicism, the Gothic genre employs supernatural and mystic elements to create an atmosphere of mystery that escapes realistic representations of everyday life. To this effect, gothic narratives activate an overwhelming feeling of threat of loss of control and sanity, to the extent that imagination and emotional effects often exceed reason; as such, suspense and hesitation are privileged over more dynamic modes of storytelling, associating the genre with the Fantastic and the use of narrative devices that produce ambiguity. Additionally, the traditional presence of ghosts, specters, demons, corpses, and skeletons roaming abandoned spaces have established these elements as part of a recognizable aesthetics that challenges standing values and expunges cultural fears and anxieties. As we will see in the coming paragraphs, these characteristics are often found in horror as well. That may be precisely why the distinction between horror and Gothic is often blurred; additionally, any attempt of conceptualization, according to Clive Bloom, "is not helped by the multiplicity of



apparently substitutable terms to cover the same thing” (BLOOM, 2012, p. 211). As such, this study must refrain from inquiring where the boundaries of these genres lie exactly, employing instead the hypothesis that they exist in a relationship of intertextuality and complementation, a continuum of sorts.

Noël Carroll defines art-horror in opposition to natural horror (CARROLL, 1990, p. 12), or horror that is, overall, felt and seen in connection to events in the real world. The violence of war, the scourge of crime and physical assault, the misery of extreme squalor, the calamity of environmental disasters, these are all horrific and inflict unspeakable pain; nevertheless, the collocate in the concept proposed by Carroll (1990) does not speak of these horrors. Conversely, the author uses the term to address the emotion “characteristically or rather ideally [promoted]” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 14) in a corpus of works of art and fiction that can be sorted together based on the common trait of purposefully eliciting negative affect. Whether it be motivated by ghosts, possessed teenagers, satanic cults, vampires, werewolves, blobs from outer space, or slasher killers, in the critic’s perspective, the emotions created by narratives of art-horror are best exemplified in the response they cause in both characters and viewers, that is, cowering, shuddering, and trembling before a monstrous threat (CARROLL, 1990, p. 18).

According to the work of Stephen Asma, the concept of the monster is flexible, since until recent history it had been used to describe a number of beings ranging from dragons and other fantastic creatures to people born with congenital malformations (ASMA, 2011, p. 7). Over time, the term “monster” has been broadly used to describe those who did not fit the standard for normative physical condition of their respective historical context, as observed by Sérgio Bellei, who discusses how the concept of monstrosity comprehended a number of non-normative conditions and categories, such as muscle hypertrophy or hypotrophy, excess or absence of body parts, hybridization between human and animal, animals born to human mothers, displaced body parts or organs, dysregulated body growth, composite beings, hermaphrodites, and monstrous races (BELLEI, 2000, p. 12). Applied to humans, the concept of monstrosity has devastating potential for alienation, as exemplified by its association with *freak shows*, a common attraction throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century (ASMA, 2011, p. 7). This discussion will move away from possible pejorative applications of the term in connection to humans, employing instead the concept as it is commonly recognized when one thinks of gothic and horror narratives, that is, ghosts, vampires, aliens, or more challenging iterations such as the slasher killer.

As an aesthetic and thematic device, the use of a monstrous figure in the production of the intended negative affects is so ubiquitous that the presence of a monster can be considered a defining trait of the genre (CARROLL, 1990, p. 14). This characteristic in itself, however, is not exclusive to art-horror: science fiction figures creatures from other planets and dimensions, fairy tales are teeming with trolls and elves, fantasy is populated by orcs and dragons. According to Carroll (1990), the difference lies, once again, in the reaction displayed by the characters in their encounter with such creatures. While monsters represent no disruption of normalcy in these genres, in art-horror, “it would appear that the monster is an extraordinary character in our ordinary world” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 16), its existence is regarded as abnormal and challenges the ontological order of the fictional world (CARROLL, 1990, p. 16).

When faced with a monster, “the characters shrink from [them], contracting themselves in order to avoid the grip of the creature [...]” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 17) and, as the author posits, the audience tends to mirror that reaction (CARROLL, 1990, p. 18). According to Carroll, this emotive convergence is not common across all genres (CARROLL, 1990, p. 18); let us think of a comic setup: the characters’ embarrassment is not mirrored in the audience, who instead is brought to laughter over their predicament. However, as Michael Myers tears at the closet door in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), the viewer shares in the anguish and dread with Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis). Moreover, in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), when Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) notices that the Xenomorph is lying at arm’s length from her, besides mirroring her fright, the audience also mirrors her repulsion. The creature does not induce only fear, but also aversion; in Carroll’s words, the monster is “not something one would want either to touch or be touched by” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 17).

Although the imminent threat is, of course, motivation enough to move a potential victim to shrink from the Xenomorph or from Michael Myers, the characters cornered by them also aim “to avert an accidental brush against this unclean being” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 17). Carroll points out that this combination of fear and disgust is, in fact, a manifestation of a tendency observed in horror stories to represent the monster in association with “filth, decay, deterioration, slime” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 22). The author further states that “[the] monster in horror fiction [...] is not only lethal but—and this is of utmost significance—also disgusting” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 22). In light of this discussion, it is possible to state that art-horror, according to Carroll, can be defined after the “the emotion that the creators of the genre have perennially sought to instill in their audiences” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 24), namely, fear, horror, and disgust. Additionally, the intended affect is frequently created in connection to “the

emotional responses of the positive human characters to the monsters in works of horror” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 24), and this reaction is mirrored in the audience. Furthermore, in weighing the contribution of Bloom to the importance of the affective responses caused by the monster in art-horror, we must consider that, “[unlike] the Gothic tale, the horror tale proper refuses rational explanation, appealing to a level of visceral response beyond conscious interpretation” (BLOOM, 2012, p. 221).

The monster conceptualized in Carroll’s work “refers to any being not believed to exist now according to contemporary science” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 27), and as such, is in essence purely a hypothetical threat (CARROLL, 1990, p. 29). Circling back to the fictional world created by Ridley Scott for an example, Carroll’s (1990) proposition would imply that the Xenomorph is recognized by the viewer as no more than the machinations of another’s imagination; an idea only brought to life through cinematic special effects, props, and costumes. Although “the thought of such a possible being does not commit us to a belief in [its] existence” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 29), conjecturing that it might exist is terrifying, since if that were the case, this creature would have the potential to replicate the diegetic horrors in real life. Besides, that monsters cause feelings of disgust on top of terror and fear is important to Carroll because, according to the author, “[within] the context of the horror narrative, the monsters are identified as impure and unclean” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 23).

The impurity of the monster in Carroll’s (1990) work is heavily informed by *Purity and Danger*, published originally in 1966 by Mary Douglas. As a premise for this discussion, it is important to consider the proposition that “dirt is essentially disorder [...] [that] exists in the eye of the beholder” (DOUGLAS, 1992, p. 2). Bearing in mind the idea that dirt is misplaced matter (DOUGLAS, 1992, p. 36), the concept of impurity is not only a notion of pathogenicity or a distinction between hygiene standards or lack thereof, but rather an effort to unveil a cultural categorization that enforces social order and warns those who would transgress it (DOUGLAS, 1992, p. 3). According to Douglas,

Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity (DOUGLAS, 1992, p. 36–37).

Despite being a cultural arrangement in essence, “[the] whole universe is harnessed to men’s attempts to force one another into good citizenship” (DOUGLAS, 1992, p. 3); when regarded in a narrower context of symbolism, popular belief, and superstition, this system for

separating clean from unclean interprets natural shortcomings and tragedies as a result of moral impurity: the appropriate behavior is exhorted when diseases and disasters are explained as the consequence of adultery or incest, for example (DOUGLAS, 1992, p. 3). As such, the connection between symbolic impurity and monstrosity proposed in Carroll's (1990) work is corroborated by Asma, who points out that the word *monster* has its etymological roots in the Latin verb *monere*, meaning *to warn* (ASMA, 2011, p. 13). Whether "the monster is a display of God's wrath, a portent of the future, a symbol of moral virtue or vice, or an accident of nature", the monster is, above all, an omen (ASMA, 2011, p. 13).

Douglas further states that anxiety over purity can be linked to reaction to anomaly, which eventually leads to avoidance and suppression (DOUGLAS, 1992, p. 6). The fact that this is a system ingrained in a culture represents a major aspect to be deliberated: on the individual level, when confronted with categories that deviate from the established cultural norm, people have the opportunity of reassessing values and changing their stand regarding conceptions of anomaly; on a social level, however, the public aspect makes these categories more rigid (DOUGLAS, 1992, p. 40). The values of a community are imbued with authority, since individual members are led to follow what is held by the majority in order to conform (DOUGLAS, 1992, p. 40). As such, the monster can be considered a reflection of the free floating anxiety, fear, and aversion of the cultural time and context in which it is born; the metaphorical bones left behind by monsters across literature and media in general can be regarded as a memento, almost an immaterial archeological finding of the culture that gestated them: in effect, we can say that "[the] monstrous body is pure culture" (COHEN, 1996, p. 4).

Guided by this hypothesis on purity, Carroll conjectures that any one creature or thing seen as "interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless" (CARROLL, 1990, p. 32) can thus be considered impure. Many of the monsters seen in art-horror are, by this standard, deemed as interstitial: by being incomplete representatives of their class, they cross the boundaries between cultural categories (CARROLL, 1990, p. 32). Besides being associated with filth, decay, and rotting things, monsters such as ghosts, zombies, vampires, and mummies cross the fundamental boundary between living and dead; haunted houses, haunted dolls, automatons, or other objects that are, overall, moved by a malevolent will cross the boundary between animate and inanimate; the monster in *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986) and other types of hybrid humanoids cross the boundary between different species (CARROLL, 1990, p. 32). The violation of biological and ontological categories, manifested in the previous examples as combinations of living and dead, can also take place through fission, that is, an instance in

which the monstrous aspects are separated in time or space, for example, taking shape in a monster that has one central consciousness shared across two or more identical bodies, or in a werewolf, a creature that harbors in it both human and animal, with the separate identities sharing the same body alternatively (CARROLL, 1990, p. 47).

These markings of impurity are ultimately what causes such monsters to be considered unnatural: by violating the notions of the natural world in a cultural context and giving rise to ambiguity inside the system of values, the anomalous creature defies its commonly held assumptions (DOUGLAS, 1992, p. 40). In this configuration, monsters do not only represent a threat to physical well-being, but also a threat to common knowledge, which makes them cognitively threatening (CARROLL, 1990, p. 34). Monstrosity is a category that organizes that which cannot be processed rationally, hence besides representing “the breakdown of intelligibility” (ASMA, 2011, p. 10), the monster also adds tension to any two extreme classifications wrung together too close to coexist peacefully and altogether branches into new categories that evade binary systems (COHEN, 1996, p. 6). In his analysis, Carroll (1990) points out that the strategies for representing the interstitial nature of monsters tend to be observably uniform across works of art-horror. Besides the aforementioned iterations of monsters that cross contradicting categories or monsters that are spread either temporally or spatially, Carroll also highlights the common traits of the monster as being dangerous, psychologically, morally, or socially threatening; its goal might be to destroy a victim’s identity, moral order, or altogether produce an alternate social order (CARROLL, 1990, p. 42–43).

For the works of art-horror in which the creature displays no outward sign that denounces its monstrousness, we must consider that if the concept of monstrosity in fact does comprehend moral as well as biological aspects, as suggested by Asma (2011, p. 7), it must also be the case that impurity can manifest independently from biological and observable traits. Carroll maintains that the horrific nature of the creature can often be perceived by its association with impurity through horrific metonymy, a strategy that can be seen at use when “the horrific being is surrounded by objects that we antecedently take to be objects of disgust and/or phobia” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 51). This configuration is exemplified in *Rosemary’s Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968): the cult using Rosemary to bring about the antichrist, at first glance, looks like an overly friendly, normal group of senior citizens. Despite not looking threatening, the term “monster” applies to them on the basis of their being inhuman (ASMA, 2011, p. 7), since it “[can be] applied to human beings who have, by their own horrific actions, abdicated their humanity” (ASMA, 2011, p. 8). This group of people is marked as impure because of their

involvement with satanic ceremonies and rituals using blood. Despite looking inconspicuous, “the association of such impure creatures with perceptually pronounced gore or other disgusting trappings is a means of underscoring the repulsive nature of the being” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 52).

Finally, because “the monster is difference made flesh” (COHEN, 1996, p. 7), it represents more than simply the abstract, cultural places and categories that one should not explore; as an embodiment of the *Other*, of the *Outside*, the monster also stands to reinforce the notion that the domestic sphere is safer than what exists abroad (COHEN, 1996, p. 12). Being a reminder that what lies at distant places is geographically and cognitively uncharted, we must consider Carroll’s indication that the monster’s origin tends to reinforce its status as an outsider of the cultural system: the place whence it comes can be interpreted as “a figurative spatialization or literalization of the notion that what horrifies is that which lies outside cultural categories and is, perforce, unknown” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 35). The monstrous creature can often be found to have originated in places where humans commonly do not tread, it comes from marginal spaces such as graveyards, abandoned castles, sewers, and old, derelict manors; from unknown, lost continents or outer space, from under the earth or the sea (CARROLL, 1990, p. 34).

## 2.2. *MORE MODERN THAN MODERN: CONCEPTUALIZING POSTMODERNISM*

The concept of postmodernism is as far-reaching as it is elusive, since it spans over many areas that “[use] it to designate a plethora of incommensurable objects, tendencies, [and] emergencies” (HEBDIGE, 1988, p. 181). This section will attempt to offer a general overview and establish the basis of what is referred to as postmodernism in the scope of this work, chiefly following the discussions provisioned by Woods (2003) and Connor (2004).

Steven Connor (2004) maintains that the hypotheses and theoretical discussions about postmodernism began in the 1970s, with theorists explaining the shift observed in Western society as a shift towards postmodernity. Postmodernity, as it was, described the social, economic, political, and cultural state of an increasingly consumer and service-oriented West, ever more dependent on computer mediation for communication and entertainment (WOODS, 2003, p. 10). According to Connor (2004), this fundamental change, for some, was primarily characterized by a change in organization, whereas other theorists considered it to be primarily cultural and artistic. The works and definitions that attempt to capture the nature of postmodernity in its socio-economic, political, and cultural phenomena do not pertain to this research, even though some of its aspects are inexorably interconnected with postmodernism

itself; thus, henceforth the primary focus will be the latter, or more specifically, “the broad aesthetic and intellectual projects in our society” (WOODS, 2003, p. 10).

Despite the initial theoretical gap, Connor (2004) considers that from the 1980s onwards, both discourses aligned as different accounts of the postmodern formed a powerful amalgam, to the extent that causation was set aside in favor of parallelism. This syncretism meant that by the 1990s, postmodernism was no longer a concept applied in discussions regarding specific topics or cultural areas, but rather a “general horizon or hypothesis” (CONNOR, 2004, p. 2).

This coalition of discourses superseded previous notions held by postmodernist theorists in the wake of this perceived shift that changes had occurred predominantly in social and economic spheres, without much of a connection or synergy with cultural-artistic conditions (CONNOR, 2004, p. 3). According to Connor:

During the early twentieth century, relations between the two spheres were thought of as tense [...], with many assuming that art and culture needed to be protected from the ‘culture industry’, and both traditional and Marxist critics agreeing on the need for art to maintain an antagonistic distance from the market and prevailing norms (CONNOR, 2004, p. 3).

Furthermore, the author argues that postmodernist rationale brought about an erosion of the differences between center and margin, which in turn caused a decentralization of authority and legitimacy. Notions of class, regions, and high and low culture were challenged as the absolutist concept of a uniform flow of history towards a single outcome weakened (CONNOR, 2004, p. 3). As it was, postmodernism stopped being treated as a condition of things in the world and “became a philosophical disposition” (CONNOR, 2004, p. 5) readily associated with postcolonialism, multiculturalism and identity politics. Despite its very different applications within specific discourses, the term became somewhat an indistinct buzzword that comprehended “everything that is more modern than modern” (WOODS, 2003, p. 3). Whether or not this specific phrasing is a nod to Jean Baudrillard, it is impossible to dismiss the contribution of his work to discussions about postmodernism. Whereas Baudrillard’s theories would warrant an in-depth analysis in their own right, we must invite the reader to ponder on the words echoed above: “more real than real” (BAUDRILLARD, 1994, p. 81); in this passage, the author alluded to the loss of meaning in media and to the *hyperreal*, something with “no relation to any reality whatsoever: [something that] is its own pure simulacrum” (BAUDRILLARD, 1994, p. 6). That is to say, the hyperreal represents an effacement of referentials to an authentic source of reality (ZANINI, 2011, p. 121). Hence, postmodernism

could indicate a philosophical disposition towards a modernity that no longer held referentials to any modernity but its own simulacrum, some perception of modernism doubled down on itself.

Incidentally, Connor suggests that early postmodernist formulations considered it to be a reactivation of early modernist principles, such as the refusal of modern life (CONNOR, 2004, p. 6). With regards to this argument, Connor states that:

Whereas the modernity refused by modernists was the modernity of urban transformation, mass production, and speed of transport and communications, the modernity refused by postmodernists was that of consumer capitalism, in which the world, forcibly wrenched into new material forms by modernity, was being transformed by being immaterialized, transformed into various kinds of spectacle (CONNOR, 2004, p. 6).

The refusal of a modernity that is transformed into spectacle is of particular importance here. *The Society of the Spectacle*, originally published by Guy Debord in 1967, is a pivotal landmark for capturing the plight with the conditions of production of culture under consumer capitalism and the destruction of authentic referentials to reality, which, as highlighted above in Connor's discussion, united both traditional and Marxist critics in favor of keeping "an antagonistic distance from the market and prevailing norms" (CONNOR, 2004, p. 3). Debord (2005) claims that "[in] societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (DEBORD, 2005, p. 7). This powerful theoretical dialogue between Debord's and Baudrillard's propositions leads to the conclusion that in this modern age in which "there is no true reality, just a series of representations and simulations that perpetuate themselves as they are constantly reproduced" (ZANINI, 2011, p. 117), the "[fragmented] views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudo-world* that can only be looked at" (DEBORD, 2005, p. 7, highlights in the original). The commodification of culture observed by Debord (2005) might be precisely the reason why postmodernism was strongly associated with popular culture and the receding cleft between high and low culture (CONNOR, 2004, p. 6).

Connor argues that from its onset, postmodernism was commonly viewed as a response to the canonization of modernism, with many early theorists focusing on the "difficulty, the challenge, and the provocation of postmodernist art" (CONNOR, 2004, p. 5); nonetheless, Woods describes the relationship between both movements as a "continuous engagement" (WOODS, 2003, p. 6) rather than that of replacement. Connor states that much like modernism, postmodernist art shocked, assaulted, and provoked; however, "modernist work was shock



requiring later analysis” (CONNOR, 2004, p. 9), whereas postmodernist works, concerned with the nature of their own presentness, brought disruption into the present as well, to the extent that “being a postmodernist always involved the awareness that you were so” (CONNOR, 2004, p. 10); or, in the words of Woods, postmodernism “is a social and intellectual self-reflexive mood within modernity” (WOODS, 2003, p. 8). According to Woods, unlike modernism, postmodernism celebrates “the loss of the past, the fragmentation of existence and the collapse of selfhood” (WOODS, 2003, p. 8–9), a notion that echoes the production of spectacles discussed in the work of Debord (2005).

Moreover, in regard to the distinctions between modernism and postmodernism, Woods (2003) emphasizes that the difference does not lie as much on the chronological sphere, but rather that it is a difference in attitude, despite what the suffix “post” might suggest. According to the author, it represents “a decline of faith in the keystones of the Enlightenment — belief in the infinite progress of knowledge, belief in infinite moral and social advancement, belief in teleology” (WOODS, 2003, p. 11). Additionally, the critic claims that postmodernism pits multiple, fragmented reasons of incommensurable nature against universality and the notion of the human self as a subject with single, unified reason (WOODS, 2003, p. 9); as a result, postmodernism emphasizes local over universal (WOODS, 2003, p. 11).

For Connor, postmodernism was, from its very inception, more than simply an insight into the new condition of art, society, and culture; rather, the critic considers that it was a project for renewal and transformation that raised questions of value (CONNOR, 2004, p. 5), and at that, he states that it “proved extremely resourceful in showing the socially constructed nature of systems of values” (CONNOR, 2004, p. 15). This baring of such systems, coupled with the decentralization and de-hierarchization that became emblematic of postmodernism, produced a change in the perception of alterity as well. According to Connor, under postmodernist rationale, the encounter with “the other” always brings with it a “painful intimacy [...] that prevents the other from being taken to be simply a reflection of the ego” (CONNOR, 2004, p. 15); in this sense, the author elaborates that “the modernist work reduces the other to a theme, while postmodernism attempts to preserve the infinity or unapproachability of the other” (CONNOR, 2004, p. 15).

Connor (2004) sustains that the transition from modernism to postmodernism represents a significant break from other artistic movements and other moments in history since, for the first time, the recognition and acknowledgment of a literary-cultural period did not come about as the product of a culture pursuing new artistic and cultural ventures. The postmodern

emphasis on the present, in turn, creates a perpetual state in which “[the] present is all there is, but now it includes all time” (CONNOR, 2004, p. 11), granted that new technologies enable mass storage, access, and reproduction of media in its multiple formats. As observed by Debord, “[for] the first time in history, the arts of all ages and civilizations can be known and accepted together [...]” (DEBORD, 2005, p. 105), and this characteristic unfolds in one of the key postmodernist traits pointed out by Woods, that is, “the relationship texts have with other texts or discourses, whether on a conscious or unconscious level” (WOODS, 2003, p. 5).

In summary, the general horizon for the discussion to be elaborated here considers postmodernism to present the range of observable aesthetic conditions and dispositions discussed thus far. These are iterations that, due to their rejection of notions of an infinite progress of knowledge, infinite moral, social advancement, and a guiding purpose, possess “no overall design or universal plan [and are] resistant to totalization or universalization” (WOODS, 2003, p. 4). Furthermore, Woods characterizes them as suspicious “of any discursive attempts to offer a global or universalist account of existence” (WOODS, 2003, p. 10). As a result, “the other” is preserved as an incommensurable subject. Additionally, by peeling away established systems of value, postmodernism offers aesthetics with unclear distinctions between center and margin, inasmuch as non-normative subjectivities may find their way to the central stage. In this context, considering Debord’s postulation that “[as] culture becomes completely commodified, it tends to become the star commodity of spectacular society” (DEBORD, 2005, p. 107), it is possible to say that postmodernist attempts to provoke and cause shock engage spectators in “the illusory representation of non-life” (DEBORD, 2005, p. 103), leading them to seek increasingly bigger spectacles. Finally, postmodernist works encapsulate all of time, allowing for intentional and unintentional intertextuality.

### *2.3. A SPECTACLE OF SHOCK: POSTMODERN CINEMA AND POSTMODERN HORROR*

According to Woods, media culture has become virtually synonymous with the postmodern (WOODS, 2003, p. 194). Accordingly, it stands to reason that the characteristics described thus far about postmodernism in general should be manifest as well in film; hence, this segue takes the discussion into postmodernist cinema. In this section, we will venture more deeply into the aesthetics of postmodernism with regards to the aspects that the authors highlight about cinema.

In his discussion about narration in film, Johann N. Schmidt maintains that in its early stages, besides the absence of verbal expression, cinema also lacked narrative structures

“beyond the stringing together of stage effects, arranged tableaux, and sensationalist trick scenes” (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 216). According to the author, since 1907, the gradual developments of narrative modes from the early “cinema of attractions” through the organization of cinematic signifiers and the creation of an enclosed diegetic universe resulted in what is called “classical narration” (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 216), which aimed to create “a coherence of vision without any jerks in time or space or other dissonant and disruptive elements in the process of viewing” (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 216). This narrative mode, described by Schmidt as the “classical Hollywood ideal”, strived to establish “cause-and-effect logic, clear subject-object relation, and a cohesive effect of visual and auditive perception” (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 216) in its quest to create realistic meaning. Employing a consecutive style, this narrative mode aimed to hide indications of artificiality to produce a narrative that seemed to originate from a natural observing position (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 216).

For Woods (2003), it is important to understand the ways in which postmodernism breaks away from modernist ideals. In this effort, the author explains that modernist cinema rejected the potential that film presented for reproducing reality (WOODS, 2003, p. 209). Since modernist ideals sought to stand against the modernity of the developments in communication, modernist efforts in cinema exposed the synthetic nature of film by bringing to light the mechanisms behind its production (WOODS, 2003, p. 209). The surreal nature of the scenes created strived to showcase the ways in which film had the ability to manipulate time and its perception through the use of editing and other analogous techniques (WOODS, 2003, p. 210). Additionally, Schmidt points out that modernist cinema and non-canonical art films turned away from the hegemonistic narrative mode of classical Hollywood cinema by making use of alienating, rather than empathetic storytelling strategies (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 216). Woods interprets these practices as an indication that modernist cinema, in itself, presented “proto-postmodernist” dispositions or, one could argue, postmodern cinema is some facet of modernism revamped, made to be *more modern than modern*; nonetheless, both are overtly distinguishable (WOODS, 2003, p. 210).

It must be mentioned that, from its beginning, modernist cinema explored gothic and horror motifs, affects, and imagery. To mention some examples, films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau, 1922) and *The Hands of Orlac* (Robert Wiene, 1924) used dramatic, *chiaroscuro* lighting and eerie, uncanny atmosphere as part of their aesthetics (KAPPES, 2016, p. 80); besides allowing for encounters and experiences that transgress the limits of reality, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* explores the recesses of human

subjectivity, *Nosferatu* warns against the dangers of the *Outside*, on top of using the recognized image of the vampire, and *The Hands of Orlac* delves into the dangers of hybridization and contamination with impurity; moreover, according to Summers, Surrealism described itself as drawing inspiration from the Gothic genre (SUMMERS, 1969, p. 16). Whether or not that claim should be dismissed—as Summers (1969) proposes—, it bears mentioning that a spectator of *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1929) quickly notices the copious use of imagery that can easily be described as gore, which could warrant an attempt of drafting the film to the ranks of the Gothic-horror. These films illustrate that the Gothic and the horror genre are as prone to challenging categorizing efforts as the narratives they showcase; as such, attributing them to one alleged classical tradition in cinema is an elusive task. Furthermore, if the refusal of empathetic storytelling strategies implicates that modernist cinema always displayed postmodernist characteristics, one could argue that gothic works bore the seedlings of both movements from its early stages, after all, the genre is described for its ability to transgress cultural boundaries of modernity and humanistic values, as mentioned previously.

According to Woods, postmodernist aesthetics undermine the reference of the depicted image to reality in a claimed celebration of surfaces that refuse material history (WOODS, 2003, p. 211), a notion that is overtly reminiscent of Baudrillard’s work, since the theoretician postulates that “the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials” (BAUDRILLARD, 1994, p. 2). Woods further comments that this development of postmodernism’s emphasis on the present unfolds in a state of “depthlessness” and an effacement of the historical past (WOODS, 2003, p. 211) that evoke a particular sentiment of nostalgia that can be summarized in observable features such as the reinventing of the past, or the setting of films in the present, but evoking the past (WOODS, 2003, p. 212) by means of intentional and unintentional intertextuality, to the extent that the boundaries between past, present, and future seem to be erased in postmodern film (WOODS, 2003, p. 212).

In alignment with the quest to provoke and shock, the postmodern cinematic aesthetic seeks to bring the unspeakable into view, blurring the lines that previously isolated the private life (WOODS, 2003, p. 212–213), searching new ways to show the unrepresentable and to bring down the barriers that protected normative life from the profane (WOODS, 2003, p. 215). As a result, intense sexuality and violence increase in prevalence as modes of freedom and self-expression, simultaneously being depicted as something abhorrent and attractive (WOODS, 2003, p. 213), a tendency that one could easily link to what Catherine Constable describes as a

“roller-coaster” sensibility that celebrates visceral qualities of the image rather than narrative and characterization (CONSTABLE, 2004, p. 51–52).

Unlike the classical Hollywood cinema described by Schmidt (2009), which uses a traditional model of linear narrative composed of casual links and conceals the artificiality of the represented world with editing, Constable (2004) states that postmodern cinema breaks away from convention due to its lack of a universal plan, thus frustrating the audience’s expectations. Finally, Constable (2004) approaches the turn of postmodern film to spectacle and special effects as a development of the international reach of studios and marketing campaigns. This perspective is shared by Schmidt, who sustains that post-classical cinema “enhances the aesthetics of visual and auditory effects by means of digitalization, computerized cutting techniques, and a strategy of immediacy” (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 217) as a response to its world-wide distribution and reception; according to the author, this change seems to point towards a shift “from linear discourse to a renewed interest in spectacular incidents” (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 217).

When it comes to horror narratives in film, for the sake of this discussion, we will consider the horror films produced from 1931 onwards by Universal Studios as a prime example of the so-called classical structure owed to the fact that the studio—despite not solely responsible for the success it achieved—proved that horror films could be very profitable and successful with a more general audience (WEAVER *et al.*, 2007, p. 29), thus making films such as *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931), *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), and *The Mummy* (Karl Freund, 1932) fan favorites (WEAVER *et al.*, 2007, p. 22) that are arguably remembered as classics. According to Stacey Abbott, these films “generally draw upon a gothic aesthetic defined by *mise-en-scène* and lighting”, warranting the sobriquet *Hollywood Gothic* (ABBOTT, 2020, p. 695). The classical horror narrative in these films displayed a disruption of social order by the action of the monster and the attempt and success at resistance by a white, male hero who saved damsels and children, and restored social order in a string of actions that complied to the classical Hollywood narrative mode. The defeat of the monster came by means of human ingenuity and resilience, bringing with it the reinstatement of patriarchal normalcy (PINEDO, 1996, p. 19). In these narratives, evil is an external force, and its otherness is often marked by physical repulsiveness, as seen in the discussion proposed by Carroll (1990). In turn, postmodern horror films are characterized by the absence of absolutist beliefs in the progress and power of human knowledge; in these films, “rationality, science, and expertise mean nothing” (STONE, 2001, p. 16).

As a consequence of the postmodern emphasis on local over universal, the representation of the monster as an outsider changed, “the other” is preserved as an incommensurable subject not guided by a unified morality, which means that now the “next-door neighbor might be the monster” (STONE, 2001, p. 16). In the past, one of the traits that marked monstrosity was its origins at the margins, in places such as graveyards, abandoned castles, and exotic countries and continents, as previously highlighted in accordance with the work of Carroll (1990); the shift observed by Stone (2001), in association with the postmodern dispositions discussed here, leads us to consider that people who could, at earlier times, unproblematically be considered a peer with shared morals now might instead be a monster in hiding, a notion that echoes Zanini, who maintains that “[now], the more concealed crimes and faults are, the more evil the monster can be” (ZANINI, 2011, p. 15). In this regard, the slasher film is a prime example of postmodern horror. Dika describes the slasher killer as a portend of past crimes returned to exact revenge on the community that originally wronged him (DIKA, 1985, p. 98); besides reproducing the gothic motif of the return of the past to haunt the present (BOTTING, 1996, p. 1), this characteristic underscores the fact that the slasher killer comes from within the community, rather than from forgotten dungeons. Additionally, this killer is monstrous because his actions betray his abdication of humanity (ASMA, 2011, p. 8), not necessarily because of any prominent horrific biology; he is a misfit (CLOVER, 2015, p. 30) who demonstrates that the periphery infiltrates and effectively is present amidst sheltered middle-class, white spaces by penetrating what should be a safe haven to slaughter the young members of the community (CLOVER, 2015, p. 31).

Pinedo (1996) considers that postmodernist horror films denote the decentralization of universal subjects—white, male, heterosexual. In this context, one example of the way in which postmodernist works produce shock and strain normative perceptions is the now established trope of the undefeatable slasher killer. The importance of this trope here is twofold: first, the decentralization of the universal subject in these films can be connected to the failure of protective instances such as the family and law enforcement, who can do little, if anything, to protect those who depend on them (CLOVER, 2015, p. 132). Additionally, male wanna-be heroes stand no chance against these killers (CLOVER, 2015, p. 44). Second, as a viewer of *Halloween* or *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), one is likely left astounded by the killer’s fortitude, since no number of gunshots and stab wounds seems to be enough to arrest the monster’s pursuit. The horrifying realization that the monster is seemingly unstoppable works as an additional marker of monstrosity, since it is possible to consider that monsters are “imbued with

awesome powers in virtue of their impurity” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 34); additionally, it opens the door to hesitation: if the killer is human, then surely a bullet should stop him. Thus, the audience must integrate this narrative tension as an indication of supernatural attributes or genre compliance.

Furthermore, Pinedo points out that these films do not only transgress social boundaries, but also the boundaries of the body itself; postmodern horror cinema employs and displays violence as a core narrative element, creating a spectacle of mutilation that demonstrates how fragile human bodies can be (PINEDO, 1996, p. 21). These films constantly find new ways to show the unrepresentable, as highlighted by Woods (2003, p. 215), also depicting visceral images of intense violence (DIKA, 1985, p. 102) and sexuality. Regarding the latter, it is important to mention that sexual and illicit activities are not only closely shown through the voyeuristic gaze of the killer, but also represent a major narrative drive in the slasher film: these are the type of behaviors that will motivate the violence and carnage (DIKA, 1985, p. 92).

As seen with the postmodernist cinema as a whole in its turn to spectacle, following the notion proposed by Debord (2005), postmodern horror can be described as an “[...] immeasurable machinery of special effects” (BAUDRILLARD, 1994, p. 59) that favors immediacy (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 217). The enormous success seen in the major slasher films drove the proliferation of sequels and imitations (CLOVER, 2015, p. 6), training viewers to expect and appreciate the formulaic structure and violent excesses for which the genre became famous (DIKA, 1985, p. 91). In turn, this boosted world-wide distribution and reception, feeding the system with spectators old and new seeking increasingly bigger spectacles, which ensuing films surely delivered. This high level of reproduction gave rise to an equally high level of referentiality in this cycle, sometimes to the extent of rendering violent scenes comic and campy (CLOVER, 2015, p. 26). Finally, Pinedo argues that in postmodern horror films, the monster always wins, or else the aftermath is uncertain, making ambiguous open-ended narratives the dominant norm (PINEDO, 1996, p. 25). The author considers that this characteristic is a possible product of the represented inefficacy of human action, as well as of a rejection of narrative closure (PINEDO, 1996, p. 19). On top of being a feature that challenges a traditional, linear narrative model, this predilection for the absence of a clear resolution could also be considered a strategy for provoking the audience easily linked to the postmodern disposition presented previously.

#### 2.4. POST-9/11 HORROR

At the dawn of the new millennium, another significant culture shift took place that bears addressing to fully comprehend the new trend in horror cinema: the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. In approaching this topic, Kevin Wetmore recognizes the previous trends of employing open-ended, and often nihilistic, uncertain resolutions in which the undefeated monster lives to terrorize another day, but the author claims that the horror genre has been deeply influenced by the fall of the Twin Towers in the decade following this harrowing event (WETMORE, 2012, p. 2). Even though post-9/11 horror did not create the concept of cinematic narratives with bleak, ambiguous endings and the triumph of evil, the author states that this cultural shift made these tropes much more foregrounded in the films produced and released afterwards (WETMORE, 2012, p. 19). Thus, in this section, the transformations that the genre underwent leading to the 2010s are going to be explored according to the work of Wetmore (2012).

The terrorist attacks that took place on 9/11 represent a significant shift in the history of the country. Using box cutters and claiming to have a bomb, a group of 19 people hijacked four planes headed to California and used three of them as projectiles against the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, with the fourth plane, supposedly aimed at the White House, crashing in a field in Pennsylvania. The first attack by a foreign force on the mainland USA since the War of 1812 (WETMORE, 2012, p. 86) amounted to a total death toll of 2,996, and more than 6,000 injured people. In the ensuing years, according to Wetmore, triumphant narratives in heroic, dramatic, or action films failed to capture the experience and offer solace because these events did not feel like a victory, rather these films reminded the audience of the fear and horror; hence, “[instead], the horror attacks and wars that followed have been co-opted into other genres, most notably horror” (WETMORE, 2012, p. 2).

Perhaps the most overt example of appropriation of the attacks’ imagery and tropes in horror cinema would be *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008), produced by J. J. Abrams and distributed by Paramount Pictures. This film that “reinvents 9/11 as a monster movie” (WETMORE, 2012, p. 51) sets New York city as ground zero in the destruction caused by an unknown threat that attacks without any warning. The film opens with a text marking the video as government property recovered from the incident, thus characterizing it as a found footage, one of the most predominant stylistic staples of post-9/11 horror (WETMORE, 2012, p. 59). The depiction of deserted streets, fleeing crowds, falling ash and dust amidst the ruins of the city all reminisce of the broadcasts seen by the entire world on 9/11 (WETMORE, 2012, p. 24). On top of that,



the group of protagonists witnesses explosions, the destruction of landmarks that symbolize the US in the public imagination—such as the Statue of Liberty—and needs to rescue a friend buried under rubble from the attack. Additionally, the shaky images shown from a handheld camera adds in the feeling of watching the tragedy “live”, another element that audiences correlate with the terrorist attack, since for the vast majority of people, the tragedy was experienced as a real time documentary (WETMORE, 2012, p. 57). Nonetheless, the influence of the terrorist attacks on cinema goes beyond the use of iconic elements and tropes.

A more covert example would be the *Saw* franchise (2004–2021) and the popular cycle since called *torture porn*, a term coined in 2006 in a *New York Magazine* article (WETMORE, 2012, p. 96) to describe the franchise as well as the other films following this trend. Isabel Pinedo argues that depictions of torture have been recurrent in horror films since the cinematic genre made its debut in Hollywood in the 1930s, meaning that horror films are not classified as *torture porn* simply for depicting torture; however, this bloodcurdling imagery had, for the most part, been characterized by oblique or off-screen presentation (PINEDO, 2014, p. 345). Films such as *Saw* (Wan, 2004), *Hostel* (Roth, 2005), *Turistas* (Stockwell, 2006), and *I Spit on Your Grave* (Monroe, 2010) are examples of the pronounced emphasis described by Pinedo on the graphic torment suffered by the victims, which is shown in close-ups that linger on details of the injury (PINEDO, 2014, p. 345).

Torture porn rose to prominence among audiences as undisputed proof of American troopers torturing prisoners in Iraq was disclosed globally in the media (WETMORE, 2012, p. 96); thus, the trend is claimed to echo the debate over the US policy of “enhanced interrogation” (PINEDO, 2014, p. 345), a euphemism for government-sanctioned torture of persons of interest. These films capture a fascination over the premeditated infliction of pain, and the American body is the preferred medium in these undertakings of vivisection (WETMORE, 2012, p. 98) both because Americans saw themselves as a target in 9/11 and also because of the various photographs and videos of American hostages being beheaded overseas (WETMORE, 2012, p. 98). Ultimately, Wetmore sustains that torture porn posits a debate over the moral and ethical implications of causing intentional harm: when the victims have the chance to turn the tables on their tormentors, they become torturers themselves; however, their “actions are justified because of what has happened to them” (WETMORE, 2012, p. 101). According to the author, these films raise the question that figures at the heart of the debate and the uneasiness populating the audience’s mind: “will you harm others, perhaps even innocents who have done no wrong,

in order to protect and save yourself?” (WETMORE, 2012, p. 104), and the actions taken within and without the diegesis points towards a positive answer.

Another defining difference between horror cinema before and after the 9/11 described by Wetmore (2012) is the fact that the previous postmodern trend of violent, unrelenting monsters that seem impossible to defeat—most notably represented by slasher killers—frequently allowed for hope in the form of a provisional rest: although the killers most likely will return in the next sequel, they can be temporarily defeated by the “final girl”, a term coined by Carol Clover to describe the archetype of the lone survivor of the slasher killer (CLOVER, 2015, p. 35). Wetmore maintains that these films, albeit bleak, allowed for some form of *reintegration* (WETMORE, 2012, p. 3), that is to say, a sense that normalcy had been restored. Conversely, “[after] 9/11, nihilism, despair, random violence and death [...] assume far greater prominence in horror cinema” (WETMORE, 2012, p. 3). Death will surely come for most, if not all characters (WETMORE, 2012, p. 3), and for the ones who manage to survive, these films still end in hopelessness because after all the violence, there is no normalcy to which the survivors can go back, since the trauma remains (WETMORE, 2012, p. 118).

In post-9/11 horror, the postmodern inclinations for reflexivity and referentiality seen in films produced during the 1990s are left behind (WETMORE, 2012, p. 82), and the commonplace use of inventive and humorous deaths is gone as well (WETMORE, 2012, p. 85). The author sustains that postmodern horror films have a history of depicting undifferentiated human beings as victims in such a way that the only real characters are the killers; as a consequence, the lack of empathy from the audience towards these characters renders their death absent of any real sense of horror (WETMORE, 2012, p. 85), allowing for experimentation with the varied ways and instruments with which people can be killed. Wetmore argues that following the terrorist attacks in 2001, it was no longer possible to be amused by these deaths (WETMORE, 2012, p. 83) after all, when people die violently and horribly, each and any individual death is a terrifying tragedy. Nonetheless, I have observed elsewhere that these films adhere to the tendency observed in postmodern horror films of showing violence quickly to shock, not showing the inflicted wound for long (FERNANDES; ZANINI, 2021, p. 229). According to the work of Vera Dika, this approach to the depiction of violence does not allow the audience to feel the adequate level of grief or pain (DIKA, 1985, p. 102).

Wetmore argues that in the post-9/11 horror model, random and motiveless violence becomes a major trope in horror films (WETMORE, 2012, p. 88). The victims are picked

simply because they are available (WETMORE, 2012, p. 83). There is no bad behavior to be curbed or past crime to be avenged. The killers' goal is not disclosed, or more specifically, the goal is to cause fear and to further their games of terror (WETMORE, 2012, p. 90). According to Wetmore, this is a direct product of the terrorist attacks on 9/11: the USA was made aware that innocent people can become victims of extreme violence simply because they are at the wrong place or because of what they represent (WETMORE, 2012, p. 84). Even though the randomness of the attacks shown on screen accentuates their brutality, the number of deaths is far lower than in a postmodern horror film (WETMORE, 2012, p. 89). On the other hand, the narrative does not give the audience any space to relax and offers no catharsis, both the characters and the audience alike are relentlessly tortured (WETMORE, 2012, p. 89). In this terrifying universe, there is no space for heroic attempts because they are ultimately futile: The bad guys rarely have the tables turned on them (WETMORE, 2012, p. 91).

The turn towards a more pervasive use of bleak narratives, according to Wetmore (2012), echoes the experience lived by the people who witnessed the attacks. The frugal attempts at rescue yielded no results; people who managed to get to rooms protected against the fire still did not have a real chance, since the collapse of the buildings brought everything down with it (WETMORE, 2012, p. 117). The people who escaped to the rooftops in hopes of being rescued ended up faced with the choice to die by fire or to jump from the hundredth floor (WETMORE, 2012, p. 117). Additionally, many family members received phone calls from people inside the World Trade Center or from the planes and heard every gruesome detail of their death (WETMORE, 2012, p. 118). The aftermath was a generalized feeling of powerlessness, hopelessness, and despair that was reproduced in horror films; these nihilistic narratives demonstrate to the audience a dark truth that is already subconsciously known: the trope of the hero who manages to get the upper hand and save the day is merely a cinematic convention (WETMORE, 2012, p. 119). Nothing could be done by anyone. Tragedy came and left no hero, no triumphant narrative of overcoming odds, only survivors forever scarred (WETMORE, 2012, p. 118). Wetmore argues that horror cinema co-opted these themes to produce films that truly leave the audience with the feeling of utter defeat even after the movie theater session ends or the TV is turned off (WETMORE, 2012, p. 135). This denial of catharsis effectively increases the despair: the audience is "left lonely, isolated, despondent and without the possibility of redemption of any kind" (WETMORE, 2012, p. 135).

## 2.5. *HORROR AFTER 2010, OR POST-HORROR*

According to the work of David Church, the state of horror cinema has changed significantly in the second decade of the new millennium (CHURCH, 2021, p. 27). The popularity of Torture Porn waned considerably, arguably from 2008 onwards (PINEDO, 2014, p. 345), but new films fitting the genre have been produced and released after the 2010s nonetheless, such as *A Serbian Film* (Spasojević, 2010), *Hostel Part III* (Spiegel, 2011), *The Human Centipede 2* (Six, 2011), *A Thousand Cuts* (Evered, 2012), *I Spit on Your Grave 2* (Monroe, 2012), *Darkroom* (Napier, 2013), *The Human Centipede 3* (Six, 2015), and *I Spit on Your Grave 3: Vengeance Is Mine* (Braunstein, 2015); moreover, the *Saw* franchise is alive and thriving with the release of *Saw 3D* (Greutert, 2010), *Jigsaw* (The Spierig Brothers, 2017), and *Spiral* (Bousman, 2021), totaling nine films thus far and spanning almost two decades of history. Nevertheless, the Torture Porn fad is claimed to have been superseded by what is considered one of the major trends since the turn of the millennium, a corpus of films that has been described in various specialized criticism and media outlets throughout the years as *Slow*, *Smart*, *Indie*, *Prestige*, or *Elevated horror* (CHURCH, 2021, p. 2), and as of late has become known as *Post-horror* (CHURCH, 2021, p. 3). Encompassing films such as *Under the Skin* (Glazer, 2013), *It Follows* (Mitchell, 2014), *It Comes at Night* (Shults, 2017), and *Get Out!* (Peele, 2017), this trend privileges lingering dread and visual restraint over explicit shock and disgust (CHURCH, 2021, p. 1). In this section, the aesthetic characteristics that set this trend apart from its precursory cycles will be discussed to highlight its most important features and their connection to previous trends in horror cinema.

Church claims that the term *post-horror* was first coined in 2017 in an attempt to convey the different effect and reception that these films had both on critics and the audience, and to set them apart from traditional horror's low status (CHURCH, 2021, p. 2). This is also what led to the adoption of the descriptor *Elevated horror*, a "modifier [that] suggests a raising of horror up to a certain degree of respectability" and suggests an association of the trend with higher aesthetic strata (CHURCH, 2021, p. 45). While recognizing that the descriptor *post-horror* is flawed, the author adopts the term in spite of the possible elitist and highbrow connotations nonetheless because of the corpus of films readily associated with it, thus facilitating the delimitation of a theme and cycle (CHURCH, 2021, p. 3). In his discussion, Church underscores that the aesthetic strategies associated with modernist art-cinema specifically are in part what leads some critics to consider that this cycle is altogether a new genre that transcends other horror productions perceived to have a lower status (CHURCH, 2021, p. 3); nevertheless, the

author states that the cycle can be linked within a tradition of art-horror cinema (CHURCH, 2021, p. 3). In this context, the use of the term “art-horror” differs from that seen in Carroll’s (1990) work, referring instead to works of horror that were well received by horror-skeptic critics for their artistic qualities. Examples of such films privileging fear and anxiety while achieving critical acclaim for their artistic qualities are *Cat People* (Tourneur, 1942) and *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), to name but two (CHURCH, 2021, p. 43). In fact, according to Church, this perceived connection to previous works with critical acclaim and cultural traction has given rise to the moniker *Prestige horror* to highlight the *auteurist* character seen in the trend (CHURCH, 2021, p. 43). Furthermore, the author draws attention as well to the fact that horror has always dealt with the themes for which post-horror is praised (CHURCH, 2021, 49), namely, grief, mourning and sadness (CHURCH, 2021, p. 13). As a result, it is important to highlight that the individual and collective use of these elements and features are not new, much less that post-horror created them; rather, the key factor pointed out by Church is the way in which these strategies favoring minimalism are employed (CHURCH, 2021, p. 13). The critic sustains that while many of the

[Earlier] “prestige” films were promoted as singular, high-profile events, often appearing years apart from each other, and capable of appealing to broad – or at least middlebrow – tastes [...] post-horror more closely resembles a trend because so many of these films have appeared across a tighter cluster of years, while also bearing greater stylistic affinities with modernist art films than with major-studio productions [...] (CHURCH, 2021, p. 44).

Some stress should be placed on how said stylistic affinities with modernist art films distances the current trend from earlier prestige films, since the author emphasizes the fact that unlike post-horror, the examples seen earlier seem to predominantly follow Hollywood’s narrative conventions with only a few notable exceptions, such as *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980) (CHURCH, 2021, p. 44). To better outline the distinction between the Classic Hollywood narrative mode and art-cinema, we might consider Stacey Abbott’s description of the former as stories “based around character-motivated cause and effect plots, [...] with clear narrative goals” and the latter as “motivated by character psychology, subjectivity and narrative ambiguity” (ABBOTT, 2020, p. 697).

According to Church, the post-horror cycle merges art-cinema style with decentered tropes from the horror genre (CHURCH, 2021, p. 1). The author maintains that the ingenuity and the divergence from established elements seen in these films unsettle both audiences and the genre itself. That, coupled with an aesthetically higher tone centered around the use of “slow pacing, ambiguous endings, and lack of conventional monsters/thrills” (CHURCH, 2021, p. 11)

warranted high critical acclaim on one side while dividing fans of the genre between those who appreciated the style adopted and those who found it to be lukewarm (CHURCH, 2021, p. 1–2), considering the trend “boring, confusing, not scary, and utterly unsatisfying” (CHURCH, 2021, p. 11); this negative reception is

[...] a backlash from some fans who claim that these films are “overrated” or stray too far from an imagined generic core (sometimes dubbed “straight-up” horror) associated with scariness, monsters, gore, entertainment value, and other traits that post-horror texts may seem to eschew (CHURCH, 2021, p. 53).

David Church considers that the affect produced by films in the post-horror cycle is at the root of the debate over its elevated status among critics as well as the differences it features from other cycles (CHURCH, 2021, p. 7). The author draws from affect theory to describe sensations that precede cognitive processing into emotions (CHURCH, 2021, p. 7). According to Church, affect is registered as a generalized block of sensations, such as anxieties not fixed upon established objects without apparent cause or solution (CHURCH, 2021, p. 7). As such, the lingering dread and haunting atmospheres of post-horror films heighten negative affects by not employing visceral, overt monstrous imagery, a tendency celebrated by horror-skeptic critics (CHURCH, 2021, p. 7). This choice for employing a tone that is blatantly different from Hollywood’s established model and conventions for horror is conveyed through the use of stylistic minimalism, turning away from jump-scaries, dynamic editing, and energetic cinematography in favor of distanced framing, longer shot durations, slow camera movements and slow narrative pacing. These stylistic elements create a general mood that is largely perceived as more oppressive and alienating than spectacular or sensational (CHURCH, 2021, p. 11). The stillness of the shots heightens the dread over the feeling that something could happen at any time, thus stretching the perceived temporal experience (CHURCH, 2021, p. 12), which can be argued to attribute the trend with gothic qualities, considering that Summers draws attention to the fact that the gothic narrative is built on long-drawn suspense to hold the audience in expectation (SUMMERS, 1969, p. 55). This restrained visual approach can also be seen in the portrayal of the monster, who often is presented indirectly or as an invisible, abstract force (CHURCH, 2021, p. 12), sometimes even appearing in anthropomorphic guise rather than an abhorrent creature (CHURCH, 2021, p. 13).

Said preferred cinematography style led some to call the cycle *smart horror* due to a claimed association with the use of “long-shot, static composition, and sparse editing” seen in the American smart film, popular in the 1990s (CHURCH, 2021, p. 36). However, Church points out that while smart films, such as *Magnolia* (Anderson, 1999), employed irony as if to

indicate a distancing from contemporary populist films (CHURCH, 2021, p. 37), post-horror tends to be more serious and stark in approaching its themes, openly moving away from recognizable horror tropes that are considered a given cultural capital shared by its audience; thus by turning elsewhere for inspiration, post-horror manages to dissociate itself from possible humorous and fun viewing experiences (CHURCH, 2021, p. 38). One such aesthetic inspiration would be the choice for slow narrative pacing, described by Rick Warner as characteristically associated with art cinema (WARNER, 2021, p. 105); considered by Warner to be the “antithesis of [...] action-centered rhythms” (WARNER, 2021, p. 106), slow pacing is linked by Church with the use of “*temps morts* to generate claustrophobic dread” and the reduced use of jump scares (CHURCH, 2021, p. 30).

In his discussion about slow thrillers, Warner states that “[this] kind of suspense involves an enduring residue of the unexplained and the incomplete [...]”, highlighting the way in which this aesthetic strategy has the ability to capitalize on ambiguity and on the viewer’s unknowingness to “[transfer] suspense elsewhere” (WARNER, 2021, p. 106, highlights in the original); this notion can be argued to reinforce the idea that post-horror does away with conventional thrills in favor of the haunting atmosphere described as characteristic of the cycle, “making space for characters and viewers alike to soak in contemplative or emotionally fraught moods, not shuffled along to the next abrupt scare” (CHURCH, 2021, p. 12). This stylistic change has also been emphasized by critics who would describe the trend as *slow horror* (CHURCH, 2021, p. 29). Furthermore, the author states that this moniker, along with *Quiet horror*, have been described as an active resistance against the “quick and chaotic editing and camera movements” commonly seen in Hollywood after the 1990s and as a reaction to Torture Porn (CHURCH, 2021, p. 32).

As it stands, despite the problematic term adopted to describe the trend, post-horror can be described as a genre because many films with converging stylistic affinities with modernist art films have been released in a short span of years. As for the generic features that unites these productions, it is possible to highlight a shared disposition for privileging lingering dread, haunting atmospheres, and visual restraint, with a penchant for avoiding overt shock and disgust (CHURCH, 2021, p. 1). With a thematic predilection for themes such as grief, mourning and sadness (CHURCH, 2021, p. 13), these films tend to make use of decentered tropes from the horror genre (CHURCH, 2021, p. 1), granting them a somber tone that is perceived to be more serious and oppressive. These characteristics are woven in narratives motivated by fraught psychological states and subjectivity using aesthetic strategies associated with modernist art-

cinema (CHURCH, 2021, p. 3). These stylistic strategies unify the genre with characteristic slow pacing, static shots, *temps morts*, ambiguous endings, and lack of conventional monsters, dynamic editing, and jump-scares, distancing it from Hollywood's narrative conventions (CHURCH, 2021, p. 44).

While the combined characteristics that would set post-horror apart as a genre make it a unique trend, a comparison with the horror cycles that came before shows us that it is part of a horrific continuum. According to Botting (1996), the Gothic has a long-standing devotion to the exploration of threats to social values, delusions, religious and human evil, and mental disintegration. Additionally, postmodern horror cinema strived to bring the unspeakable into view and blur the lines isolating private life (WOODS, 2003, p. 212–213). As such, post-horror's thematic interest in narratives depicting fraught psychological states and subjectivity, and manifestations of grief, loss, and sadness seems to be aligned with a host of films that came before it. The use of open endings has been described as quintessential to postmodern horror cinema (PINEDO, 1996), and we could also speculate that the genre's aesthetic affinity for lingering dread is not too far removed from the bleak narratives observed in some post-9/11 horror films, which are described for their lower number of deaths, more contained use of violence, and rejection of fun, referential kills. Considering the discussion carried out by Stone (2001) regarding postmodern horror, it is possible to point out some prevalence of teleology and belief in the human ability to conquer danger and evil in the trends that came before it. In turn, while postmodern and post-9/11 horror do away with these notions, they favor energetic editing and immediacy. As such, among all post-horror's common qualities and generic subversions, it seems that the preference for slow pacing and static shots, the refusal of dynamic editing and camera workings, and the distance from traditional Hollywood narrative mode could be the most defining differences. Nonetheless, it is the genre's distinct use of ambiguity in connection to this alienating storytelling mode that is of interest for this research.

Church claims that the minimalistic approach and more covert representation of monstrosity are effectively better at producing negative affects than more explicit approaches (CHURCH, 2021, p. 16), insofar as the genre's conventional locus for generating fear and disgust are displaced (CHURCH, 2021, p. 16). As a result, the author maintains that the nature of these narratives is more closely related to the concept of "the fantastic" proposed by Tzvetan Todorov (CHURCH, 2021, p. 16), meaning that these narratives are more perceptibly rooted in hesitation, creating and maintaining a generalized feeling of apprehension over the nature of the events depicted on the visual track rather than resolving the ambiguity by explaining



“uncanny” events with rationalizing elucidation (CHURCH, 2021, p. 16). Hence, “if these films evoke a deep sense of unease, it is partly because they often retain one foot in the realm of real-world plausibility” (CHURCH, 2021, p. 16).

Church explains that horror films do not necessarily need object-directed emotions to set mood and elicit apprehension (CHURCH, 2021, p. 17); through the use of narrative strategies, *mise-en-scène*, and cinematography, films can immerse audiences in an anticipatory atmosphere that creates an overwhelming feeling of free-floating anxiety that can linger well after the films end without a clear resolution; to this end, an implied monster or disrupting force can and often does co-opt objectless anxieties to create negative affects, since horror’s impact is not reduced simply to the use of abject imagery and its effect (CHURCH, 2021, p. 17). According to the author, this is, effectively, one of the reasons why the post-horror trend proves to have such an elusive resistance to a classification under horror’s established subgenres: affect is often privileged over monstrous entities (CHURCH, 2021, p. 17). Church also highlights that the prevailing presence of the monster as a trope makes it easy to relegate the atmosphere to a lesser position in the ranks of narrative creation; however, post-horror exemplifies that it is an important, constitutive part (CHURCH, 2021, p. 17).

The author presents the following criteria for selecting films as part of his corpus: films labeled as post-horror by critics; films that share the traits described thus far; and whether the films engage in negative affects (CHURCH, 2021, p. 13). Some key aspects to consider in these criteria would be formal/stylistic minimalism and thematic/affective resonance, as these are the characteristics that distinguish post-horror from horror in general, according to Church (2021, p. 15). In accordance with his proposed criteria and the list of films provided (CHURCH, 2021, p. 14), it is possible to validate the films in our corpus as part of the trend. As such, by analyzing *Absentia* (2011), *Hereditary* (2018), and *The Lodge* (2019), we will propose an informed discussion into the use of hesitation in connection to the apprehension over the nature of the strange events shown in these films to offer an overview of the strategies employed to elicit narrative ambiguity.

### 3. CINEMATOGRAPHY, OR HOW TO READ A FILM

Johann N. Schmidt states that the notion that a narrator is an indispensable feature in a narrative is especially problematic for the application of literary theory in filmic analyses (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 212). According to the author, although almost all films present storytelling characteristics, the intrinsic medium differences in connection to the presentation and mix of temporal and spatial elements in cinema set it apart from narrative modes primarily based on language (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 212). Considering these distinctions, Schmidt maintains that to be applied to film, the apparatus offered by narratological theory needs to cover a number of techniques employed to build a story world having specific effects in mind, and to create meaning in their totality (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 212). Peter Verstraten recognizes that literary theory cannot be directly employed in film narratology due to the intrinsic medium differences (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 7), but claims that most films can unproblematically be called narratives on formal grounds, the criterion being the existence of a narrative agent conveying a story in which a temporal development takes place (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 24), a view that is shared by Schmidt, who sustains that “the most solid narrative link between verbal and visual representation is sequentiality” (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 212).

Verstraten describes the temporal development in cinema by saying that “we could define filmic narration as showing a moving image with the option of adding either editing or sound” (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 8). The author considers that this showing is never neutral (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 8), a display of agency that one could easily correlate to the set of techniques described by Schmidt (2009) as specifically native to the cinematic medium. For one, the narrative subject, otherwise absent in film as it is understood in literary works, can be perceived as a construct of a visual narrative instance that mediates cinematographic devices such as camera, sound, and editing, the *mise-en-scène*, and filmic focalization (SCHMIDT, 2009, p. 212). According to the work of Verstraten, these are the product of the “(external) narrator on the visual track” (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 8), to which he refers as the visual narrator. Verstraten sustains that this narrative agent is responsible for deciding “who or what can be seen, for locating the characters in a certain space, for positioning the characters with regard to each other, and for determining the kind of lighting in the shot” (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 9). In order to better conceptualize this narrative instance, it is important to highlight the fact that Verstraten (2009) considers this agent to be *external*. On this aspect, the work of Sabine Schlickers proves helpful in expanding the discussion: according to the author, the

camera as a narrator is located on the extradiegetic level in most cases (SCHLICKERS, 2009, p. 244), only being inserted in the intradiegetic or hypodiegetic levels “when the ‘camera’ is visible as a camera on these lower levels of the shown world serving a diegetic function, for example, when a film is being shot within the film” (SCHLICKERS, 2009, p. 244). Henceforth in this study, the concept of visual narrator will be employed in the discussion, and thus it should be understood that what is shown by the camera is attributed to this narrative agent. Additionally, this study will take into consideration the discussion offered by Verstraten (2009) to illustrate how he perceives narratological concepts to manifest in cinema. Considering the scope of the discussion to be carried out here, we will focus on monstration, focalization, and sound.

According to Verstraten (2009), the narrative agent is one of many elements of importance for film narratology, with filmic writing conventions also representing a significant aspect to be considered. As pointed out by Linda C. Cahir (2006), film structure can be considered to have literary form, since film and literature have aesthetic equivalents in method and style. According to Cahir, because the structure of both literature and film is composed of particular rhythms, tones, and syntax, the composition and analysis of both can be considered analogous, insofar as words combine to make paragraphs, which in turn make a book, and in film, sequences combine to make shots, which in turn make an entire film (CAHIR, 2006, p. 46). Thus, it stands to reason that, just as knowing a given language is necessary to understand a text, understanding the conventionalized language used in cinema to create meaning will play an important part in this analysis. To this end, cinematography will be addressed according to the work of Bruce Mamer (2009).

Additionally, the concept of focalization will be addressed according to the work of Gérard Genette (1990) and François Jost (2004); and the relevant aspects for an analysis of unreliability and the representation of perception in film will be laid out according to the work of Uri Margolin (2011), and Meir Sternberg and Tamar Yacobi (2015). The reader is invited to think of the theoretical review offered in the following pages as the working methodology for the discussion to be carried about the corpus of films selected for this research.

### 3.1. FORMAL ASPECTS OF FILMIC NARRATIVES

According to Peter Verstraten, *monstration* is described as a primary element that is always encompassed in film, even though it is not necessarily indispensable for narration in cinema (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 51). The author argues that cinema is always *overspecific* (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 51): shots cannot help but show everything at once, which in turn reveal too much but lack the precision and exhaustive meticulousness that can be found in literary works. Consequently, cinema always involves implicit description, “it reveals but does not explicitly describe” (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 52). According to the author, description can take two forms in cinema: deliberately showing overspecific shots that offer a general impression without highlighting any specific detail, leaving to the viewer the task of picking fragments and putting together their own description; or through *selective framing*, which consists of manipulating the scenes by means of “camera operations, framing, and different angles, [...] the use of particular lenses, the workings of light and dark, adding colour, and other techniques” (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 53) to direct the viewer’s attention to one specific detail over others. Let us consider, for example, a scene from *Hereditary* (2018). In Figure 1, the viewer is presented with an overspecific shot of three girls in the kitchen during a house party. In this shot, the cinematography used does not focus on any specific detail, thus attributing to the viewer the task of coming up with their own description.

Figure 1 – Girls making a cake at the house party.



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:28:37)

However, as the sequence progresses, the scene cuts to a close-up shot of the cutting board, as per Figure 2. In this example, both the framing and the use of focus illustrate the use of selective framing to draw the viewer’s attention to the copious amounts of nuts being chopped.

*Figure 2 – Close-up of cutting board.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:28:40)

Henceforth, to carry out an analysis of unreliable narration/focalization in the “post-horror” cycle, this study will prioritize some aspects of cinematography over others, namely: framing, angles, camera movement, and focus, all of which will be duly described below.

Cinematography—the conventionalized language of cinema—dictates that the *frame* is the smallest visual component in film, corresponding to an individual photographic image (MAMER, 2009, p. 3). The elements in the frame, in turn, are organized in a *composition*, a curated disposition of elements that compose the *mise-en-scène*. When displayed in sequence, creating the illusion of movement, the succession of frames creates a *shot*, which is conventionally described as “the footage created from the moment the camera is turned on until it is turned off” (MAMER, 2009, p. 3). Thus, selective framing would impact basic blocks of footage that can be isolated and selected for analysis.

To understand the framing, or the disposition and composition of the elements that will be displayed in a frame, we will look at the camera positions used to convey description to the audience, which are described by Mamer (2009) as *proxemics*; that is, the distance between subjects and the camera. There are three basic camera positions—each conventionally communicating metainformation of their own—, and any intermediary position is considered a variation of these three (MAMER, 2009, p. 5); they are : (1) the long shot, (2) the medium shot,

and (3) the close-up shot. Despite using the human body as a common measure, in the realm of visual description, these camera positions apply to both characters and other elements. According to the description presented by Mamer (2009), in effect, proxemics can be used to directly draw or disperse the viewer's attention to elements and actions by closing or expanding the field of vision. A shot captured from further away shows more information at once, offering a general and overspecific emphasis that can be used in establishing shots and transitions between scenes. When shown from a distance with a long shot, characters and elements alike are portrayed more impersonally, even estranged from the viewer. Due to its focus on the human face, describing the framing of an object in medium shot could be challenging; nonetheless, this shot offers a neutral albeit more detailed view of the subject. Finally, the close-up is the richest in detail and, consequently, is the most personal type of camera positioning.

The (1) long shot is described as any shot that displays the full human body or more (MAMER, 2009, p. 5). Mamer (2009) states that the long shot tends to present random or overspecific information, to use the terminology established by Verstraten (2009). This type of shot makes it hard for the audience to understand which character, characters, or even other location-related elements are the primary subject in the shot (MAMER, 2009, p. 5). If one is not to consider the use of lighting and composition to highlight one element over the other, the long shot does not offer any logical means for discerning which element is more valued in this shot (MAMER, 2009, p. 5). This choice of camera positioning can be employed to attain the effect of diminishing the subject, considering that, for example, "presenting a lone figure in a vast landscape will make the figure appear overwhelmed by the surroundings" (MAMER, 2009, p. 5). Variations of the long shot include the full shot, displaying just a human figure from head to toe, and the extreme long shot, a shot in which the subject is extremely removed from the camera, displaying a lot more of the location (MAMER, 2009, p. 5).

The second basic camera position would be (2) the medium shot, which displays a person from the waist up, offering more detail than a long or a full shot (MAMER, 2009, p. 6). This type of shot is generally neutral in its presentation of the subject—neither diminishing nor emphasizing it—, since it more closely represents the perspective and distance from which a person would interact with a given interlocutor in Western societies (MAMER, 2009, p. 6). This shot puts the viewer in an equal position with the subject, not looking either too much from above or from below; moreover, this position also does not symbolically invade the subject's personal space while not standing too far off (MAMER, 2009, p. 6).

The third camera position would be (3) the close-up shot. In a close-up, the camera moves in closer to the subject's face, often showing a person from collar bones up, much like in a headshot (MAMER, 2009, p. 6). The proximity between viewer and subject in this sort of position forces the audience to symbolically face and get psychologically closer to a character, thus building more character-viewer identification. This shot imposes severe restriction on the perceived freedom of movement, which combined with the close psychological proximity, can in turn create a claustrophobic atmosphere, imposing an oppressive closeness that might range from uncomfortable to menacing (MAMER, 2009, p. 6). Mamer (2009) even suggests that the close-up can be particularly successful in creating suspense (MAMER, 2009, p. 7). This camera position offers much more detail and as a result, emphasizes actions (MAMER, 2009, p. 6), thus making a transition from long shot through medium shot to close-up a logical progression when approaching a subject (MAMER, 2009, p. 7). Turning once again to *Hereditary* (2018), we can find an example for the type of transition described. In Figure 3, we can see a long shot offering an overspecific view of a grief support group.

*Figure 3 – Long shot of grief support group.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:19:29)

In this frame, we could interpret Annie as being subdued and diminished among the other members of the group. The effectiveness of this approach in communicating a sense of isolation is underscored by the fact that she is initially unwilling to open up about what brought her there. This lack of connection extends to the viewer as well: being this far removed from the character, the viewer likely feels little emotional resonance. This perceived distance changes as the sequence progresses and the camera moves in closer to her, as per Figure 4.

*Figure 4 – Close-up of Annie in the support group.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:21:19)

As Annie begins to talk, the camera slowly brings the viewer closer to her. Nevertheless, despite the incentive towards identification between viewer and character, the nature of the conversation also makes this shot uncomfortable, as if we were invading her personal space during her moment of grief.

Besides the application of proxemics, which control how much detail is shown by expanding or closing the field of vision in a shot, according to Verstraten (2004), selective framing also uses different camera angles to manipulate scenes. The angle through which the subjects are portrayed have a significant impact on the subjective assessment a viewer might make about a character and where they stand in a context; furthermore, Mamer (2009) emphasizes that the ubiquitous use of a camera leveled with the world unveils aesthetic assumptions regarding neutrality: the use of camera techniques that attempt to approximate a “natural” perception of the world—such as the medium shot, eye-level shot, and leveled camera—points towards the possibility of describing the world without attaching intrinsic subjective values to the images shown “when subjective judgements are not desired” (MAMER, 2009, p. 10). The camera angle refers to the orientation and height of the camera in relation to the subject (MAMER, 2009, p. 7), and much like the distance between camera and subject, also conventionally communicates metainformation to the viewer. The six types of camera angles described by Mamer (2009) as commonly used in filming are (1) the low-angle shot, (2) the high-angle shot, (3) the eye-level shot, (4) the bird’s-eye view, (5) the Dutch angle, and (6) the point-of-view shot.



In (1) the low-angle shot, the camera is set in a lower position in relation to the subject, thus pointing upwards and showing the frame from below. Sequences displayed from this perspective typically have the effect of making subjects look threatening, intimidating, or powerful, “looming over the awed onlooker” (MAMER, 2009, p. 7). The low-angle shot is also described as having the tendency of attributing perspective distortion to the sequence; the steeped perspective warps the expected proportion between images in the foreground and in the background, creating a foreboding and disorienting feeling that, according to Mamer (2009), can be employed to show a world out of balance (MAMER, 2009, p. 8). Turning to *The Lodge* (2019) for an example, we can see an extreme low-angle shot of a cross during Laura’s funeral, as per Figure 5. The cinematography in this shot echoes the thematic depiction of extreme religious zeal present as an oppressive threat in the film. Additionally, the perspective distortion makes the looming cross look even taller.

*Figure 5 – Low-angle shot of a cross.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:09:29)

In a (2) high-angle shot, on the other hand, the camera is set in a higher position, thus being pointed downwards and showing the subject from above. Mamer (2009) describes this as the opposite of the low-angle shot in regard to its effects: characters and elements are often made to look insignificant when shown from this perspective (MAMER, 2009, p. 8). Another effect of this type of shot is that subjects may look intimidated or threatened (MAMER, 2009, p. 8).

For (3) the eye-level shot, the camera is positioned slightly above or below the eye-level of the subject being filmed, since filming directly at eye-level might be considered too

confrontational (MAMER, 2009, p. 9). This camera angle tends to put viewer and subject on equal positions, neither diminishing nor emphasizing the subject, much like the medium shot; as a result, it tends to offer a neutral perspective (MAMER, 2009, p. 9). In regard to (4) the bird's-eye view—or the overhead shot—, Mamer (2009) states that this is an extreme variation of the high-angle shot. To capture this type of shot, the camera is taken up into the air using aircrafts or cranes, then showing subjects directly from above. Much like the high-angle shot, this camera position also has the tendency to make people look insignificant; however, considering how far removed the camera is from the subject, the overhead shot has the added effect of making the subject look ant-like while attributing a somewhat omniscient, God-like quality to the perspective from which the viewer watches the sequence (MAMER, 2009, p. 9).

In a (5) the Dutch angle—or the oblique shot—, the camera is tilted on the horizontal axis rather than vertically, “[taking] the straight lines of the world and [presenting] them as diagonals” (MAMER, 2009, p. 9). The choice for this unlevel camera angle is conventionally associated with the representation of a world out of balance; however, extensive use might render it predictable and campy (MAMER, 2009, p. 9). Finally, (6) the point-of-view shot is used to represent the vantage point of a specific character, as if seen through their eyes. Since cameras and eyes work differently, with human vision shifting focus more often than a camera would, the use of this angle might attribute a sequence with a “maniacally focused” feel (MAMER, 2009, p. 10); Mamer (2009) argues that this characteristic accentuates the tension in chase scenes, with successful examples often seen in horror films (MAMER, 2009, p. 10).

Another set of techniques that pertains to the concept Verstraten (2009) describes as monstration (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 51) would be camera movement. By moving the camera, it is possible to show other elements and new compositions to the viewer with fluid transitions that have the additional effect of creating associations and even a sense of causality (MAMER, 2009, p. 11), thus making it an essential mode for storytelling in film (MAMER, 2009, p. 10). Conventionally, camera movement is created by using pans and tilts, dollies, and cranes.

A pan is a shot created by swiveling the camera horizontally, while a tilt is created by swiveling the camera on a vertical axis (MAMER, 2009, p. 10). Both are conventionally used to reveal and include either unknown or previously known elements into the frame. A dolly is a wheeled camera support that often runs on specialized tracks to reduce bumps during movement. With a forward or backward movement in relation to the subject, it can be used to switch between different proxemics, for example, alternating between a long shot displaying

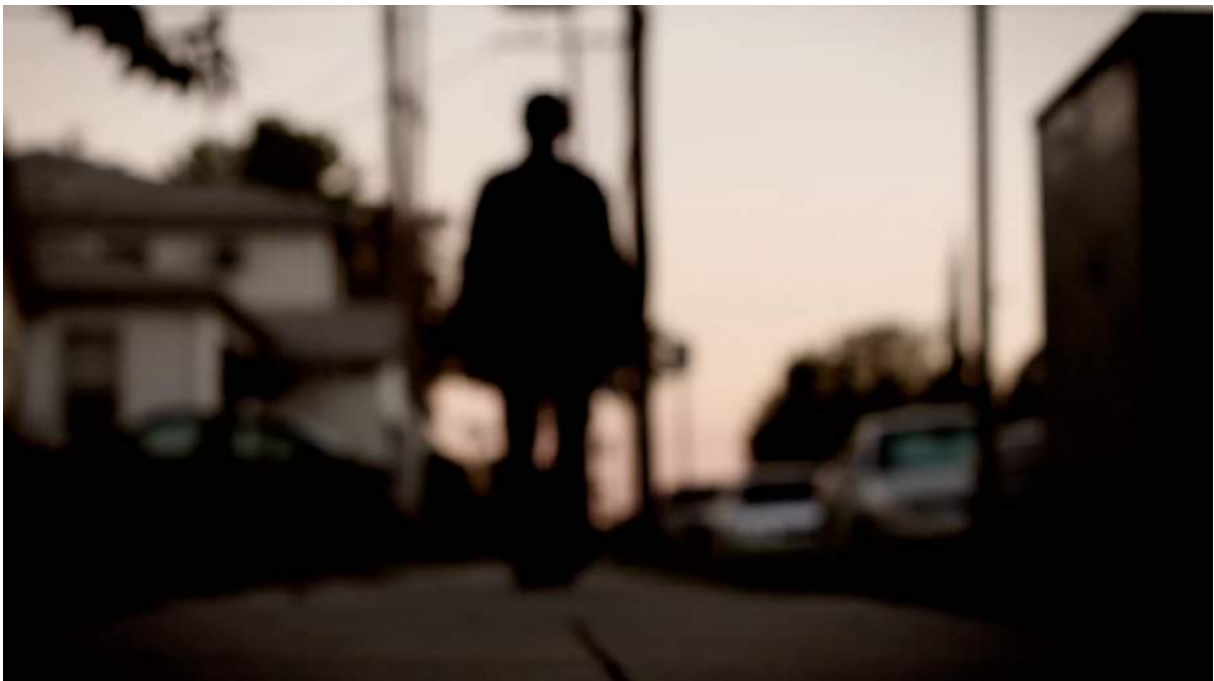
overspecific information and a close-up to highlight details. This specific movement, called a *push-in*, clarifies details, focuses on important elements, and amplifies emotion (MAMER, 2009, p. 12). The inverse movement, called a *pull-out*, disperses the focus of attention as it pulls away from characters to display wider spaces, thus offering the ability of revealing previously unseen elements, much like a pan (MAMER, 2009, p. 12). The dolly also has the ability of moving in front of, behind, or vertically along the action, following the subject's movement with fixed proxemics in what is called a tracking shot (MAMER, 2009, p. 13). By creating a smooth and fluid, continuous shot following an action, this movement eliminates the need of editing and cutting between scenes to put together a sequence, while also allowing for the possibility of depicting changes on the background while the character's position remains relatively the same in relation to the camera. Besides creating the effect of concurrent movement between viewer and subject, as if the former moved alongside with the latter, this type of camera movement can also be used to portray a character as being unaware of their surroundings (MAMER, 2009, p. 14). When it comes to the use of a crane—an elevating arm on a rolling vehicle—, on top of allowing for much the same possibilities as the dolly, the camera can be raised to create vertical movement as well, hence adding the ability of switching between different proxemics and angles (MAMER, 2009, p. 14).

The scope of techniques used in selective framing to convey cinematic description also includes *focus*, the effects of which can be subtle, to the point they are barely noticed by the audience, or so significant that they could warrant interpretation on a thematic level (MAMER, 2009, p. 19). Conventionally, different approaches define which sections of the frame stay sharp, that is, in focus (MAMER, 2009, p. 19–20), which in turn may affect how a film represents depth (BORDWELL; STAIGER; THOMPSON, 1988, p. 581). The approach most commonly employed in productions that favor realism is the *deep focus*, an optic effect that keeps all elements within the frame sharp, creating a deeper image that allows for complex, multilevel action with the same focus across foreground and background (MAMER, 2009, p. 19). Alternatively, different planes of focus can be applied across foreground and background to direct the viewers' attention to a specific part of the frame, suggesting “different planes of action both literally and figuratively” (MAMER, 2009, p. 20). This approach, known as *shallow focus*, creates a flatter, purposefully less realistic image whose play between sharp and soft focus can be used to

[Suggest] other planes of action without allowing them to dominate viewer attention[;] [to isolate] a subject in a space[;] [to suggest] that a subject lacks clarity[;] [to shift] focus for dramatic emphasis or to draw viewer attention to a specific part of the frame[;] [and to act] as a transition from one scene to the next (MAMER, 2009, p. 20).

One example of the possible thematic uses of focus can be seen in *Absentia* (2011), as per Figure 6. When Callie asks what Tricia thinks happened to Daniel, the widow discloses the theories with which she came up to imagine the missing husband is alive and well: he could have developed amnesia, wandering off not knowing who he was. The visual narrator shares her idealization with the viewer, portraying Daniel in soft focus to illustrate his lack of clarity.

*Figure 6 – Daniel walking away out of focus.*



(ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:09:02)

Regarding additional uses of focus, Mamer also describes the strategy of displaying the background out of focus to suggest peripheral action as being a common effect in film (MAMER, 2009, p. 20). This strategy adds a sense of realism to the scenes, showing the actions of characters and elements unrelated to the plotline instead of a sterile space; however, the use of a soft focus prevents the viewers' attention from diverting from the action driving the narrative (MAMER, 2009, p. 20). Additional effects may be achieved by adding movement to create *shifting focus*. As the camera or the subject moves, the focus shifts to accommodate the changes in the disposition of the elements within the frame (MAMER, 2009, p. 21). This action, described by Mamer (2009) as *rack focus*, is typically used to keep a moving subject in focus, but is often used as a transitional device between scenes, with a fade-out and fade-in effect, and

to shift focus from one element to another without the use of editing or camera movement (MAMER, 2009, p. 21).

### 3.2. FOCALIZATION AND IMPLIED PERCEPTION IN FILM

As for *focalization*, Verstraten (2009) takes into consideration the term first proposed by Gérard Genette (1990) in 1972. In *The Handbook of Narratology*, Burkhard Niederhoff states that Genette (1990) proposed the term *focalization* as a replacement for *perspective* and *point of view* (NIEDERHOFF, 2009, p. 115); according to the author, this narratological concept “may be defined as a selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the experience and knowledge of the narrator, the characters or other, more hypothetical entities in the storyworld” (NIEDERHOFF, 2009, p. 115).

In his work, Genette (1990) proposes three types—or degrees—of focalization: “zero”, “internal”, and “external focalization” (GENETTE, 1990, p. 189–190). The first corresponds to what is traditionally described in anglophone criticism as narration with an omniscient narrator; that is to say, a narrator whose knowledge exceeds what any of the characters know (GENETTE, 1990, p. 188–189). Genette (1990) describes the second term as being analogous to a “narrative with ‘point of view’, after Lubbock” (GENETTE, 1990, p. 189); in other words, a narrative in which the narrator’s knowledge is equal to what the characters know (GENETTE, 1990, p. 189). Finally, Genette (1990) describes the third term as akin to an *objective* or *behavioral* narrative: a narrative in which the narrator knows less than what the characters know (GENETTE, 1990, p. 189).

According to the work laid out by Genette (1990), a non-focalized narrative—or narrative with zero focalization—is a feature seen in what the author calls classical narrative (GENETTE, 1990, p. 189); this type of narrative “provides us with complete access to all the regions of the storyworld, including the characters’ minds” (NIEDERHOFF, 2009, p. 119). With internal focalization, the narrator knows as much as the character does while the narrative is unfolding, including his or her thoughts and feelings; compared to the description offered by Niederhoff (2009) about non-focalized narratives, in this instance, regions of the storyworld are only made known to the reader as the character explores them. Genette (1990) additionally states that internal focalization is “fully realized only in the narrative of ‘interior monologue’ [...]” (GENETTE, 1990, p. 193) owing to the fact that, to be applied in a strict way, the character on whom the narrative focalizes internally could never be described externally, as if seen from the outside, and his or her thoughts and feelings could never be analyzed objectively

by the narrator (GENETTE, 1990, p. 192). For this type of narrative, all information mediation can be centered around one character, in what Genette (1990) describes as fixed internal focalization; around alternating characters, a configuration dubbed by the author as variable internal focalization; or else, the information regarding the same event can be mediated around a number of different characters, which would consist of an instance of multiple internal focalization (GENETTE, 1990, p. 189). Finally, the third term—external focalization—would be exemplified in narratives in which the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings are never revealed to the reader as his or her actions unfold (GENETTE, 1990, p. 189). At this point, it is relevant to restate that Genette’s (1990) proposition aims to do away with the conflation of iterations of point of view based on physical perception—what is seen, heard, etc., by the characters—and what is known; as Niederhoff (2009) puts it, Genette (1990) proposes a category that would allow for analyses based on the selection or restriction of narrative information (NIEDERHOFF, 2009, p. 115).

Such an analysis of focalization does not need to consider the aforementioned formulas as a steady, continuous feature throughout the whole of a narrative, since, according to Genette (1990), any given formula of focalization may be perceived in specific narrative sections on occasion, however briefly, without necessarily dictating that ensuing sections bear the same logic (GENETTE, 1990, p. 191). Furthermore, the flexibility of these categories means that pointing out any one mode as a pure, most prominent type of focalization in a section is not always a clear-cut task (GENETTE, 1990, p. 191)—hence, neither is it something that a given analysis should strive to achieve; Genette (1990) draws attention to this complexification by stating that the same narrative passage can easily be considered external or internal focalization, given that the narrative might be focalized externally on a protagonist whose mind and thoughts are unfathomable just as well as it might be focalized internally on a confused witness whose knowledge about the unfolding situation is shared, but whose thoughts are not disclosed (GENETTE, 1990, p. 191). Since the terms proposed by the author deal in information and knowledge rather than perspective or point of view, the wording of a given passage or reconstruction by an actual reader might produce such an instance of ambivalent focalization without much of a theoretical shortcoming. Additionally, Genette (1990) indicates that the same order of complexification is true for variable internal focalization and zero focalization, since “the non-focalized narrative can most often be analyzed as a narrative that is multifocalized *ad libitum*, in accordance with the principle ‘he who can do most can do least’” (GENETTE, 1990, p. 192).

In considering how focalization could be appraised in cinema, it is important to have in mind that Hansen (2009) highlights the existence of contrasting codes for establishing objective and subjective perspectives in film. Regarding the former, the author states that classical cinematic standards favor the notion of an invisible observer, which could be described as zero focalization according to the author (HANSEN, 2009). Under this rationale, the narrative agent has knowledge that exceeds that of any character; if we consider that to be the case, zero focalization would account for instances in which the camera wanders to regions of the storyworld without the mediation of any character, as well as instances of shots that seem to be objective. As for the fact that the narrative agent does not venture into the characters' minds, except for occasions in which voice-over is used, one could consider this to be in accordance with the aforementioned principle "he who can do most can do least". Interesting examples of the possible use of zero focalization in horror films can be found in sequences displaying a character's attempt to escape the monster. The narrative agent often knows where the threat is and has the ability to share that location with the viewer while the character is kept in the dark. Using perceived objective shots, the narrative agent can show the monster in the negative space of the frame, looming behind the character while they are unaware of the danger. Additionally, the principle "he who can do most can do least" would explain the narrative agent's ability to limit the viewer's field of vision by hiding what the character sees, or heightening the tension in a scene by limiting what can be seen in the space around the character, creating apprehension over the possibility of an unexpected attack coming from a blind spot.

On the other hand, the apparent neutrality of an impartial representation of the world by the camera, despite being compelling, unveils intent in itself (MAMER, 2009, p. 10), after all, as pointed out by Hansen (2009), a *trick* objective perspective can be obtained when the audience is led to believe that the information being shared is conveyed impersonally through the use of "zooming and traveling cameras, where we approach the characters from a distance; [with] establishing shots in which the characters are not present, etc." (HANSEN, 2009). If we are to consider that the narrative is organized by a narrative agent, it is possible to assume that Verstraten's (2009) proposition that, in film, characters are often positioned, rather than position themselves (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 40), could implicate an instance of external focalization. In this configuration, the narrative agent on the visual track would know less than any of the characters, and the information disclosed to the viewer would be anchored on them. That would be the case even for objective shots, despite seemingly being impersonal, since, according to Hansen (2009), in a setting focalized externally, the audience is never shown

anything that cannot be connected to a character's domain (HANSEN, 2009). Regarding the appraisal of internal focalization in film, Hansen (2009) considers that it is possible to claim a filmic narrative is focalized internally when the use of shot/reverse shot and eyeline match points towards a subjective perspective; however, Verstraten points out that, while possible, internal focalization is always embedded in the external vision (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 41): even in a case of a subjective point-of-view shot, the camera's eye would still be dependent on and mediated by the visual narrator.

At this point, it must be considered that the concept of focalization established by Genette (1990), in doing precisely what it proposes *stricto sensu*, fails to offer a means to account for the representation of perspective and point of view in a narrative. These terms, however, are far from being dispensable as a device in an analysis, even more so when the object at hand is film, where the camera makes point of view a reality, rather than just a metaphorical concept (JOST, 2004, p. 74). Considering that Niederhoff (2009) makes a case for a relationship of coexistence between these terms (NIEDERHOFF, 2009, p. 121), moving forward in this study, the notion of perspective and point of view will be used to complement discussions about focalization. The concept proposed by Genette (1990) and discussed thus far will be used as a theoretical framework for focalization. When the notion of point of view is addressed henceforth, it is to be understood as a description of camera operation and positioning to create the subjective effect of looking through the character's eye, as the technique is described previously according to the work of Mamer (2009). Finally, the notion of perception will be addressed from the perspective proposed by François Jost (2004), particularly the notion of *ocularization*, which will be discussed below.

Jost (2004) proposed ocularization in an analysis of *comparative narratology* "to better comprehend a narrative category which functions equally well for the analysis of written as well as filmic narrative" (JOST, 2004, p. 71). The author takes issue with what he describes as a theoretical and critical "confusion between seeing and knowing" (JOST, 2004, p. 73) in discussions that employ and inevitably conflate the notions of "point of view", "vision", and "focalization". Since a narrative focalizes on a specific character or characters to restrict the information that is known or made available, in film, that is the "product of what one sees, what the character is presumed to be seeing, what he or she is presumed to know, what he or she says, and so forth" (JOST, 2004, p. 74). Hence, the new terminology suggested offers a device that would make an analysis similar to focalization possible, but on the visual track: separating what the camera, or the narrative agent shows and what can be presumed to be the characters'



visual perception, thus “determining the narrative value of what is shown by the camera” (JOST, 2004, p. 74).

The different degrees of ocularization are established considering the imaginary axis of the *locus* of visual perception—the camera—, and a perceived diegetic, seeing subject. In this rationale, either the audience considers the image to be the product of the perception of an actual, diegetic set of eyes, in which case the perspective is homodiegetic; or the position of the camera makes it so the audience cannot attribute the act of seeing in a shot to the subjects displayed in it, in which case the perspective is heterodiegetic. For the former, Jost (2004) describes a case of *internal ocularization*; for the latter, *zero ocularization* (JOST, 2004, p. 74).

According to the author, an instance of internal ocularization might be described either as primary or secondary. The first configuration is marked by the use of the point-of-view shot (MAMER, 2009, p. 10): a regarding look is suggested through camera movement, which might mimic a person’s gait by slightly rising and falling; additionally, the field of vision reproduces a more realistic vantage point, meaning that hands might be seen when they move in front of the field of vision, and legs are visible when the camera tilts down, but the body is not fully displayed, as per Figure 7 in a shot from *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968). Primary ocularization can also be manifested through the use of other camera operations, such as angles and focus that are not regarded as neutral to denote perceptual deformations: a low-angle shot might be used to represent the field of vision of a character lying down, and an image out of focus might be shown to represent conditions of drunkenness, to mention a few examples. (JOST, 2004, p. 75).

*Figure 7 – Point-of-view shot of Rosemary (Mia Farrow) climbing down a ladder.*



(ROSEMARY’S, 1968, 00:46:36)

Let us consider another scene from *Hereditary* (2018) to further our notion of how perspective and subjectivity can be approached. As Annie delivers a monologue about her guilt and grief after her mother's passing, the camera pulls back until the group's mediator marginally enters the frame, as per Figure 8. Even though the visual narrator provides the viewer with a perceived diegetic set of eyes, the field of vision does not reproduce a realistic point of view. In this over the shoulder shot, the mediator's body can be partially seen from behind—albeit diffuse because of the rack focus effect used; we can interpret this shot as a recess for the viewer from the intense proximity of the previous close-up shot, additionally, the mediator works as a stand-in of sorts, asking the questions the viewers themselves might have.

*Figure 8 – Secondary ocularization during Annie's monologue.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:22:41)

As for secondary ocularization, Jost (2004) considers the use of the shot/reverse shot principle to identify this configuration (JOST, 2004, p. 75). This concept is approached in Verstraten's work (2009) in combination with *suture theory*, a Lacanian concept employed in film studies that states that “[as] soon as a subject gains access to an entire field of meaning, it necessarily must sacrifice its untranslatable ‘being’ in the process” (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 88). Since “being” always falls outside the scope of representation, there is a constant and impossible desire for filling this space, characterizing a permanent “lack of being”. In conclusion, Verstraten (2009) explains that “[suture] signifies the process of ‘attachment’ in which a fulfilled wish masks itself as a satisfaction of the desire. Because this guise eventually turns out to be false, suture needs to be repeated continually in order to suppress the permanent void at the core of every subject” (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 88).

As it is employed in cinema, this concept concerns the empty spaces unavoidably left by the frame, since “[the] camera cannot register anything but a limited view” (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 88) and “the biggest ‘gap’ remains in the area directly behind the camera” (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 88). According to the author, the shot/reverse shot principle used to bridge the gap left by the camera’s limitation works on a three-part plan: first, the camera ‘looks’ at someone, or something; second, the spectator watches the film; third, shots of the characters looking are linked through eyeline match to shots of the object of the character’s gaze (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 87–88). That is, when a character is shown looking at something, he/she occupies the frame and is effectively the object of the camera’s eye; next, a reverse shot is presented matching the angle and position of the character’s eyeline, and “the principle of the eyeline match holds that the content of the first shot corresponds to the perspective of the character in the second” (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 88). This order is, however, not a fixed rule; these reverse shots can come in different dispositions or be altogether absent (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 97–98). According to Jost (2004), this technique is indicative of an instance of secondary ocularization because “[any] image that is edited together with a shot of a person looking, within the rules of cinematic “syntax,” will be “anchored” in the visual subjectivity of that person or character” (JOST, 2004, p. 75), which is described by Hansen (2009) as a character’s domain. With reference to the use of shot/reverse shot, Verstraten (2009) further states that “[when] shown two separate shots back to back, the viewer tends to assume there is a narrative relation between those two shots. When you show a bowl of soup followed by a shot of a man’s face [...] a connection is almost automatically made: it looks as if this person might be hungry” (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 89). Furthermore, the author states that this theory explains the identification process in film: since the viewer sees events more or less from a character’s perspective, they are inclined to feel sympathy for such character (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 90).

Regarding zero ocularization, Jost (2004) states that this configuration can be identified “when the image is not seen by any entity within the diegesis” (JOST, 2004, p. 75). With the use of establishing shots in which the characters are not present, as described by Hansen (2009) in his discussion about zero focalization in film, coupled with camera operations that are considered neutral, such as the medium shot, eye-level shot, and leveled camera (MAMER, 2009, p. 10), this type of ocularization can easily be considered objective and be associated with “the instance which seems to organize and execute both the representation and the story” (JOST, 2004, p. 76)—the narrator on the visual track. Despite the apparent neutrality of these

shots, yet again we must consider that the characters are often positioned (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 40), lest we fall for the fallacy that the camera “plays no active role in the representation [and] copies reality without changing it” (JOST, 2004, p. 72). According to Jost (2004), there is a prevalence of zero ocularization in most films even in scenes in which characters recount their own stories in flashbacks (JOST, 2004, p. 76), a proposition corroborated by Schlickers (2009), who states that “conventional flashback-structure first shows the character in zero ocularization and only then slides into this character’s visualized flashback which itself is mediated in zero ocularization” (SCHLICKERS, 2009, p. 249).

In addition to the aspects discussed thus far, it is important to consider another element at the narrative agent’s disposal: sound. In the words of Schlickers (2009), “as a narrative agent, the ‘camera’ can track sound as well as images, which means it is not limited to ‘showing’ only” (SCHLICKERS, 2009, p. 245). According to Michel Chion and Claudia Gorbman (2019), it is not uncommon for cinema to be thought of as a visual medium and for sound to be regarded simply as a complement to the image (CHION; GORBMAN, 2019, p. 32); however, as highlighted by Verstraten (2009), the relation between sound and image is not one of superiority privileging any one side of the axis (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 130). As such, we must now direct our attention to the use of sound in film. Authors such as Rick Altman (1992), William Whittington (2014), and Chion and Gorbman (2019) approach the topic with discussions about production aspects and sound design, as well as the use of sound as a driving force in filmic description and narrative progression, for example; while the importance of these studies is undeniable, the sheer breadth of this approach makes its implementation unfeasible in this analysis. Hence, considering the focus of this research on affect and perspective, this line of investigation will not be explored; instead, we will favor the use of soundtrack as a catalyst for emotion and the concept of *auricularization*.

According to Jean Châteauvert (1990), the term *auricularization* was proposed by François Jost in conjunction with ocularization in his work *L'OEil – Caméra: Entre film et roman* in 1987. With his discussion about comparative narratology, Jost aimed to bridge the areas that he found wanting if narratology is to be used as a general theory that covers narrative in all media formats (JOST, 2017, p. 5–6). The author’s proposition for this concept is analogous to that offered for ocularization, that is, he distinguishes three forms of auditory perspective (SCHLICKERS, 2009, p. 250). This division is also centered around an imaginary axis of the *locus* of aural perception, that is to say, whether the audience can attribute the perception of sound to an actual, diegetic set of ears, in which case the perspective is

homodiegetic; or the perception of sound cannot be attributed to the act of hearing of any subjects displayed in a scene, in which case the perspective is heterodiegetic. As it is proposed by the author, the homodiegetic instance can be described as *primary internal auricularization*, a configuration in which distortions anchor the sound to a subjective perception; and *secondary internal auricularization*, which would be manifest when the subjectivity is established by the visual context. Finally, the heterodiegetic instance can be described as *zero auricularization*, a configuration in which the act of hearing cannot be attributed to any subject in the diegesis (CHÂTEAUVERT, 1990, p. 113).

Schlickers (2009) claims that zero auricularization is “indeterminate and extradiegetic” (SCHLICKERS, 2009, p. 250), thus encompassing soundtrack, since it consists of sounds that are not anchored on the characters’ perception and are heard only by the viewer. Despite not affecting the story world directly, the importance of soundtrack cannot be overstated. Claudia Gorbman (1987) maintains that its presence in film is so pervasive that it is considered a natural, invisible dimension of cinema by most moviegoers. Nonetheless, despite not being “very consciously perceived, [music] inflects the narrative with emotive values via cultural musical codes” (GORBMAN, 1987, p. 4). Lest we fall for the fallacy of neutrality, the author highlights that film music is not merely incidental, but designed to elicit affects in the audience (GORBMAN, 1987, p. 5), “[setting] moods and tonalities [...], [guiding] the spectator's vision both literally and figuratively” (GORBMAN, 1987, p. 11). Perhaps, more importantly, Gorbman (1987) considers that “[music] lessens defenses against the fantasy structures to which narrative provides access. It increases the spectator's susceptibility to suggestion” (GORBMAN, 1987, p. 5). As a signifier of emotion, the soundtrack chosen to accompany a given sequence has the power to set specific moods and emphasize the emotions suggested in the narrative (GORBMAN, 1987, p. 73), to the extent that music cannot be regarded merely as a complement to the images shown, but rather “as augmenting the external representation, the objectivity of the image-track, with its inner truth” (GORBMAN, 1987, p. 79).

### 3.3. *UNRELIABILITY*

The formal aspects described thus far can be used to influence the viewer's perception of a character or space with low or high-angle shots, for example; an otherwise unassuming character might be visually depicted as threatening, an ordinary building might be made to look looming. Adding in the aural dimension to a sequence, mundane events can be made to feel disturbing, imbued with malevolent intent. Considering the different possibilities of showing things objectively, through a character's implied visual and aural perception, or otherwise playing with different degrees of knowledge, the narrative agent has an assortment of tools to manipulate the way events are interpreted by the viewer. As a result, it can be argued that by using the techniques described in the previous section, the narrative agent has the potential to instill hesitation and maintain the balance between notions of possible/impossible realities throughout the horror narratives of this corpus, making the audience experience uncertainty with the intent of keeping characters and spectators guessing whether the threat is real.

If we consider that such techniques are employed to fulfill aesthetic purposes, we must ponder on the importance of the portrayal of a character's perception of reality in the diegesis. Having perception at issue, it could prove useful to include Uri Margolin's discussion on how the presentation of perceptual missteps has a major role to play in the portrayal of the mind in action (MARGOLIN, 2011, p. 61). In his essay about the subject, the author states that readers, or in our case, spectators, make use of the representation of the inner workings of the human mind in pieces of imagination to obtain insights into the way their own minds work, as well as those of others (MARGOLIN, 2011, p. 62). For the films to be analyzed here, the protagonists' journey is one of finding out whether the rules of common daily life still apply and there is a normal explanation, or the normal is an illusion, and the world is governed by unknown and supernatural rules, which could work as an extrapolation for moments in which people feel that their perception fails them as a silhouette of an object in a badly lit room could be perceived as something else.

Margolin considers that perception is the central point of connection between self and world (2011, p. 64), and if we consider that to be true, we must also consider that this intersection is teeming with possibilities for anxiety and dread. In his words, "[the] one pole is purely physical stimuli: light of different intensity reflected off surfaces in the external world and impinging on our retina. The other pole is purely mental: the world as envisioned by us, our internal representation of our life world as experienced by us" (MARGOLIN, 2011, p. 65). In real life, a delay or a misstep in this exchange between physical and mental recognition often

is the cause of a scare and makes many a heart skip a beat: a coat hanging on a coat hanger seen from the corner of the eye could look like an otherworldly sighting. The author exemplifies this by stating that if we take literature's many depictions as examples, it is possible to establish that when something goes wrong with our standard sense experience, the world ceases to be familiar (MARGOLIN, 2011, p. 65).

Margolin further sustains that the portrayal of the perception process as daunting or difficult is actively fabricated by authors when the correspondence of a character's achieved object representation is questioned (2011, p. 67) and readers and characters themselves are confronted with "how much of it corresponds to the outside story world, how much is an illusion and how much [...] stems from delusion or hallucination" (MARGOLIN, 2011, p. 67). This active attempt can be seen in cinema as well, where screenplay, direction and editing control pace and development of a narrative. Let us consider *Absentia*, Tricia's perception process can be interpreted as compromised due to her grief over finally ruling her husband as legally dead *in absentia*. This possibility is validated in the narrative by her psychiatrist, who underscores her psychological suffering and guilt for moving on with her life. In this sense, visions of her husband are the sign of a mind processing grief. As for Callie, the sister, her history of substance abuse offers a possible explanation for the missteps in perception. In *Hereditary*, the perception process is possibly hindered by the mental condition of the protagonist, who could be either going through an episode of psychotic delusion triggered by the recent trauma experienced by her, or experiencing hallucinations due to her previous disorder. Finally, in *The Lodge*, the viewer could interpret Grace's perception process as difficult over the fact that her medication goes missing, forcing upon her a period of withdrawal and acclimation to a change in brain chemistry. On top of that, the religious dogmas and beliefs from her time of indoctrination by an extreme zealous cult are reactivated. Be what it may, the split between physical and internal perception plays a paramount role in the tension created in the fabula.

The critic further develops his argumentation by describing how the process of perception is skewed and played with

[...] [First] of all, the near instantaneous process is slowed down considerably, becoming durative rather than punctual. [...] Beyond this point authors have the choice to portray the stage as proceeding unhindered [...] or to make it tenuous and problematic by introducing one or more of the following: hesitation, difficulty, ambiguity, trial and error (self-correction), error, or most radically, failure, leading to the disruption or interruption of the sequence of processing stages [...]. (MARGOLIN, 2011, p. 67)

For Margolin, this endeavor is carried out with the intent of peeling away the supposed automaticity of a process that is considered obvious and straightforward (MARGOLIN, 2011, p. 66). He considers that “[once] perception is portrayed as a daunting task for a story-world participant, it loses its air of familiarity and obviousness for the reader observing this activity” (2011, p. 66) and said reader focuses instead on the characters’ perceptual activity to monitor it, engaging in a ludic meta-cognitive activity, that is, “cognition whose object is some facet of cognition” (MARGOLIN, 2011, p. 67), making the spectator aware that perception is not a seamless fabric (MARGOLIN, 2011, p. 66).

When it comes to cinema, it could be assumed that the subjectivity of the perceiving process is hindered by the medium itself, since textual and visual descriptions are carried out differently; as a result, perception is possibly portrayed as difficult with the aid of different perspectives. For the corpus in this study: both in *Absentia* and *Hereditary*, the protagonist has an encounter with the supernatural and people close to them dissuade them by questioning the veracity of the report; in *The Lodge* this dynamic is shifted, but still present: the protagonist tries to resist the perceived new reality while the people around her are convinced of the supernatural nature of the events. Additionally, the mental stability of the protagonists is questioned by the disclosure of a mental illness history, past trauma, or substance abuse. It is possible to suppose that once the spectator realizes that the protagonist’s perception could be skewed, they engage in what Margolin (2011) describes as a ludic meta-cognitive activity, a synthetic aspect of the narrative, to use the concept introduced by Phelan (1989, p. 2), that adds a second layer of anxiety and unrest: not only does the spectator have to process the possible existence of the supernatural, but they are also presented with the question of whether they can trust what is seen.

Dan Shen describes narratological studies regarding unreliability as largely divided into two groups: the rhetorical and the cognitive/constructivist approaches (SHEN, 2014, p. 897). According to the author

The first group [...] treats unreliability as a textual property encoded by the implied author for the implied reader to decode [...]. By contrast, the second group [...] focuses on the interpretive process and regards unreliability as being dependent on actual readers’ divergent readings for its very existence (SHEN, 2014, p. 897).

Over the course of this research, the constructivist approach laid out by Tamar Yacobi will be favored over the rhetoric, since, as stated by Shen, the latter deals with “one type of textual incongruity—the gap between narrator and implied author [...]” (SHEN, 2014, p. 902, highlights in the original). Considering that there is no conflict in terms of critical coverage



between both approaches (SHEN, 2014, p. 902), some attention will be directed to formal elements, nevertheless the concept of the implied author will be altogether dismissed.

Yacobi's approach treats unreliability as a perspectival hypothesis which attributes incongruities to a source of transmission as a result of strategies used by readers to solve textual tensions (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 402). Meir Sternberg describes these strategies as integration mechanisms, "the large variety of measures (prosodic or syntactic or thematic, say, as well as genetic) available to humans for establishing coherence, regardless of functional sense and sense-making" (STERNBERG, 2012, p. 371). This quest for coherence emphasizes on the conditions for intelligibility and the interplay between coherence-promoting and coherence-resisting factors, insofar as it is integration that enables the text to hold together (STERNBERG, 2012, p. 406). Furthermore, the critic considers that a theory of integration must take into equal consideration any element that resolves or ambiguates any pattern in the text at hand (STERNBERG, 2012, p. 408). Hence, one must consider the importance of elements such as textual dimensions (the phonic, the lexical, the grammatical, the thematic, the communicative, etc.) as well as compositional principles (analogy, implicature, logical and chronological sequence) and operations, such as sound, word, clause, idea, and dialogic turn, whose synthetization results in intelligibility (STERNBERG, 2012, p. 407).

Integration mechanisms comprehend the assimilation process of troublesome or unrelated discourse elements that establish or undermine coherence, thus "even a piece of language that is deviant to the point of virtual incoherence (as autonomous speech garbled by you or me in the real world) may cohere on more than one level within a fictional context [...]" (STERNBERG, 2012, p. 412), covering "everything, on any level of the text, that requires, invites, or allows assimilation to some pattern in some beholder's eye" (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 403).

In their work "(Un)reliability in narrative discourse: a comprehensive overview", Sternberg and Yacobi employ integration, "the widest framework of our mind's structuring activity" (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015, p. 403), to approach reliability—or the lack thereof—as a reading possibility attained by the receiver. Towards this goal, the authors suggest a set of six integration mechanisms that, when used in combination or individually, help shed light onto the sense-making process behind the judgment of a text as reliable or not. Considering the nature of integration, this set does not exhaust all the integrational possibilities of the human mind and is not considered complete or closed (STERNBERG, 2012, p. 407).

These six mechanisms are (1) the genetic, (2) the generic, (3) the functional, (4) the existential, (5) the perspectival, and (6) the figurative one. The (1) genetic mechanism solves incongruities in the text by attributing them to the creation process, both as a product of possible author's failings that have gone uncorrected or later problems during revision, publication, distribution. The (2) generic mechanism attributes textual tensions to the conventions of the genre of which the text is a part and considers incongruities to stem from stylistic compliance. The (3) functional mechanism attributes incongruities to their functional value to a work of fiction; the existence of such peculiarities is considered to fulfill aesthetic and thematic purposes. The (4) existential mechanism explains incongruities in a work of fiction due to the unusual, culturally different, anachronic, futuristic, supernatural, or alien nature of the fictional world depicted. The (5) perspectival mechanism attributes incongruities to the mediator's deficient, unlikely, or unusual perspective, meaning that the subject through whose perspective the world is described is either at fault or speaks from an unexpected vantage point. Finally, the (6) figurative mechanism is at use when discursive oddities are resolved by interpreting the unusual language use to be metaphorical or allegorical, in that archaic expressions might lead a modern reader to interpret the passage as a figurative use; and figurative uses in themselves can be integrated as different or even opposing allegories by different readers.

Considering that the corpus selected for this study is composed of horror films and thus subscribes to at least some of the genre conventions, it is to be expected that the use of the generic mechanism to solve incongruities in the narrative might lead, in part, to either the resolution of narrative ambiguity or a verdict towards unreliability; since it is assumed here that ambiguity in these films serves aesthetic purposes, it can be expected as well that the functional mechanism also applies, as will be discussed in later sections. Given that the plot in all three films revolves around people with mental health conditions, history of substance abuse, or overall psychological states that hinder the perception process, a viewer might consider the protagonists to be unreliable, thus solving narrative tensions in these films by applying the perspectival mechanism. These three mechanisms could be applied individually or in different combinations.

The integration mechanisms proposed by Sternberg and Yacobi (2015) can easily be employed in an analysis of cinema; nonetheless, it is necessary to address the discussion regarding unreliability in film studies. Ferenz, for one, argues that in film, the concept of narrative unreliability can only be adequately employed when dealing with pseudo-diegetic character-narrators (2005, p. 135), that is, characters who appear to be the source of what is

shown. On the other hand, Hansen points out that authors such as David Bordwell, George M. Wilson and Gregory Currie “have applied the concept to films with non-personalised narrators where important omissions of information lead the spectator to draw his or her own or false conclusions as the film progresses” (HANSEN, 2009). The author further argues that unreliability is a feature also found in third-person narration, rather than being restricted to first-person narrators (HANSEN, 2009). This is relevant for the present research, since there is a prevalence of narration with zero focalization in film (JOST, 2004, p. 76), moreover, this is also the case in the films analyzed here.

Furthermore, considering Sternberg's proposition that synthetization of multiple compositional principles and operations results in intelligibility (STERNBERG, 2012, p. 407), we must consider that even the title of a film in itself could direct the viewers' opinion: that is the case with *Hereditary* (2018); since perception is at issue because of the ambiguity between psychological and supernatural explanations, viewers might strongly favor a psychological resolution on the grounds of a chronic psychiatric condition. The film opens with a note about Ellen Taper Leigh's passing. With this note, the viewer learns that the woman suffered from a prolonged illness, which is later disclosed to be Dissociative identity disorder (henceforth addressed as *DID*) and age-associated dementia. In the following paragraphs, we will briefly discuss the traits of such condition in hopes that it might contribute to the overall theme regarding unreliability in the film. It should be made clear that the use of these descriptions is not meant to diagnose the characters, but rather to work as a tool with which to assess deviance from behavior that would be considered neurotypical in a real-world setting.

The condition referred to as DID is “[...] characterized by a disruption of and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control, and behavior” (AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, 2013, p. 291). The diagnostic criteria laid out by the DSM-V describes some symptoms of DID as analogous to the experience of possession, and individuals going through an episode may describe it as a lack of control and/or agency over their body, behaviors, emotions, and even thoughts. Cases of possession-form identities “manifest as behaviors that appear as if a ‘spirit,’ supernatural being, or outside person has taken control, such that the individual begins speaking or acting in a distinctly different manner” (AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, 2013, p. 293). An individual experiencing this condition might feel as though their body has been taken over by someone who already died, and speak and act as though said person were still alive (AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION,

2013, p. 293). People suffering from this condition often report experiencing flashbacks with sensory reliving of previous events as if they were happening in the present with partial or complete loss of contact with reality during the flashback (AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, 2013, p. 294).

It also bears mentioning that in real-life settings, some individuals seemingly without an underlying mental condition might be triggered by stressors—an emotional or physical factor that disrupts the normal cognitive, emotional, or behavioral balance of an individual. These episodes may be associated with the onset, occurrence, or exacerbation of a mental disorder (AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, 2013, p. 829)—additionally, they may cause brief periods of psychotic symptoms (AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, 2013, p. 96), which are marked by the presence of delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, and abnormal motor behavior. Since the psychological explanation for the events in the corpus of films selected for this research would implicate the onset of either a mental illness episode or a brief period of psychosis, the characteristics of the four symptoms mentioned will be discussed shortly: *delusions* are characterized by fixed beliefs (falling outside of behavior considered normal) that cannot be dissuaded even with evidence to the contrary; *hallucinations* are characterized by vivid and clear perception-like experiences unmotivated by external stimuli and can manifest as any of the five senses; *disorganized speech* is characterized by derailment, or obliquely related or completely unrelated loose associations; finally, *abnormal motor behavior* is characterized by repeated stereotyped movements, staring, grimacing, mutism, and the echoing of speech (AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, 2013, p. 87–88).

It could be argued that the psychological explanation would have the viewer of *Hereditary* (2018) attribute Peter's experience as a result of trauma and the exacerbation of DID. His fateful possession could be explained taking into consideration the common symptoms described for the condition. Regarding Annie, her experience could be explained as the symptoms of brief psychotic disorder. Apparitions would be explained as visual and auditory hallucinations; her conviction in the plot to harm her family would be explained as persecutory delusion; even the moments in which she replies by confirming if people are talking about Charlie could be explained as disorganized speech. Additionally, she grimaces and makes facial movements and expressions that could be considered stereotyped, thus falling into the abnormal motor behavior category.

In *Absentia* (2011), the possible interpretations would either involve the existence of an insectoid monster in the underpass or Callie's history with substance abuse. Additionally, some emphasis is given to Tricia's grieving process as a possible cause of the sightings of her missing husband as a ghoulish apparition. This psychological explanation is relayed to the audience by a mental health professional in the diegesis. The drug to which Callie is addicted is not disclosed, but the moment when she is supposedly shown under the influence, as per Figure 9, seems to be compatible with descriptions of heroin use: the National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that after the initial surge of pleasure, users will usually be lethargic and feel drowsy for several hours (WHAT, 2018, p. 4).

It is worth mentioning that research on the area points out that opiate abuse does not seem to trigger psychosis; it is rather withdrawal from these substances that seems to be correlated with psychotic breaks when these cases happen (MAREMMANI A. G. I. et al, 2014, p. 294). Be as it may, whether Callie's portrayal has grounds on proven science is not at issue for this study. Since drug use is commonly associated with altered states of mind and is depicted in the film as a potential explanation for the seemingly impossible situations Callie describes, we shall consider the effects to be akin to the descriptions offered above about delusions and hallucinations.

*Figure 9 – View of Callie after relapsing into drug use.*



(ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:52:07)

When it comes to *The Lodge* (2019), as mentioned previously, Grace refuses to believe in the possible supernatural explanation for the unnerving events that take place in the family

cabin. Nevertheless, the hesitation between psychological and supernatural resolutions is maintained by Grace's attempt at resisting falling back onto religious discourse and belief in the afterlife and the consequences of sin, and her lack of mental clarity is explained due to her medication going missing. Coupled with the stress of being stranded with low to no resources to weather the extreme winter, there is enough reason to believe that she could undergo a brief psychotic episode.

Regarding the approach to portray these missteps in perception and to create tension, we must consider the discussion held in previous sections following the work of David Church (2021). According to the author, one of the stylistic characteristics of post-horror is its covert representation of monstrosity (CHURCH, 2021, p. 16). As a result of this minimalistic approach, the nature of these narratives is more perceptibly rooted in hesitation. The author observes that films in this trend tend to feature monsters wearing a human guise, or monsters that are barely visible, if shown at all. Thus, with a stylistic strategy that is closer to Todorov's "fantastic genre", the ambiguity in these films is described as not being resolved by explaining "uncanny" events with rationalizing elucidation (CHURCH, 2021, p. 16).

Our analysis of the corpus of films selected for this research will be informed by the work of Urbano (1998). The author states that the intended effect of the horror genre cannot be achieved with one strategy alone, thus describing four strategies that he claims to work best together. He names these strategies as (1) the representation of the uncanny, (2) the representation of the monster, (3) the *mise-en-scène* of violent physical assault, and (4) the *mise-en-scène* of the trauma of birth. Urbano points out that these strategies are often seen used in combination on the same given sequence but can nonetheless be distinguished in theoretical perspective (1998, p. 890). As such, for the purpose of selecting which scenes will be analyzed, we will consider the overall effect of these strategies individually.

According to Urbano (1998), the first strategy can be seen in the many formats described by Freud (2001) in his essay about the uncanny. The important aspect to be considered in this strategy is the fact that the figuration of the uncanny never causes much impact and has somewhat a static nature (URBANO, 1998, 890); it sets the atmosphere that the film will not be a romcom. Therefore, scenes that fall under this strategy must feature monsters, doubles, shadows, ghosts, supernatural sightings, mirrors, or reflections, as well other culturally loaded tropes that indicate a risk of fragmentation of identity and a threat to values. The soundtrack will also be considered due to its possibility of augmenting the affects associated with what is shown on the screen, as observed in the previous review of Gorbman's work (1987).

Turning away from the use of frightening graphical images, we must then consider the use of figurations of the uncanny to create the haunting atmosphere and lingering dread. According to Freud (2001), the uncanny, or *Das Unheimliche*, is the feeling opposite to that which is familiar, associated or belonging to the *I*. In his essay, he suggests that this feeling does not only comprehend that which is unfamiliar, but also that which is familiar but should have remained hidden or unseen by the *I*. This is specifically important for the analysis carried out here, because according to psychoanalysis, this feeling is something that humans frequently experience as a natural response to elements that pose a threat to the ego. The presence of uncanny elements in horror films in general can be very extensive, because as Freud (2001) points out, these instances comprehend, among other elements, the classic fear and discomfort caused by the double and its representation in literature as shadows, reflections, ghosts, guardian angels, and the fear of death.

Considering the work of Rahimi (2013) and his reading of Lacan's mirror stage, we can further understand the connection of uncanny elements in visual and ocular terms. According to the analysis proposed by Rahimi (2013), the recognition and projection of the *I* in the mirror is a protective measure that creates a sense of totality and offers the comfort of a sense of visual identity; however, the identification attained in the mirror stage is an illusion, and because it is an imaginary construct, it also creates the roots of the double. That means that any threat to the stability of the identity logic—that which keeps the unit of internal experience and the identity *Gestalt* with the mirror image unified—has a potential for being horrific or uncanny, because it has the potential to unveil the original lie that the image and the *I* are a unit. Whether or not these instances are presented in association with a monster, the double, shadows, ghosts, or other supernatural sightings, as well as mirrors and reflections are a portend of the possibility of the ego unraveling and the fragmentation of identity.

The second strategy depicts the monster in a scene in which it is simultaneously the central focus of both spectator and protagonist in a shot that is meant to show its destructive potential before the audience and the protagonist get a chance to see its devastating prowess empirically (URBANO, 1998, p. 891). Considering Church's description (2021) of post-horror and its common traits, we must weigh in the visually marginal status of the monster in these films; thus, in selecting the scenes that will populate this strategy, we will consider visual depictions of monstrosity as well as more subtle indications, such as characters' actions and perception.

Urbano states that the third strategy consists of a violent assault on the protagonist, but its main intention is to build suspense (1998, p. 893). It is possible to say that, as originally proposed, this strategy describes sequences in which the cinematography employed during the encounter of victim and monster is used to heighten a sense of threat and dread of a physical attack, and how the narrative agent negotiates to which field of vision it will grant access, and to whom—with the use or absence of a reverse shot, for example. The engagement and tension elicited in scenes that fall under this strategy arise from the possibility of keeping information hidden from the protagonist and sharing it with the audience, or doing the opposite. This entails the process of producing scenes that elicit that very characteristic feeling in horror films that the protagonist is facing the wrong direction and the threat is right behind them, or that the protagonist is inadvertently going towards their doom. The concept Urbano (1998) proposes for this strategy will be appropriated in our analysis to select scenes that depict direct violence from the monster, or the threat thereof. The fundamental difference to be considered between this and the second strategy is the fact that for these scenes, the depiction of the monster and its potential for violence must be more dynamic rather than static.

Finally, Urbano describes the last strategy as the moment when there is a sense that an unstoppable threat is approaching, that complete loss of control is near, and that things could metaphorically or literally explode (1998, p. 894). The sequences that fall under this strategy tend to feature more aggression from the monster than the previous one, with an overwhelming apprehension for the imminent “re-creation of the overpowering and emotionally unmanageable trauma of birth” (URBANO, 1998, p. 902). Therefore, the scenes selected for fitting this strategy must be depictions of “utter helplessness” (URBANO, 1998, p. 902). Having selected scenes from the three films that fit these four different moments, the technical and methodological framework introduced previously will be employed to suggest common uses of cinematography and narrative strategies to give rise to ambiguity and hesitation.



#### 4. CLOSE READING

In this chapter, an analysis of the three films selected to form the corpus of this research will be carried out with the intent of describing the use of cinematography to elicit ambiguous readings and hesitation in the viewer, and how the narrative agent negotiates the tension between supernatural and real-world plausibility. The formal elements used in these films will be considered to suggest the possibility of representation of missteps in perception and their connection with narrative tension. These three films have complex plots and character dynamics, as such, each would warrant an in-depth analysis in their own right; nonetheless, for the sake of appreciating possible common strategies for eliciting ambiguity and unreliability, our analysis will focus on specific points and scenes. Such scenes have been selected using the strategies proposed by Urbano (1998) that can help exemplify ambiguating instances in the narratives. On top of dividing this chapter in four sections corresponding to each strategy, the discussion will be structured considering each film individually, in order of year of release.

*Absentia* (2011) follows sisters Tricia (Courtney Bell) and Callie (Katie Parker) as the former deals with the legal proceedings to apply for a ruling of death in absentia for her missing husband, Daniel (Morgan Peter Brown). After at least five years going in and out of multiple rehabilitation institutions across the country, Callie comes back to her sister's house in California to offer support as Tricia, now pregnant, tries to officially close Daniel's case after the necessary seven-year wait time has elapsed. For Tricia, this process also includes collecting and burning all the missing person's flyers that she had been continuously replacing around the neighborhood, as well as finding a new apartment to strive for a fresh start. Her attempts at overcoming the loss and grief, and trying to open up to a new romantic interest, however, are disrupted by a string of nightmares and sightings of her now ghoulish husband. Besides being either revealed to be dreams or depicted as brief moments not witnessed by other characters, the possibility of there being a psychological explanation to these events is reinforced by the fact that Tricia's therapist believes that this is nothing but a manifestation of her subconscious struggling to let go.

In the meantime, Callie also has an unexplainable encounter while jogging around the neighborhood and going through an underpass nearby. These events are triggered by her meeting a pale and starved Walter Lambert (Doug Jones), who she mistakes for a homeless person. Having been missing for many years, Walter is surprised that Callie can see him. Matters are further complicated when the missing husband unexpectedly shows up at Tricia's

door, only to be abducted again shortly after. The only witness to the attack is Callie; however, having relapsed into drug use, her report is discredited as drug-induced hallucination. Determined to prove that she is telling the truth, she begins investigating the area, and as it turns out, the tunnel near the house was built on top of a naturally occurring sinkhole connected to several accounts of disappearances going back a hundred years. In the narrative, the place is associated with the tale *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, a story about a bridge guarded by a troll; only in this case, it is revealed by Daniel that the supernatural sentinel is an insectoid who moves through the walls. After reclaiming Daniel, the monster comes back once more to abduct Tricia as well. Once again, Callie is the only witness, thus the whole account is discredited. Seeing no other option to save her sister, Callie decides to face the monster and offer herself in exchange for Tricia. The creature accepts the trade; however, Callie gets the short end: the person returned is Tricia's unborn fetus. The film ends with the detective responsible for the investigation conjecturing what could have happened, whether they were murdered by a local criminal, or simply took off without letting anyone know. However, this possible open ending is cut short by a shot of Callie staring at the street from the tunnel's threshold as an insect leg rests on her shoulder.

*Hereditary* (2018) shows the struggles of a family dealing with loss and grief. Annie (Toni Collette) loses her mother, Ellen Taper Leigh (Kathleen Chalfant), to an undisclosed ailment. Ellen had been suffering from old-age related health issues, besides a lifetime of struggles against DID. After losing her mother, Annie and her family also have to deal with the tragic death of Charlie (Milly Shapiro), Annie's daughter. The girl loses her life after going to a party against her will due to her mother's insistence. The film establishes from the very first scenes that Charlie is allergic to peanuts, an exposition that spells tragedy. After a close-up of hands vigorously chopping nuts, Peter (Alex Wolff), unaware of the danger, bids his sister to go eat cake to get himself a chance to talk to a girl from school. Not having brought an epinephrine autoinjector to prevent an anaphylactic shock, Peter must then hurry to the hospital to save his sister. The siblings get involved in a car accident caused by Peter's hard swerving off the road while Charlie had her head out of the window, trying desperately to gasp for air. This shocking and gruesome death takes a huge toll on Annie and Peter, and their relationship becomes even more estranged. Following these events, the family becomes seemingly haunted and both Annie and Peter experience supernatural encounters. Conversely, Steve (Gabriel Byrne)—Annie's husband—is skeptical and believes Annie is having a relapse on her mental condition. Although the balance in this ambiguity is kept during most of the narrative, it could

be argued that there are strong indications of the actual existence of a scheme to fabricate the tragic outcome, reinforcing the interpretation that the film's end favors the supernatural explanation.

In *The Lodge* (2019), the viewer follows the story of another family torn by tragedy. Couple Richard (Richard Armitage) and Laura Hall (Alicia Silverstone) have recently broken up; while Richard is easily bouncing back and has started a new relationship, Laura is having a hard time overcoming the end of their marriage. After dropping their kids, Aiden (Jaeden Martell) and Mia (Lia McHugh), at Richard's place, Laura gets the news that her ex-husband wants to formally get a divorce in order to marry his new girlfriend, Grace (Riley Keough). This has a devastating effect on her, leading the woman to commit suicide in a very graphical scene. The previous contempt that the kids felt towards Grace then becomes outright loathing, since they blame her for their parents' breakup and their mother's untimely death.

Nonetheless, Richard's intention of marrying Grace is not dissuaded by the tragedy and the animosity felt by his children. In an attempt to get the three to warm up to one another, he decides to get them to spend the days leading up to Christmas together up at the family's lodge while he stays in the city because of work. While they are there, a heavy snowfall and the extreme cold locks them inside. One day, the three wake up to find out there is a power shortage, and their belongings are missing; additionally, their phones are out of battery, so contact with Richard is impossible. The discovery of a troubling news article with a notice of their death leads the kids to believe that they all died after leaving the gas heater on through the night. Isolated from the whole world and having no means of leaving the place, they are confronted with the possibility of being stuck in purgatory because of their sins. This idea is particularly upsetting for Grace since she is the sole survivor of a zealous suicide cult. The process of coming to terms with this apparent reality without access to her medication sends the woman down a spiral that triggers the reactivation of the cult's dogmas.

#### 4.1. THE REPRESENTATION OF THE UNCANNY

The first strategy encompasses figurations of the uncanny with somewhat a static nature to set the atmosphere of the film. Therefore, for the analysis of the sequences and elements that fall under this strategy, scenes have been selected to underpin the overall theme suggested in the narratives, the use of cinematography and ambiguating discourses within the diegesis.

Regarding *Absentia* (2011), the elements that serve the purpose of the first strategy described by Urbano (1998) are for the most part connected to the underpass. The figurations of the uncanny in this case can unproblematically be associated with the gloomy, abandoned places seen in Gothic fiction. The film opens with a low-angle shot of the underpass near Tricia's house, as per Figure 10. The composition of this shot is telling, since Mamer points out that sequences displayed from this perspective typically attribute subjects with a threatening and intimidating quality (MAMER, 2009, p. 7). Besides the possibility of being read as a desolate, alienating place that evokes the hidden passageways of the Gothic *loci*, this place is also associated with superstition: a sinkhole connected to cases of disappearances over a century, linked to the tale *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*.

Figure 10 – View of the underpass near Tricia's house.



(ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:00:52)

The depiction of this place as threatening is also reinforced in other shots; as illustrated by Figure 11, the viewer is shown a spider web hanging from the tunnel's wall immediately after a close-up of a spider catching a prey. Despite the absence of a monster in these scenes, they seem to capture the crux of Carroll's (1990) discussion on horrific metonymy. Through its

association “with objects and entities that are already reviled” (CARROLL, 1990, p. 52), the tunnel’s impure nature is emphasized. Through this indication of its status as a space that is seldom up kept—if ever, the connection of the space with the Gothic *loci* is further supported.

*Figure 11 – View of a spider web hanging from the wall in the underpass.*



(ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:03:03)

Recalling Mamer’s description of the high-angle shot, we can infer that any subject seen from this perspective will be made to look intimidated or threatened (MAMER, 2009, p. 8). Therefore, it seems relevant that this close-up shot uses soft focus to draw the viewer’s attention to the foreground: the subject of the camera is the perch from where a predator stalks its prey moving below. The examples given thus far illustrate how the cinematography in the film establishes the underpass as threatening from the very opening scene; nonetheless, later sequences also further develop the uneasiness the viewer is likely to already feel before any direct indication that this marginal space does in fact originate the threat, as pointed out by Carroll (1990, p. 34). Another example to be discussed here pertains to a scene in which Callie goes out jogging during the day.

At this point, it bears mentioning that it is possible to notice some jerks and slight shaking in the images shown by the narrative agent. Even though these bumps are described by Jost in connection with primary ocularization, for that to be the case, the viewer must be able to attribute them to a diegetic set of eyes (JOST, 2004, p. 75). Thus, it could be argued that establishing shots are likely interpreted as objective despite the movement that would otherwise signal a person’s gait as they walk. Considering the integration effort that might be at work in

these instances, viewers might resolve the tension of whether these are a case of subjective perspective by using the genetic mechanism described by Sternberg and Yacobi (2015). That is to say, since the sequence shown is not connected with the act of looking through the use of shot/reverse-shot, the viewer might consider that the camera bump was caused unintentionally during the shooting process. Alternatively, when there is a reverse shot, the viewer might interpret the bump as subjective perspective, hence, secondary ocularization.

In the scene previously mentioned, Callie is shown from behind, in long shot at first. As observed, some bumps and shakes are noticeable as the camera follows her; however, since this characteristic has been present in most scenes thus far, it causes no particular effect. The muffled quality of the song playing in the background and the fact that the character was shown putting on headphones allows us to interpret this as an instance of primary auricularization; in addition to the mellow soundtrack, the scene takes place in broad daylight, thus distancing it from any ominous reading. Things quickly change when she approaches the underpass. A somber, extradiegetic crescendo creeps in, overlaid on top of Callie's jogging playlist. As observed by Gorbman, the soundtrack has the power to emphasize the emotions suggested in the narrative (GORBMAN, 1987, p. 73); hence the tense, menacing aural atmosphere created around the underpass seems to underpin the uncanny characteristics pointed out thus far.

Subsequent to showing Callie going in the underpass, the scene cuts to a fixed, high-angle reverse shot with rack focus. Once again, the camera displays a spider in sharp focus in the foreground; the negative space in soft focus shows Callie coming into the tunnel (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:14:15). It could be argued that, on a thematic level, the composition in this shot shows the woman coming into the critter's field of vision. As she crosses the threshold, her silhouette is only marginally distinguishable; we could interpret that the use of shallow focus separates the living, outside world from the underworld of the underpass and the attention of the critters within. When the next scene displays Callie from behind once again, as per Figure 12, a shot/reverse shot connection is established, as if confirming the critter's gaze upon the woman. While following Callie inside the underpass, the narrative agent's use of proxemics perceptibly changes. The camera gets uncomfortably closer to the subject, moving from long to medium shot. Even though Mamer maintains that the latter typically does not symbolic invade the subject's personal space (MAMER, 2009, p. 6), the closer proxemics the confined space of the tunnel, and the tense aural atmosphere attributes the scene with a claustrophobic feel, thus reinforcing the thematic purpose suggested above. Additionally, the previous shot/reverse shot in combination with the jerks in the image are reminiscing of Mamer's

description of the point-of-view shot: the “maniacally focused” impression (MAMER, 2009, p. 10) makes it feel like Callie is being chased.

*Figure 12 – View of Callie in the underpass.*



(ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:14:18)

Another scene that is worth mentioning regarding the representation of the uncanny is the interaction between Callie and Walter Lambert, as per Figure 13. Upon finding Walter lying in the underpass, Callie thinks that he is homeless. The man is dirty and malnourished, and the condition of his clothes is unkept. Whereas Callie is convinced that Walter must want something from her and promises to come back later, the man mutters the disconcerting lines “Do you see me?” (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:16:07) and “It’s sleeping” (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:16:18).

On the one hand, Walter’s distress is foreboding; there is a significant level of uneasiness because his urgent pleas make no sense to Callie and to the audience alike. While she insists that she has nothing to offer, the man begs her to wait as she is trying to leave and cries out about his son. Regarding the cinematography employed, it bears mentioning that he is often shown from a high-angle shot, which would render him intimidated, in a disadvantaged position; when shown with a leveled camera, the narrative agent enters his personal space with close-up shots, arguably enabling more intense resonance of the audience with the man’s despair at being left alone in the underpass.

*Figure 13 – View of Callie's encounter with Walter Lambert.*



(ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:15:47)

Finally, as Callie moves away from him, she is displayed in medium shot, occupying the left side of the frame in the foreground. In the negative space, Walter's image slowly fades from sight in a transition from sharp to soft focus, as per Figure 14. In line with the suggested thematic use of shallow focus, Walter's figure is obscured and left in the underground as Callie goes back into the daylight.

*Figure 14 – View of Walter out of focus in the background.*



(ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:16:47)



On the other hand, it is possible to tell that Callie is weary of him, reinforcing the discourse around urban violence that is presented in later scenes, for example, when Tricia says that there are petty burglaries in the neighborhood and the front door should be kept locked (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:17:45). If the audience does interpret Walter to be homeless, the fact that he seems to carry out a conversation independent from Callie's replies might be integrated as a case of mental health impairment, considering that the number of people living with some type of mental disorder among the homeless population can be as high as 95% in the USA and other Western countries, according to Martens (2001).

When it comes to *Hereditary* (2018), the representation of the uncanny includes the depiction of the "domestic space as a gothic site of repressed or buried secrets" (SEDGWICK, 2020, p. 662), taking the form of Ellen's sinister influence and legacy, the covert action of her cult and the indications of occult practices. Consequently, the analysis will cover examples of scenes that include the depiction of cult members being eerily friendly or oddly placed, the depiction of occult symbols, and indications that there is a plan in action.

After the initial textual display of Ellen's service note, the opening scene shows Charlie's tree house through a window. The scene progresses with a zoom out effect that expands the field of vision to show more details; as the camera pans the room to the right, a tense, extradiegetic soundtrack fades in and the narrative agent shows the interior of what seems to be an art workshop. As described by Verstraten, this scene offers a general impression without highlighting any specific detail, leaving the viewer to put together their own description (2009, p. 52); nonetheless, we must consider the soundtrack's ability to elicit affect in the audience, as suggested by Gorbman (1987, p. 5). Despite the absence of visual cues to draw the viewer's attention to any specific uncanny aspect in the space, an apprehensive feeling is associated with what is shown. The camera movement stops when a model house is in the foreground, as per Figure 15.

With a *push-in*, the camera brings the viewer into one of the rooms in the model; the shot then seamlessly transitions into the actual room, where we see Peter sleeping. It is possible to state that the effect of such a scene is to highlight to the viewer that the model matches the actual house, creating an uncanny effect associated with doubling and with things that are not what they appear to be. In support of this claim, it is worth mentioning the several long shots of the interior of the house that look like a display of the model, and even some long, high-angle shots of the property that look like a miniature—possibly because of the rack focus used, as per Figure 16. Besides highlighting the synthetic nature of the story (PHELAN, 1989, p. 2)

by reminding the viewer that the diegetic space is a construct—a simulation of reality—, this feature also brings to attention that the characters exist in a controlled space to act out a narrative like pawns.

*Figure 15 – View of the model house.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:01:56)

*Figure 16 – High-angle view of the Graham house.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:23:37)

This is echoed in the scene in which the schoolteacher talks about the Greek tragedy *The Women of Trachis*. While Peter is distracted on his phone, a discussion takes place about how the hero, Heracles, is undone by his fatal flaw: arrogance in thinking that he has control (HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:14:48). The teacher further states that Sophocles writes an oracle

into the play to indicate the unconditional absence of choice (HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:14:54), and a student mentions that she thinks the story is more tragic for this, since the characters never had any hope. Considering Verstraten's assertion that characters are often positioned (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 40), the narrative agent's choice for showing this specific interaction is interesting. This scene is very informative to the viewer regarding what is to come unto the characters: Annie's arrogance in trying to control the situation leads her to demise, Peter's and Charlie's fates were spelled out for them, with no hope of escaping death, and Ellen is the embodiment of the prophecy about the dead killing the living.

Despite being dead, Ellen is far from gone. Incidentally, the intrusions of her presence seem to underscore the gothic tendency of depicting the family not only as an extension of the old house trope, but itself a "place rendered threatening and uncanny by the haunting return of past transgressions [...]" (BOTTING, 1996, p. 7). Besides the fresh memory of her passing, Annie still has her mother's things packed in a box in the workshop (HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:11:18). She also imparts onto Charlie an account of how the grandmother would not let her feed the girl when she was a baby (HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:08:55). The narrative agent illustrates Ellen's grip for control over the infant with a display of one of Annie's models: in it, she is sitting in bed raising baby Charlie to her breast, and Ellen is by the bedside trying to offer hers instead (HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:13:03). During her eulogy, Annie mentions that Ellen was a very secretive woman, with private rituals and private friends (HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:04:29); as the viewer will soon find out, these rituals were literal occult practices, and these friends were members of a cult. Against this backdrop of secret interests and activities, the note found amidst her belongings sets a foreboding tone from the beginning of the film, emphasizing the notion that the family members have a path laid out for them.

My darling, beautiful, dear Annie,  
Forgive me all the things I could not tell you. Please don't hate me and try not to  
despair your losses. You will see in the end that they were worth it.  
Our sacrifice will pale next to the rewards.  
Love,  
Mommy (Reproduction of Ellen's note. HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:12:00)

The aura of mystery surrounding Ellen is further reinforced when Annie checks her mother's old room to find a triangle burned onto the floorboards, as per Figure 17. Although the triangle is not a symbol as readily recognizable and established in popular culture as the pentagram, it is present in the magic rites of *The Goetia* as a binding space into which the

magician must compel the Spirits being summoned (MATHERS; CROWLEY; BETA, 1995, p. 71–72).

*Figure 17 – View of the triangle burned on the floorboards.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:17:22)

The notion that the characters have no power over their destiny, but rather are inexorably being directed towards an unavoidable outcome is also brought to attention when members of Ellen’s cult are shown observing the family. They loom over Charlie during the grandmother’s funeral, as per Figure 18, and watch the girl while she is at school, as shown in Figure 19. These scenes are also paired with somber aural cues that signal their affective disposition.

*Figure 18 – View of Charlie being watched by a cult member.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:05:02)

*Figure 19 – View of Charlie being watched by a cult member outside her school.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:16:26)

Additionally, Peter is observed as well in a later scene, as per Figure 20. A long-shot shows the teenager in the background, leaning against his windowsill to smoke. On the foreground, a silhouette is barely visible on the left side of the frame, obfuscated by the rack focus effect used in the sequence. This person's presence is betrayed by the condensation of their breath, arguably characterizing this scene as an instance of secondary internal ocularization through an over-the-shoulder shot.

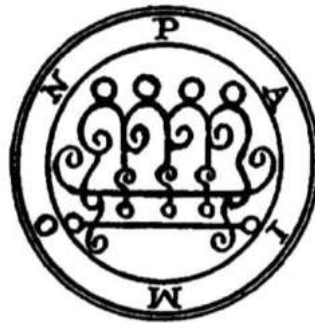
*Figure 20 – View of Peter being watched.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:23:30)

The action of the cult is also brought to the viewer's attention through the use of mystic symbols. During Ellen's wake, the narrative agent highlights Paimon's seal (MATHERS; CROWLEY; BETA, 1995, p. 31) with a close-up shot of her pendant, as per Figure 22. This sigil returns when the siblings are on their way to the party, eerily etched on the pole where Charlie will fatefully meet her untimely death, as per Figure 23. The Seal of Paimon described in *The Goetia* is provided below for comparison in Figure 21.

*Figure 21 – The seal of Paimon.*



(MATHERS; CROWLEY; BETA, 1995, p. 31)

*Figure 22 – View of Ellen's necklace with Paimon sigil.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:04:57)

*Figure 23 – View of Paimon's sigil etched on the pole.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:28:10)

Although the sigil displayed in Figure 23 is arguably a “blink and you miss it” detail, the narrative agent dedicates enough emphasis to make this sequence stand out. Prior to the frame selected for the example above, the narrative agent shows Peter in the driver’s seat; as he looks up at what the viewer can assume to be said rear-view mirror, a reverse shot shows Charlie’s reflection on it, confirming this sequence as Peter’s subjective perspective. The soundtrack that accompanies the montage in this sequence is very ominous, once again highlighting the affective disposition. Even though this sequence is fairly mundane, the feeling of tension that it elicits is overwhelming. The scene cuts to a fixed camera position showing the car on the road, on the right-most side of the frame. As the car speeds along the road, crossing the space in the screen, the camera pans left quickly to follow its movement, but rather than see it off the other side, this rapid movement is arrested when the pole is in the foreground, at the center of the frame. Whether or not the viewer will notice the glyph, the fact that the camera maintains the pole as its subject for some four seconds while the soundtrack hits a dramatic, low note is indication enough that this is an important element. The fact that Peter swerves off the road in reaction to the butchered body of a goat placed in the middle of the road also seems to be disconcertingly convenient: if not for that detail, Charlie might still end up dying, but her decapitation would probably be altogether avoided.

In addition to the situations described, other elements that could be classified as uncanny transpire with Charlie. Considering that many characters wind up without their head, the girl’s interest in finding new heads for her homemade toys is dumbfounding. While in the classroom, she is displayed trying to attach some type of wire coil to a plastic body (HEREDITARY, 2018,

00:13:15). In a later scene, the viewer follows as she beheads a dead pigeon (HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:15:55) to collect material for one of her toys (HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:23:55). Her bedroom desk is filled with such toys put together with mundane objects and finished with creative heads. The fact that her own decapitated head is crowned and placed on an idol in the end seems to be fitting with this theme. If the head is the seat of reason, this experimentation with matching different bodies to different heads might be an early indication of Paimon's influence in leading Charlie to seek a new, more fitting body; for this displayed potential, these scenes could arguably be sorted under the representation of the monster just as well, but at this point during the narrative, the viewer likely has no reason to suspect that the girl will play an antagonistic part in what is to unfold. Nonetheless, the depiction of Charlie's hobby turns out to be upsetting, even if only for the tense soundtrack with which these scenes are paired.

In *The Lodge* (2019), the figurations of the uncanny that set the tone of the film revolve around secrets, the dissolution of the family, and an overarching organizing force—either human or divine. Thus, the analysis will cover scenes that feature the doubling of the family lodge and indications of instability in the family unity, as well as indications of controlled events.

In the opening scene, the narrative agent displays a model house that is a realistic dollhouse duplicate of the family's lodge, as illustrated by Figure 24 and Figure 25 provided below for example.

*Figure 24 – View of the dollhouse.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:01:58)



*Figure 25 – View of the family lodge.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:53:03)

This depiction of elements associated with childhood, innocence, and happiness have the ability of eliciting uncanny and uncomfortable affects when presented in association with tense soundtrack and eerie visual cues for its potential for displacing something that is culturally seen as a safe haven. Additional sequences show a model living room with the family members together, as per Figure 26, and a model kitchen.

*Figure 26 – View of the model living room with the dolls representing the family members.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:01:48)

In the latter, a lens distortion effect blurs the edges of the image while Laura calls out for Mia with a distorted sound effect applied to her voice, setting a tense atmosphere that could

indicate that something is off, a discomfort reinforced by the ominous soundtrack. The composition of these scenes seems to suggest a disconnection between the model house and the diegetic reality: in the dollhouse, a place of union and family is preserved while the muffled and distorted sounds seem to signal that something lurks beneath this idealized representation. The fact that the model house is displayed in a child bedroom during a sunny day while the actual lodge is locked in a gloomy, winter landscape reinforces this notion. Additionally, when the model house is shown, it is possible to hear the extradiegetic sound of children's laughter with a distorted, muffled sound effect, underscoring the notion that the happy sounds that filled the place are tainted.

The theme of a bright, artificial façade also seems to apply to Laura. The visual narrator shows her in medium shot from behind as she puts makeup on (THE LODGE, 00:02:14). The intradiegetic sounds of birds chirping outside, and the ample bathroom flooded with natural light seem to indicate a comfortable and peaceful life in the suburbs; nonetheless, Laura breaks down crying looking at herself in the mirror, as per Figure 27. The images depicted have a connection with the uncanny due to their unhomely nature: the visual narrator and thus the viewer are trespassing into a private space in the house during a private moment of vulnerability, hence gaining access into some secret knowledge about the mental state of the character. Considering that the identification with the illusory image seen in the mirror is at the root of the uncanny, according to Rahimi (2013), we could interpret the fact that Laura is only shown crying through her reflection as a possible indication of fragmentation of identity.

*Figure 27 – View of Laura crying while looking in the mirror.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:02:23)

The soundtrack in this shot is also telling; besides the silent sobs, the viewer will hear the lively noises from the outside, further reinforcing the disconnection between the ideal family life and the actual condition seen inside: the peaceful sounds and the beautiful house mask some dark secret. This disconnection is intensified by the juxtaposition of the shots of the model house, the painting of Mary, and the close-up shot of the pistol resting on top of a table during the opening sequence, as per Figure 28.

*Figure 28 – View of the gun on the tabletop.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:01:35)

The depiction of the loaded gun is particularly effective in heightening the feeling of uneasiness; since this scene is presented in combination with motifs of childhood innocence and religion, it can be interpreted not only as a displacement from these themes, but also as an omen. Much like the Greek tragedy in *Hereditary* (2018), these elements foreshadow the development of the film.

Concerning the role of the model house, it is possible to further highlight that it works as a stand-in for the family house, and that more than mirroring moments of the family together, it reflects Mia's disposition towards the space and the people in it: at first, the model represents the idealized past of the family as a happy unity; after Laura's death, the dolls are rearranged to reflect the new setting, with the surviving family members shown kneeling in prayer around the painting of Mary, as per Figure 29.

*Figure 29 – View of the family members kneeling in prayer.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:11:42)

Moreover, Mia ties her mother's doll to a balloon in hopes that it will ascend into the sky; when that does not happen, the girl breaks down crying, claiming that her mother cannot go to heaven, as per Figure 30. The fact that the doll fell to the ground, although arguably symbolic, is deeply connected to Mia's perception of the situation, possibly representing her coping strategies with real, emotional values.

*Figure 30 – View of the doll falling to the ground.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:09:18)

Additionally, the dollhouse also serves a function similar to that seen in *Hereditary* (2018), in that the people in this space can be placed and controlled according to the designs of the ones looking from the outside. Even though the organizing force behind the events will only be revealed to the viewer towards the end of the film, several shots of the model are displayed in between scenes of the characters in the actual house, indicating a connection. The shot illustrated in Figure 31 of the model house displaying the dolls toppled on the floor and on the couch are an example of this organizing effort. The doll wearing a burgundy coat on the image represents Grace, and not the mother, since it does not have blonde hair, which confirms that what is shown in the dollhouse reflects a controlled situation.

*Figure 31 – View of the dolls toppled down.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:07:45)

The composition of the sequences displaying Grace and siblings in the lodge is also worthy of mention. The example provided in Figure 32 is a high-angle shot that distorts the space depicted, making it look smaller, more confined; additionally, the view from above could be thematically interpreted as an indication of the organizing force looking in from the outside.

*Figure 32 – High-angle shot of Grace and the siblings in the lodge.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:49:28)

This notion is further underscored by the fact that the siblings are shown whispering by the dollhouse as they move the dolls and items around, as per Figure 33.

*Figure 33 – View of the siblings whispering by the dollhouse.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:19:17)

Finally, motifs of oppressive religious iconography and themes seem to permeate the narrative. From Mia's belief that her mother will not go to heaven for having committed suicide, the existence of the zealous cult that committed mass suicide to atone for their sins, and the prolonged, stern depictions of crosses and the portrait of Mary; these themes and images tie

into the idea of an overarching, controlling force behind the events that transpire in the narrative.

The analysis of the scenes presented in this section make it possible to identify common strategies for setting the stories that will unfold in all three films. Besides dealing with grief and sadness, as observed by Church (2021, p. 13), these films have the common trait of exploring the instability of family relationships, which could invite the use of the functional mechanism to integrate figurations of the uncanny as allegory for these themes. The use of cinematography and soundtrack denounce the underlying themes from the very beginning: a bedtime story for children and its eerie connection to the local underpass, a Greek tale of fate, and the images of corrupted childhood, and religious zeal. Additionally, the narrative agent displays hints of the threat early on the story: the critters living the tunnel's walls in *Absentia* (2011); Ellen's cult members in *Hereditary* (2018); and the children planning to psychologically torture the woman they blame for their family's dissolution in *The Lodge* (2019). Nonetheless, even before the monster is revealed, the groundwork is laid for the possible psychological explanations: in *Absentia* (2011) Callie is introduced as a reformed drug addict, but the narrative agent betrays her in showing that she is secretive about a box she ends up hiding in her bedroom; in *Hereditary* (2018), besides the film title itself, the family's history with mental illnesses is revealed when Annie tells the grief support group about Ellen's struggle with DID, her father's chronic depression, and her brother's schizophrenic condition; in *The Lodge* (2019), the children are shown arranging the dollhouse settings that are intermittently displayed between sequences in the actual lodge. Notwithstanding, the tension between possible readings is further developed as the narrative progresses with the use of shots that represent the characters' perception and reactions in the face of supernatural events; thus, in the following pages we will analyze the representation of the monster.

#### 4.2. *THE REPRESENTATION OF THE MONSTER*

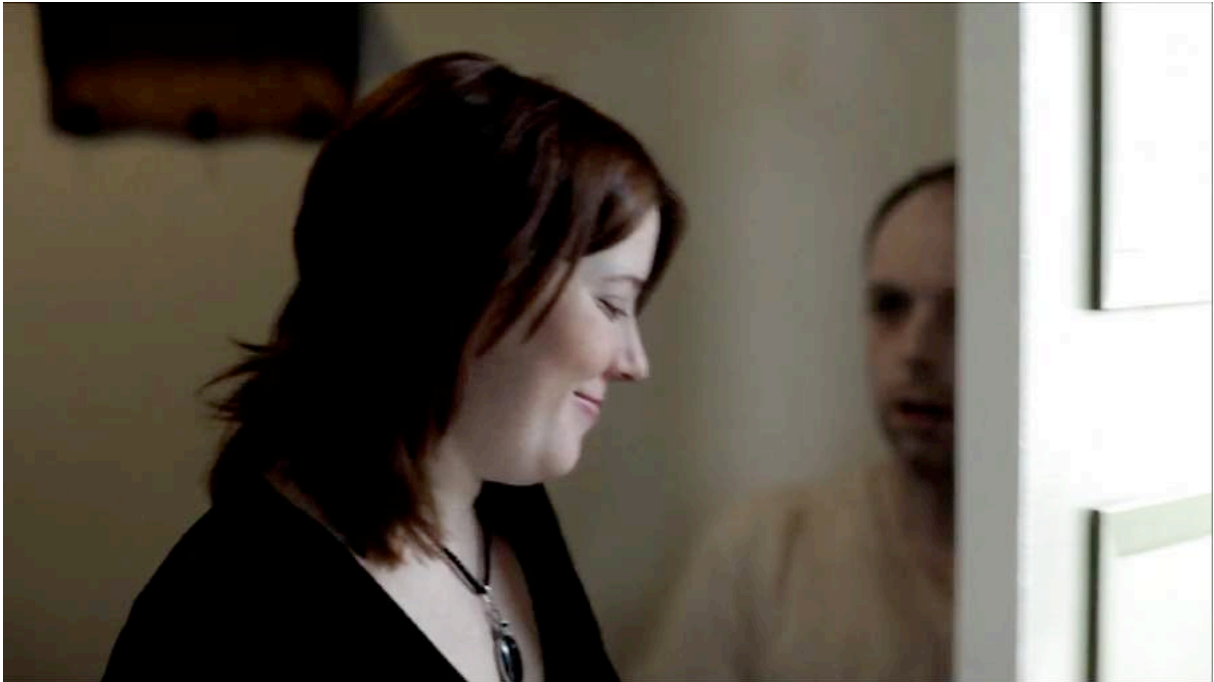
The second strategy proposed by Urbano is characterized by its display of the monster as a threat not yet fully realized. Whereas one could consider that the first strategy consisted of the activation of negative affects through the use of uncanny imagery and ominous soundtrack, the second strategy depends on the visual representation of monstrosity. Considering Church's claim that the monster in post-horror films is seldom shown, presented indirectly or as an invisible, abstract force (CHURCH, 2021, p. 12), in this section, we will analyze how its destructive and threatening potential is depicted in the corpus of films selected for this research to better understand the use of this restrained approach in creating tension between possible and impossible in the narrative universe. Thus, important aspects to be considered are what type of visual cues are in fact used to represent a possible monstrous intrusion into ordinary life, whether characters' reactions conform to the repulsion and fear described by Carroll, and the existence of scenes and dialogues that might lead the spectator to integrate these iterations as misperception or hallucinations.

In *Absentia* (2011), the narrative features two monsters, the ghost of the missing husband and the insectoid monster that lives in the tunnel's walls. As such, the discussion will cover scenes that feature sightings and other indications of their existence. For the first one, we have Tricia's sightings of her missing husband. The first appearance to be described according to this strategy happens after Tricia sees her romantic interest—Detective Mallory (Dave Levine)—off the door. As the frame provided in Figure 34 highlights, Tricia is shown in profile in a medium shot; as the door closes, the ghost of her missing husband is revealed behind it in soft focus.

The use of shot/reverse shot during Tricia's conversation with Detective Mallory grounds the scene in her domain, making it an instance of secondary ocularization. In combination with the subjective perspective, the use of soft focus to blur the apparition and the fact that it quickly disappears when the scene cuts to show her reaction could potentially lead the viewer to integrate this scare using the functional mechanism (STERNBERG; YACOBI, 2015), thus interpreting it as an allegory for Tricia's mental state.



*Figure 34 – View of Daniel's ghost behind the door.*



(ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:18:33)

This reading is reinforced during Tricia's conversation with her therapist, who calls these encounters "lucid dreams" that reflect the woman's subconscious mind negotiating her own feelings of grief and guilt (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:24:22). On the one hand, this diegetic explanation might lead the viewer to consider Tricia as an unreliable character when it comes to these sightings; that being the case, future apparitions might be considered allegorical, being integrated using the functional mechanism. On the other hand, the ghost's actions and influence might escalate to the point where they cannot be simply dismissed as a psychological manifestation. As the narrative progresses, the ghost appears again while Tricia is signing the petition to issue Daniel's death certificate, and she quickly looks down to avoid seeing it (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:27:20); in this example, the scene could be considered an instance of secondary ocularization because of the use of shot/reverse shot, establishing what is seen as Tricia's perspective. On top of being out of focus, no one else in the room acknowledges the apparition's presence, further influencing the viewer to interpret the ghost as a fabrication of a troubled mind.

Finally, during the ghost's last appearance, the narrative agent shows Tricia meditating in medium shot. Even though Tricia reacts to the intradiegetic creaking sound of the floorboards, indicating secondary auricularization, this is an objective scene shown in zero ocularization (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:29:56). Despite the absence of shot/reverse shot to indicate that she sees the ghost, her facial expression and body language seem indicative of the

fear and repulsion caused by the monster, denouncing that she is aware of its presence even though she does not see it. Unlike the examples described thus far, this time, the apparition lingers, lurking around the woman. As the sequence progresses, an intradiegetic sound of whispering swells to match the strain on the character's face and her effort to continue her breathing exercise. Although the use of zero ocularization, the persistence of the ghost, and Tricia's strain to ignore it seem to strengthen a possible supernatural reading, eventually the soundtrack diminishes and the ghost grows steadily more out of focus until it is eventually gone, denoting that the character has made peace with her decision and confirming that her sightings were in fact purely psychological (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:30:45).

Regarding the second instance of the representation of the monster in the film, we have a much more elusive case—since the insectoid that lives in the tunnel's walls is portrayed indirectly for the most part, confirming the general tendency observed by Church (2021, p. 12). Although any more explicit display of the creature is relegated to later moments, the narrative agent gives early indications of its presence. For the first example of this type of representation, it is possible to point out the sequence in which Callie is brushing her teeth, right before going to bed to find a handful of trinkets left for her (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:31:24). While the diegetic explanation for the appearance of the trinkets on her bed cover the theme of urban violence and the possibility of a break-in, this discourse causes narrative tension due to its strange nature—what reason could Walter have to break into the house to leave scraps? This scene, shown mostly from the side in medium shot, can be considered a case of secondary ocularization because of the use of shot/reverse shot as Callie notices an insect in the bathroom sink and washes it away down the drain. Here, the presence of the monster is indicated through a squeaking sound originating from an indefinite place (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:28:36). With the character's perception having been established as the source of what is seen, we can also consider this intradiegetic sound to be an instance of secondary auricularization. Even though there are no overt depictions of monstrosity, Callie's apprehension at the noise—should it be mirrored in the audience—signals that this is eerie. Nevertheless, upon pulling the shower curtains to investigate, she finds nothing, thus dispelling the tension.

When it comes to the representation of the monster in *Hereditary* (2018), it is possible to point out the manifestation of ghosts and the beams of light that signal Paimon's presence. Regarding the former, the first supernatural encounter happens right after the family comes home from Ellen's funeral. In this scene, Annie goes through her late mother's things before going to bed; the consecutive use of shot/reverse shot showing her looking at family pictures

and the note left for her centers the sequence around the character's domain, in an instance of secondary ocularization. As a result, when Annie sees a figure obscured by shadows in the corner after turning the lights off to leave the room, as per Figure 35, the viewer has reason to interpret this as subjective perspective. The effect of this scene is potentialized by the swelling, ominous soundtrack that is abruptly interrupted when the lights are turned back on. The effect could be compared to the peak in tension for the brief moment of a frightful impression, followed by the relief of noticing that all is well.

*Figure 35 – View of Ellen's ghost.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:12:26)

In similar fashion to what has been described in *Absentia* (2011), the apparition quickly disappears. Presented with Annie's hesitation and considering that she turns the lights back on to make sure her eyes were not playing tricks on her, the viewer could interpret this sequence as the portrayal of a misstep in perception, as described by Margolin (2011), replicating the character's confusion outside the diegesis. Moreover, the viewer has reason to attribute the sighting to Annie's emotional distress, since she has just buried her mother. Be as it may, since the viewer is aware of the family's history of mental health issues, this instance of misperception might give rise to distrust in the character. If Annie's struggles are interpreted as loss of sanity, or a psychotic break, her fear of the cult's action and her encounters could be explained as persecutory delusions, and auditory and visual hallucinations.

On another occasion, Peter is disturbed by a low, intradiegetic sound, the characteristic pop that Charlie used to make with her mouth. This realization is echoed in Peter's reaction: he hurriedly sits up in bed, startled (HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:49:02). As he looks around trying to identify the source of the sound, the reverse shot—secondary ocularization—pans quickly to

the left, locking on a pile of clothes that are initially mistaken to have human form. A close-up of the dubious shape confirms that it is nothing more than just shadows playing tricks, emulating the character's hesitation with the camera operation. This clear example of visual misperception leads the viewer to also interpret the popping sound as an auditory hallucination.

When it comes to other instances of the representation of the monster in this film, it is possible to point out the display of beams of light signaling Paimon's presence. This supernatural manifestation can be seen in a sequence in which Charlie is shown in her bedroom patching different parts together to make new toys. This scene starts in a somewhat objective perspective, since no shot/reverse shot is used to attribute what is seen to Charlie's perspective. The narrative agent moves from a close-up shot of the tabletop, over the girl's shoulder, to an elevated position showing the girl from a low-angle shot. The slow, receding movement in this composition, in combination with the light refraction at the left edge of the frame, eerily resembles the over-the-shoulder shot that reveals a cult member watching Peter from afar. Hence, it could elicit the feeling that an invisible force is lurking in the space. Shortly after, an ominous extradiegetic soundtrack sets in as the beam of light scatters across the room and focuses on the wall on the far side, rousing her from the desk, as per Figure 37. While a beam of light on its own could be interpreted to be nothing more than glare or a reflection from an undefined source, the undisclosed mechanics behind its movement elicit narrative tension. Additionally, despite formless and not inherently associated with monstrosity or the uncanny, it can unproblematically be identified as monstrous if it is moved by a malevolent will, in accordance with the discussion presented in the work of Carroll (1990). Influenced by it, Charlie leaves the house and walks down the path holding the pigeon's severed head.

*Figure 36 – Beam of light rousing Charlie from her desk.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:24:15)

While Charlie is treading her way down to some unknown destination, she is displayed in medium shot to the extradiegetic sound of an unnerving crescendo, which reinforces the feeling of uneasiness and mystery surrounding the nature of the beam of light. Considering the principle stated by Verstraten that two separate shots shown back-to-back leads the viewer to establish a narrative association (VERSTRATEN, 2009, p. 89), the reverse shot that follows can be argued to show to what the girl was being led: an extreme long-shot in secondary ocularization showing a woman from behind while she is sitting in a clearing near the Graham house, as per Figure 38. On top of being in front of what looks like a ring of fire drawn on the ground, the woman eerily resembles the grandmother. This scene is made even more puzzling because Ellen's grave has been reported as desecrated the night before in diegetic time (HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:18:10).

These sequences arguably use a mix of two strategies proposed by Urbano (1998), namely, the representation of the uncanny and the representation of the monster; as such, it elicits both a sense of uneasiness and apprehension. Nonetheless, by displaying two monsters—a light moved by a malevolent will and a body neither dead nor alive—in a scene enhanced by a tense, swelling soundtrack, the narrative agent provides the viewer with an unnerving and unexplainable development that reinforces the narrative tension. On the one hand, a viewer might integrate them using the generic mechanism, thus interpreting these as depictions of true supernatural manifestation in the storyworld—an evil presence, an undead body, or even a cult member in a dark ritual; on the other hand, these events could also be integrated using the

functional mechanism, which would lead the viewer to consider them to serve thematic or allegorical purposes.

Figure 37 – View of a woman performing a ritual near the Graham house.



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 00:26:46)

Let us also consider the scene in which Annie and Joan (Ann Dowd) perform a séance (HEREDITARY, 01:04:20). This sequence is arguably structured with a combination of two strategies, the representation of the monster and the *mise-en-scène* of physical assault due to the suspense underscored by the escalating number of supernatural manifestations displayed as Annie looks around the room and even under the table trying to find an explanation for what she sees. In this sequence, the narrative agent initially shows both women in medium shot with zero ocularization from across a table, and the developments are displayed using a very distinctive camera work, which complicates the determination of the source of perception. Nonetheless, after the ritual begins, the scene cuts from the medium shot of the women to a close-up shot of Annie. As she looks to the left to investigate something invisible to the viewer, the camera quickly pans left to follow her movement. As she turns right to look at Joan, the camera slowly pans right. In effect, the narrative agent's acknowledgement of the character's act of looking could indicate an alignment in perspective. Still, it bears mentioning that since Joan is also displayed in close-up shots, the same logic applies, meaning that the narrative agent sides with her perspective at times, making for an interesting dynamic. The fact that Joan witnesses these events as well weakens the possibility of interpreting them as simply missteps in perception, presenting a strong indication towards the supernatural explanation. Nonetheless, a skeptic viewer could interpret Joan's perception as the smoke and mirrors of a charlatan.

While coming home from the séance with Joan, Annie is depicted as emotionally distraught (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:08:24). In a close-up shot from the side, Annie is shown driving home with tears running down her face when she hears the characteristic pop that Charlie used to make (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:08:29). This scene is displayed with a rather objective approach—with zero ocularization—because even though there is a diegetic set of eyes in the scene, the camera cannot be linked to the act of looking through the use of shot/reverse shot. Nonetheless, Annie’s reaction to the intradiegetic sound makes this an instance of secondary auricularization—thus connecting at least the act of hearing to her perception. She gasps loudly in shock and turns to look at the back seat. The scene cuts to match her eyeline, but instead of showing what the character sees, the narrative agent points the camera back at her. This preferred choice for the composition of the scene limits the viewer’s field of vision, hiding the object of the character’s gaze behind the camera. Annie looks around with a defeated look on her face, then turns back to the front as her crying increases. Since there is no sighting to indicate the actual presence of a ghost, this event could be interpreted as an auditory hallucination caused by her emotional distress.

Finally, the representation of the monster in *The Lodge* (2019) is centered around Grace’s background as the daughter of a cult leader, and the existence of an overarching organizing force. After Laura’s suicide, the children blame Grace for her death, stating in an argument with Richard that he left their mother to be with a psychopath who was featured in one of his books (THE LODGE, 2019, 00:13:55), and this notion permeates the way the character is visually introduced by the narrative agent. Considering the existence of a general negative bias against new religious movements (LAYCOCK, 2013, p. 82), frequently described with the derogatory term cult, Grace’s connection with one can be argued to lead to her characterization as a monster. The secretive nature and terrifying aftermath of her father’s teachings and dogmas evoke a sinister image of practices considered inherently dangerous (CROCKFORD, 2018, p. 95); as a result, her involvement in said practices could be considered to betray her humanity, in accordance with the discussion previously presented on the work of Asma (2011). As such, her romantic relationship with the father portends the risk to social and religious institutions such as marriage and the family. The apprehension regarding her impending invasion of the family home is reinforced by her liminal presence and visual representation, as illustrated by Figure 39.

*Figure 38 – View of Grace talking to Richard.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:14:24)

This type of depiction seems to be aligned with the family's perception, therefore we can consider that the narrative agent focalizes on Laura, Aiden, and Mia to introduce Grace to the viewer, meaning that the audience only knows what they see and say. When Laura brings the kids to Richard's home, she expected Grace not to be there but sees her obfuscated silhouette through a window from the outside (THE LODGE, 00:03:44). This long shot of the house façade is connected to Laura's domain with the use of shot/reverse shot, making it an instance of secondary ocularization. After coming into the kitchen to talk to Richard, a shot/reverse shot matching her eyeline indicates Laura as the source of perception as the narrative agent cuts the scene to a long shot of Grace sneakingly leaving the property through the backyard gate (THE LODGE, 2019, 00:05:07). In this scene too, the woman is only marginally visible, with no discerning characteristics other than her long, brown hair. In Figure 39 provided above, the source of perception is identified as Mia. Even as the children are waiting in the car to pick her up before driving to the lodge, the visual representation is minimal, as per Figure 40. The example provided illustrates an instance of primary ocularization connected to the children's subjective perception through the visual distortion of their unique vantage point from within the car.



*Figure 39 – View of Grace seen through the frozen windshield.*

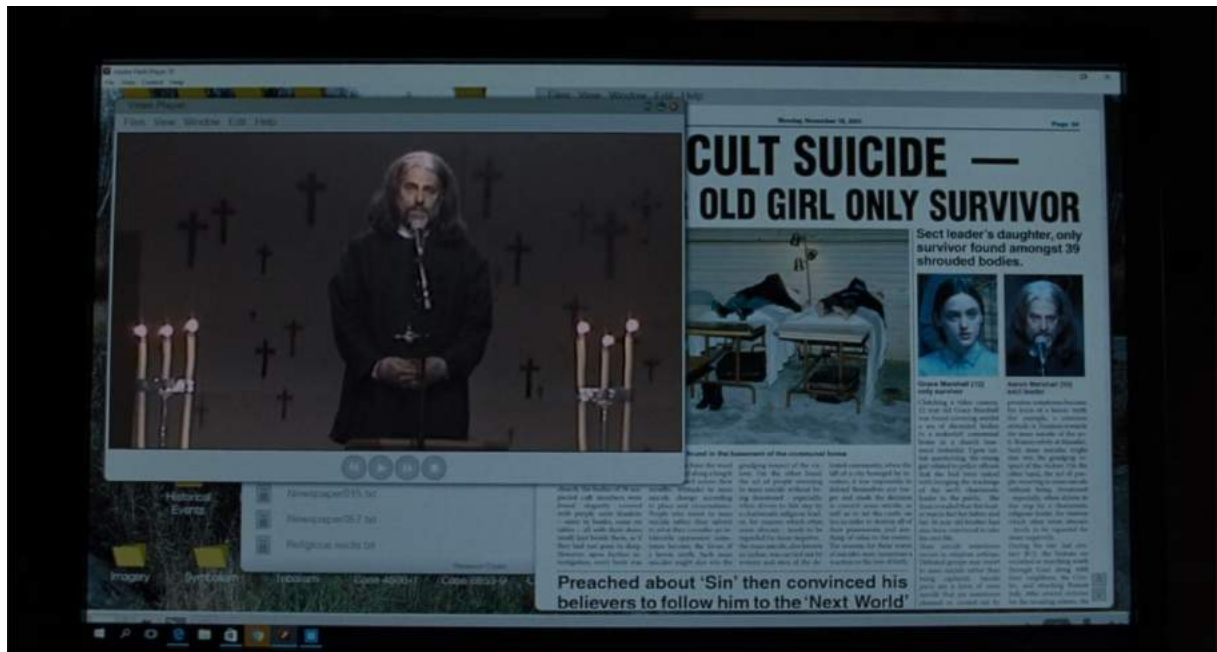


(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:20:27)

This initial characterization is so pervasive that despite her constant presence in the film, her face is only revealed after 21 minutes of runtime—this reveal can be compared to the first real look we get of a monster. She does not turn to greet the children immediately after finally getting in the car; although this wait corresponds to no more than some seconds, it is filled with uneasiness. With a medium shot of the siblings in the back seat and a close-up on Mia, the narrative agent displays the apprehensive look on their face (THE LODGE, 2019, 00:20:41). The reverse shot that comes next emulates the vantage point from the back seat, not only reinforcing the siblings' role as the source of perception, but also making it a point-of-view shot—thus the viewer is sat there with the siblings, also soaking in anticipation to finally discover who this woman is. When she finally turns back to greet them, she is disappointingly too normal.

Before this moment in the narrative, the only image we had of Grace was entirely dependent on her background as a “psychopath” cult member who was in one of Richard’s books; even though the initial lingering mystery surrounding her is partially dispelled once she finally appears, the knowledge of her past remains a source of tension. At an earlier moment, the siblings look through Richard’s material to get information on Grace. As illustrated in Figure 41, they find the only glimpse of Grace’s face before formally meeting her. Incidentally, they also gather undeniable proof of her past.

Figure 40 – View of Richard's material on the suicide cult.



(THE LODGE, 2019, 00:16:11)

This historical fact in the storyworld is brought to attention in this section due to its overt referentiality to the real-life events that transpired in the Peoples Temple at Jonestown in 1978. According to Susannah Crockford (2018), the use of cults in popular media resort to the depiction of a charismatic leader who will destroy those he leads (2018, p. 101), being isolated from friends and family in the wilderness (2018, p. 106), and taking in toxic, detrimental ideology (2018, p. 107). Incidentally, Grace's father was the charismatic leader of a religious cult that lived in a communal home, eventually leading the members to commit mass suicide to rid themselves of sin and be welcomed into the next life. Then 12 years old, the girl was the only survivor, left behind to disseminate the cult's teachings to the world. Additionally, since the trope of the "suicide cult" is deeply engrained in American popular culture (LAYCOCK, 2013, p. 81) and its use in media is so widespread, we can expect that the viewer's cultural capital will influence a reading of former cult members aligned with depictions seen elsewhere, such as potentially involved with the supernatural (CROCKFORD, 2018, p. 100) or as brainwashed victims—a trope in use since the 1960s also in association with "sleeper agents", inconspicuous people who could be led to commit terrible crimes after being "triggered" (LAYCOCK, 2013, p. 86–87). Consequently, we must consider as well later depictions of Grace sleepwalking, since they could be interpreted as a source of narrative tension and one of the possible explanations for the strange things taking place.

Upon analyzing how these three films engage the audience, it is possible to point out different uses of cinematography to elicit hesitation and ambiguity in the representation of the monster. In *Absentia* (2011), we have examples of mostly static sightings obfuscated with the use of soft focus. These apparitions are quickly dispelled when the camera shifts positions or when the character looks away; moreover, they are not witnessed by other characters. Additionally, they seem to be grounded on subjective perspective; as such, they elicit narrative tension for the possibility of being interpreted as actual ghosts, as missteps in perception, or for the possibility of being otherwise integrated as thematic use to underscore the character's mental state using the functional mechanism. The film also features an example of representation of monstrosity with its implied presence through the depiction of signs of its action or otherwise aural cues grounded on character perception; nonetheless, in these instances the possible existence of the monster is not reinforced with visual cues.

In *Hereditary* (2018), the representation of the monster uses similar strategies. The sightings of ghosts are mostly static, short lived, grounded on subjective perception, and obscured by the use of lighting in the shot. In the examples seen here, efforts to confirm the existence of the monster dispel the apparition, giving rise to the possibility of interpreting them as missteps in perception. It is also possible to infer that the presence of witnesses heavily influences a supernatural reading, despite not resolving the ambiguity completely. In this film, the use of aural cues to signal the monster's presence also works much like in *Absentia* (2011). They are grounded on subjective perception and are not paired with visual cues that might reinforce the existence of the monster. As such, they ambiguate the narrative, either being interpreted as being an actual supernatural manifestation or simply as misperception or auditory hallucination. Regarding other unlikely sightings, the example seen in the depiction of the beam of light seems to cause hesitation for not respecting real-world logic while not being overtly threatening—since Charlie's reaction could be described as curiosity. Still, the tense soundtrack that accompanies the scene augments a feeling of apprehension. As for the sighting of the old woman, we could argue that it causes hesitation due to the combination of ominous soundtrack, being unexpected, and the context of taking place after Ellen's grave is communicated as having been desecrated.

Finally, in *The Lodge* (2019), the representation of the monster also seems to make use of context. Because of Grace's past affiliation with a suicide cult, a sense of apprehension is activated because of cultural bias. Additionally, this apprehension is heightened by the fact that she is only marginally visible.

Even though these creatures are varied, they all conform to the tendency observed by David Church (2021) of being presented indirectly or appearing in anthropomorphic guise without overt depictions of visual abjection. Nonetheless, it is possible to say that they are interstitial and impure in nature as pointed out in the previous discussion informed by Carroll (1990). Additionally, it is possible to underscore the thematic use of grief, as suggested by Church (2021).

#### 4.3. *THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE OF VIOLENT PHYSICAL ASSAULT*

For the analysis of the scenes fitting this strategy, we will consider the sequences in which the threat of violence is displayed to heighten the tension and suspense in the narrative—both regarding the possibility of an attack and the plausibility of the events and the fissure between real and supernatural will become increasingly wider. As observed by Urbano (1998), the combined use of strategies is often observed; however, for the theoretical effort of describing the use of cinematography and narrative strategies to elicit ambiguity and hesitation, we will relegate the moments of possible violence connected to loss of control and helplessness to the fourth strategy.

The first instance of represented threat of violence in the film takes place shortly after the first sighting of Daniel's ghost, as can be seen in Figure 42. Tricia wakes up in the middle of the night with a looming presence behind her, shown in the background in soft focus.

*Figure 41 – View of Tricia being woken up by a ghostly figure.*



(ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:11:49)

Even though this medium shot of Tricia looks like an objective view with zero ocularization, it is possible to connect it to the character's domain with some degree of internal focalization: a sense of subjective perception seems to be confirmed by the fact that Tricia seemingly notices the presence. In the scene leading up to the attack, the narrative agent shows Tricia's actions in reaction to the specter, as if chasing the space the creature just left. In this sequence, the monster seems to have more of a haunting effect over Tricia than dread; she is not afraid to follow it, almost as if she is in fact puzzled by the situation. As such, the presence of the monster in these moments seems to mostly conform to the dynamic observed in the analysis of the previous strategy.

The visual play with expectation described by Urbano (1998) can be verified in the camera positioning for the following shots: after displaying Tricia looking down to the bottom of the stairs in a high-angle shot that suggests her elevated vantage point, the following shot matches her position with a low-angle shot showing the ghost walking into the living room (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:12:15). However, as the sequence progresses, the narrative agent limits the viewer's field of vision instead of siding with the character. Rather than following her as she goes down the stairs from her point of view—or with an over-the-shoulder shot—the narrative agent shows the character from the space where the creature's presence was last indicated, as if waiting for her to catch up—although these shots are still within the character's domain, the lack of correspondence with what she is effectively seeing characterizes these shots as an instance of zero ocularization. This strategy continuously positions the ghost in the gap behind the camera, reinforcing the audience's apprehension and creating suspense with the play with what can be seen by the character and the viewer. Nonetheless, the monster does not seem to offer an immediate physical danger; the apprehension seems to stem mostly from the structure of Urbano's strategy (1998).

Although initially this sequence displays a static view of the monster with no extradiegetic aural cues, things quickly take a turn. Once Tricia finally catches up to the apparition in the living room and covers the remaining distance between them, the narrative agent aligns the camera positioning with her perspective. The reverse shot shows the specter's back in close-up—hiding his head; the view of Tricia's hand raising to touch him gives the viewer indication that this is a point-of-view shot (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:12:58). After showing Tricia touching the ghost's shoulder in medium shot, the scene cuts to a close-up of the apparition's face, as per Figure 43, with a sudden swell in the soundtrack.

Figure 42 – Daniel's ghost attacking Tricia.



(ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:13:03)

The reverse shot shows Tricia in medium shot as her face contorts in aversion and she shrinks back onto the wall behind her to avoid the creature. Her reaction to the aggression and its potential to be mirrored in the audience seems to accentuate a sense of urgency, underscoring the plausibility of the ghost's existence. Considering that the *mise-en-scène* of physical assault represents an escalation in the threat coming from the monster, and in the suspense in the narrative, we can consider that this effect is by design. As she retreats, the narrative agent pulls back from the specter as well, indicating a point-of-view shot. The threat of violence is underscored by the intradiegetic shrieks and the fact that the monster charges after the camera with an outstretched hand (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:13:05). The scene cuts back to a close-up shot of Tricia, revealing that the monster is already behind her, and she is inadvertently retreating into its open arms (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:13:06). This bloodcurdling scene is, nonetheless, counterbalanced by the reveal that Tricia was, in fact, only dreaming.

A similar scene takes place on a later diegetic night. As Tricia is lying in bed, her bedroom door opens seemingly by itself, and the extradiegetic low, whooshing sound that accompanies the sequence elicits a sense of uneasiness (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:21:57). After displaying Tricia sitting up in long shot to check if Callie is the one responsible and finding no one there, the narrative agent cuts the scene to a medium, high-angle shot showing the character lying down again to try to go back to sleep. The next shot matches this vantage point with a medium, low-angle shot of Daniel's ghost looming over the woman (ABSENTIA, 2011,

00:22:11)—characterizing this as an instance of primary ocularization. The scene cuts back to the medium, high-angle shot of Tricia, displaying her reaction to the monster—gasping in fright and shrinking from it. The attack is displayed in a long shot from the bed side: kneeling over the woman, the ghost raises his hand menacingly to strike at her stomach (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:22:14). The outcome of the attack is shown in a medium, high-angle shot of Tricia screaming in pain—with a reverse shot from the opposite vantage point showing the ghost grinning in close-up (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:22:18). Once again, Tricia’s reaction to the attack seems to reinforce its plausibility. Considering the work of Mamer (2009), besides spatial representation, we can interpret the use of low and high-angle shots in this sequence as representing Tricia as vulnerable and intimidated, whereas the ghost is represented as threatening. Additionally, by establishing a subjective point-of-view camera through concurrent movement and vantage point of the character in both this and the prior attack described, the narrative agent manages to position Tricia as a stand-in for the viewer, thus making this an attack against the audience as well. Much like in the scene of the previous attack, Tricia is shown starting up in her bed, thus leading the viewer to interpret the attack as nothing more than a dream.

As for the *mise-en-scène* of physical assault from the insectoid monster, the example to be considered takes place after Daniel’s return. In this sequence, Callie is in the guest room under the influence when Daniel startles her. When Callie asks him to go back to his room, he explains that he cannot because the insectoid monster is lurking in one of the walls. The play with suspense and dread that warrants the classification of this scene under this category begins when Daniel’s claims are acknowledged by the narrative agent. His conversation with Callie is marked by the use of shot/reverse shot to punctuate their exchange. As such, the close-up shot of Daniel sitting on the furthest side of the bed, by the bedroom door, can be interpreted as an instance of secondary ocularization—thus Callie’s perspective. With the negative space to the right showing the corridor in soft focus and its furthest side out of the frame, this vantage point heightens a sense of anticipation: as the characters look out the door in apprehension, the narrative agent limits the viewer’s field of vision. At this point, the narrative agent presents the second marginal appearance of the insectoid monster as it shuffles quickly from the gap in the frame to the invisible space behind the wall, almost knocking a plant over in its path (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:53:30). Its presence is further indicated by the intradiegetic soundtrack, the recognizable squeaking sound.

As Daniel cowers on the bed, completely terrified, Callie gets up to investigate. She is shown walking out of the room in a close-up shot from the side as additional faint squeaking

sounds can be heard (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:53:52). Here too, the narrative agent limits the viewer's field of vision: although the character is displayed looking at direction from which the noises can be assumed to be coming, the limits of the frame do not allow the viewer to follow her gaze—thus heightening the apprehension. Using a visual composition similar to the one seen previously with Tricia, the narrative agent displays Callie's advance towards the source of the sound from the position opposite to her eyeline—as if waiting for her to catch up. In this sequence, she is shown through the bathroom's open door in long shot as she walks towards the dark space. The stark contrast in luminosity between the corridor and the bathroom limits the viewer's ability to identify any threat, maintaining the level of suspense. Even after the lights are turned on, the closed shower curtains still keep an area of the frame out of sight. In her efforts to find the vague shape that sped through the corridor, she closes the bathroom door and proceeds to pull the shower curtain. At this point, the scene abruptly ends with a sudden loud bang and an indefinite shape pushing through the shower curtains with a quick movement, as per Figure 44, before cutting to black.

*Figure 43 – View of an attack from behind the shower curtains.*



(ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:54:33)

On the one hand, the fact that the narrative agent seems to confirm Daniel's claim that the monster is inside the house by showing the creature moving could lead the viewer to integrate narrative tension using the generic mechanism, thus considering that it is in fact real in the storyworld. Even though the scene is mostly shown having Callie as the source of perception, Daniel acknowledges the creature's existence and reacts to it cowering in fear,



giving the audience reason to favor a supernatural reading. On the other hand, the attack itself happens while Callie is in the bathroom by herself, meaning that the events are heavily centered around her domain. Moreover, besides having been shown to be lying about being sober, Callie has been depicted opening her box in a previous scene, thus implying that her perception process might be compromised. This, in turn, could lead the viewer to integrate the attack using the functional mechanism, explaining the narrative tension as serving an aesthetic purpose; or else, the perspectival mechanism could be used to resolve the tension as a result of Callie's altered state of mind. This possible reading is reinforced when she is interrogated by the police: the detective in charge confirms that she is under the effect of an undisclosed substance, which leads him to discredit her account of the events (ABSENTIA, 2011, 00:59:18).

In another scene depicting an attack, we have the sequence in which Tricia is taken away by the monster. This sequence is significantly different from the previous one: here the sisters are together, and the threat is the monster that Callie claims to be real—not the husband's ghost. Despite having had her account discredited by the police officers, the narrative agent seems to side her, given the objective shot of the creature moving in the tunnel shown previously. This sequence provides an opportunity for the viewer to confirm whether that is the case, since now Callie is sober and has a more reliable witness. In the scene, the sisters are shown turning off the light on the ground floor and heading for the stairs (ABSENTIA, 2011, 01:16:08). In a long shot from the opposite side of the room, Callie is shown taking the stairs first, with Tricia only slightly behind. As the narrative agent displays Tricia getting to the bottom of the staircase in a close-up shot, the intradiegetic squeaking sound can be heard, as Tricia turns to the living room to investigate. A medium, close-up shot of Callie shows her apprehension at hearing that sound as she turns to the living room as well. In both these instances, the narrative agent does not grant the viewer access to the sisters' field of vision. The scene cuts to match their eyeline, but instead of revealing what they see, the camera points back at them. This composition allows the possible threat to hide behind the camera, thus heightening the tension.

Shown from a long, high-angle shot at the bottom of the stairs, Tricia is made to look threatened; incidentally, she is also physically closer to the creature. As she looks into the living room, the camera shifts position to a close-up shot of Tricia, still limiting the viewer's access to the field of vision behind the camera. As the camera pulls closer from this position, the approach seems dangerous, as if the creature is charging at her while she is aware. When the camera finally reveals what she sees, the negative space is pitch black, thus maintaining the tension. The scene ends with a swell in the intradiegetic squeaking and a quick movement that

indicates the monster's attack. Her account is still discredited by the police, but the indications that she might in fact be telling the truth are stronger.

In considering the *mise-en-scène* of physical assault in *Hereditary* (2018), a prime example to consider is Peter's encounter with Charlie's ghost. This sequence begins from a seemingly objective vantage point directed at Peter's bedroom door. With a pan to the left, the narrative agent directs the viewer's gaze to a close-up shot of the teenager sleeping. Peter is then woken up by an intradiegetic popping sound (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:26:47) to find his sister standing in the corner, as per Figure 45. The teenager is established as the source of perception in this shot with the principle of eyeline match, the use of shallow focus to represent his transition from asleep to awake, and Charlie's display in a Dutch-angle shot that emulates Peter's vantage point—making this an instance of primary ocularization. Startled with the sighting, he is shown sitting up in bed in a long shot. With the following reverse shot, the vivid image of Charlie is dispelled as her head topples down. As the camera tilts down to follow the movement from Peter's assumed position, the head transforms into a ball that rolls across the floor; as such, this could be interpreted as misperception. Nonetheless, as the scene progresses, Peter is shown in a close-up shot from the side as hands reach out from the bedpost and grab his head. In medium, low-angle shot, the character is shown struggling as the pair of hands strangle him (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:27:43). Further indication of supernatural forces at play is displayed when the door slams shut on its own. The struggle is interrupted when the scene cuts to show Annie in long shot trying to calm him down. Despite believing him, the fact that Annie does not see Peter's attacker seems to indicate that it might have been a dream or hallucination.

*Figure 44 – View of Charlie's ghost.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:27:16)

As for the next sequence fitting this category, we have the moment when Peter finally wakes up. When he is shown sitting up in his bed in a long shot—in zero ocularization—it is possible to see someone perched up on the wall behind him (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:48:16). Since Peter is not established as the source of perception, there is little indication that this could be an example of misperception; however, the use of an objective shot does not immediately confirm it as real—we could speculate that in this case, apprehension over its nature is dependent on context since the plausibility of the monsters seen in the film has not been acknowledged. Additionally, its unlikely and static nature, coupled with its marginally visible state elicits further hesitation. The apprehension over the possibility of an attack seems to be reinforced when Peter turns to the left to look behind him, and the obscured figure is shown skittering along the wall in the negative space of the frame in an active effort to move out of the character's field of vision. The hesitation over the nature of this sighting is further reinforced when Peter finds his father's scorched body, as per Figure 46.

Figure 45 – View of Annie perched on the wall.



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:52:04)

This scene is an example of an objective shot playing with zero focalization. The narrative agent shares with the viewer an area of the frame that is invisible to the character, enhancing a sense of dread for his unawareness of the danger upon him. Nonetheless, like in the previous, a supernatural interpretation is not automatically reinforced by the use of an objective shot, possibly because of the general unresolved ambiguity in the film. Additionally, the monster's stillness also seems to cause hesitation.

Since the monster is visible to the viewer, there is no sense of apprehension over what is hiding in the gaps of the frame. Moreover, there is no sense that Peter might be walking towards his doom. As a result, it could be argued that this scene combines two strategies, the *mise-en-scène* of physical assault and the representation of the uncanny, since it is the unlikelihood of Annie's ability to hang on the wall, coupled with the use of a low-angle shot that seems to originate the sense of threat. The scene that follows heightens even more the ambiguity established thus far. As the camera pans right to follow Peter's gaze, a naked man is shown in long shot by the open door, partially obscured in shadows (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:52:46).

In *The Lodge* (2019), the notion of a possible threat and the associated play with suspense is significantly different due to the nature of the narrative. Instead of a character who witnesses an impossible being or unlikely situation and is met with disbelief, in this film we are presented with the opposite: after the characters get stuck in the lodge, the narrative agent follows Grace more closely; while she refuses to accept the plausibility of the situation they are living, the children try to convince her otherwise. That being the case, we must consider scenes

that cause tension in the story with the intent of threatening Grace’s grounding on real world logic.

After they wake up to find that all the food and their personal belongings are gone, Grace refuses to accept the siblings’ hypothesis that things just simply disappeared. She tells them that she will go up to her room, and she expects everything to be back in place when she comes back. That does not happen, of course, but it is important to highlight that from the beginning, she attributes the unusual events to be their doing, like some type of prank (THE LODGE, 2019, 00:54:04). This straightforward stance is ambiguated by the siblings’ claim that they did not do anything, suggesting instead that Grace might be responsible, since she sleepwalks around the house through the night. Another scene that elicits ambiguity takes place while Grace is taking a shower. She needs to fill the sink with hot water, since the generator is not working; as the steam fogs up the mirror, the word “repent” becomes visible, as per Figure 47. A sharp change in the extradiegetic soundtrack accentuates Grace’s reaction to the strange situation, underscoring a sense of suspense and apprehension. From the water being poured into the sink to the character washing herself, and the writing becoming visible, this sequence is displayed without the use of shot/reverse shot, thus with zero ocularization. Having the narrative agent marked as the source of perception, the viewer has little indication that this could be a product of the character’s mind.

*Figure 46 – View of the writing on the mirror.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 01:01:33)

Another example worth mentioning takes place shortly after. As a display of the model house accompanied by an extradiegetic hymn cuts to a close-up shot of Grace lying in bed, a male voice says “Repent! Repent your sins!” (THE LODGE, 2019, 01:02:19). At this time, it is unclear whether this voice is extra- or intradiegetic since Grace’s facial expression does not confirm whether she heard. Nonetheless, the scene cuts to what can be assumed to be a reverse shot showing a cross hanging on the wall, and then another shot of Grace getting up to take it down. Considering the connection established between these shots, the viewer might interpret this as an aural representation of the character’s trauma and her discomfort around religious imagery and discourse, an echo of her past in the cult. As such, the scene might be integrated using the functional mechanism, serving a thematic purpose. This interpretation is further ambiguated when Mia comes into Grace’s room to tell her that she heard a voice; with the introduction of a witness to the mysterious event, there is reason to consider this to be an objective instance of secondary auricularization. In this regard, it also bears mentioning that as matters escalate and the viewer might feel more inclined to integrate the events using the generic mechanism to resolve ambiguity by admitting that the supernatural events must be real in accordance with genre conventions, the source of this disembodied voice urging them to repent and confess their sins is revealed to be a speaker in the attic, dramatically changing the possible readings towards a rational explanation.

As the two are shown in objective, medium shot—an instance of zero ocularization—going into the dark hall to investigate, a constant, intradiegetic sweeping sound of a draft enhances the perception of the lodge as a hostile space. As the scene progresses, a loud bang startles them and draws their attention to the negative space in the far back. The door behind them flings open seemingly on its own, with a swell in the sweeping sound of wind enhancing the tension. As Grace walks through the door, the camera position shifts to an over-the-shoulder shot. Even though the use of a shot/reverse shot is arguably absent, it is possible to link the act of looking to a diegetic set of eyes, which could lead this shot to be interpreted as an instance of secondary ocularization. That being the case, we can consider Grace to be the source of perception as the scene progresses to reveal countless snow angels lined outside under the night sky, as per Figure 48. Additionally, an extradiegetic soundtrack of indiscernible prayers enhances the apprehension over the nature of these angels and the camera zooms in to menacingly bring the viewer closer to them.

*Figure 47 – View of snow angels.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 01:04:12)

Finally, another example of a scene with a sense of possible threat and use of suspense takes place while Grace is out in the wilderness trying to find help (THE LODGE, 2019, 01:10:46). After finding a cabin that eerily resembles a cross—displayed in an extreme long shot, thus emphasizing its isolation—, Grace approaches the building in hopes of finding someone who will offer help in their predicament. Despite the presence of long, medium, and close-up shots of the character braving the extreme landscape, the absence of a reverse shot would indicate that the narrative agent shows venture objectively, in zero ocularization. As she gets closer to the cabin, the tense extradiegetic soundtrack swells, augmenting the general feeling of apprehension. The scene cuts to an objective medium shot of the windows in the upper level of the building, where an obscured figure can be seen staring down at Grace, as per Figure 49. Although the absence of a reverse shot connecting this shot to Grace’s act of looking attributes this shot with an objective quality, the strangeness of the shot and the ambiguous nature of the narrative might elicit hesitation. Alternatively, if this objective shot is accepted to be reliable, the viewer could potentially interpret that the woman is being watched without her knowledge.

Figure 48 – View of silhouette on the cabin's window.



(THE LODGE, 2019, 01:10:55)

In considering our analysis of instances of the *mise-en-scène* of physical assault, it is possible to point out that in *Absentia* (2011) and *Hereditary* (2018), the moments in which the creature is perceived as more static seem to work much like what was seen with the representation of the monster. Additionally, whether it is Tricia's depiction receding onto the wall to escape the ghost's touch, Peter's despair at being grabbed by ghostly hands, or Daniel cowering after seeing the insectoid monster, the characters' guttural reaction to the creature and its imminent violence increases the emotional stakes for the viewer due to emotive convergence (CARROLL, 1990, p. 18). As a result, it could be argued that the depiction of an active aggression and the characters' reaction to it favors a supernatural reading. After an attack takes place, there is an overall tendency of balancing the psychological and the supernatural explanations with subsequent shots that reveal the attack to be a dream, the visual representation of internal reality, or to discredit the event altogether in later conversations with other characters. Furthermore, in *Absentia* (2011) the attacks by the insectoid monster suggest that scenes featuring a witness to the monster's actions could favor supernatural readings as well.

In all three films, the scenes in which a monster or an uncanny event are depicted with the use of objective shots or with zero focalization seem to denote that ambiguity can be maintained independent of an unreliable proxy. As observed, this is arguably possible because, being inserted in the narrative context, these sequences are not in fact neutral. Being aware of what transpired before and of the clash between rationalizing and supernatural readings, the viewer is likely hesitant to take these portrayals at face value. As a result, despite the fact that



misperception does not seem to be an underlying mechanism for ambiguating the events depicted in these narratives, there is still a generalized sense of apprehension over the nature of the events and their plausibility.

#### 4.4. *THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE OF THE TRAUMA OF BIRTH*

The fourth strategy proposed by Urbano (1998) also focuses on the dynamic seen in sequences that usually feature physical attacks and a sense of overwhelming danger. However, unlike the previous strategy, the *mise-en-scène* of the trauma of birth tends to be paired with unmanageable apprehension and anxiety over complete loss of control and helplessness. Consequently, the scenes selected to be discussed under this category have the common elements of depicting the characters' descent into chaos.

In *Absentia* (2011), after Tricia is kidnapped, Callie initially goes to the police for help; given her history with drug addiction and the nature of her report, the detectives do not believe her, listing her as the only person of interest instead. Her version of the story is told in a flash-back with only the tense, extradiegetic soundtrack (*ABSENTIA*, 2011, 01:17:58). The narrative agent shows her in a Dutch-angle shot, with soft focus, still on the stairs trying to hold on to Tricia. This visual account is punctuated by shots of the detectives listening to her, looking skeptical. The flash-back resumes to a medium shot of Callie in soft focus holding on to a bollard to keep her sister from being dragged into the underpass.

Seeing no other solution to help her sister, she waits for nightfall and ventures into the underpass to offer a trade: herself in exchange for Tricia. With a tense soundtrack, the narrative agent shows Callie standing by the tunnel's entrance in long shot from the inside—in zero ocularization, as if she is mustering the courage to go in (*ABSENTIA*, 2011, 01:22:27). The narrative agent does not align with her perspective, showing her advance instead from further behind—when any eventual jerks in the camera makes it feel like the creature might be following her—, or ahead—limiting the viewer's field of vision and thus heightening the apprehension. After Callie offers the trade, the narrative agent arguably aligns with her perspective, tilting the camera up and panning to the left to represent her eyes wandering as desperate screams can be heard in the background—in secondary auricularization (*ABSENTIA*, 2011, 01:23:57).

The presence of the insectoid monster is marginally disclosed as elongated shadows rush from one point to the other while the narrative agent circles around Callie, in a movement that reveals as much as it hides. When her offer is accepted, an intradiegetic sickening tearing sound can be heard; the camera then stops, showing Callie in a close-up, high-angle shot just

slightly above eye-level. In the negative space to the right lies what the monster has to give in exchange for Callie's offer: her stillborn niece or nephew (ABSENTIA, 2011, 01:24:47). Feeling desperate and nauseated with the sight, the character eyes left and right, and the reverse shot reveals her goal, making it to one of the exits. As she tries to make a run for it, the narrative agent alternates between showing her from the side, in medium shot, and from behind, in long shot—a position that has the potential to imply a chase because of the jerks. The camera's position shifts to the outside of the underpass, displaying how close she is to her escape. As the camera shifts back to the position behind her, Callie goes into a badly lit patch and the camera pushes forward. The whooshing sound effect indicates that something happened, and indeed, when the camera catches the light again, Callie is no more. A lone converse sneaker is seen tumbling down the sidewalk on the outside (ABSENTIA, 2011, 01:25:28).

In *Hereditary* (2018), scenes that fall under this category and thus feature utter helplessness begin when Annie finds her mother's desecrated body in her attic (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:37:04), and Peter is attacked by Paimon during class (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:38:11). As for the examples that will be appreciated here, we will consider Annie's attempt to convince Steve of the imminent danger against their family, the sequence in which Annie is seemingly possessed, and the chase that ensues. In approaching the end of film, the narrative agent seems to commit to the existence of the impossible beings shown thus far. The use of objective shots and the fact that the sightings are not quickly dispelled push the viewer to accept the impossible events as supernatural. Nonetheless, additional scenes are presented that seem to reintroduce the ambiguity. Some examples will be analyzed below.

For the first example, Annie asks Steve to go into the attic to confirm if her mother's body truly is there. There is a significant break between the two characters' emotional state. Whereas Annie is desperate, Steve is depicted as collected and skeptical, slightly frustrated (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:41:02). The fact that the camera work in the sequence does not completely side with either character might signal the narrative agent's wavering between supernatural and psychological readings, mirroring the viewer's struggle to integrate the strange events taking place. There is no direct use of eyeline match to ground the source of perception on either character, yet the shots are not completely objective either, favoring instead the use of medium shots that resemble over-the-shoulder perspective. Even after Steve confirms to Annie and the viewer alike that there is a corpse in the attic, the composition of the scene is still divisive, as per Figure 50, fluctuating between objective shots in zero ocularization showing the couple in medium shot, and over-the-shoulder shots.

*Figure 49 – View of Annie pleading Steve to believe her.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:43:40)

The clash between these character's versions of the story culminates in the scene in which Annie asks Steve to burn Charlie's sketch book. She explains that burning the book will set her ablaze along with it, but that is the only way to save Peter. Shown in long shot over Annie's shoulder, Steve's response is that he thinks she is sick—and he has demonstrated suspecting that his wife exhumed Ellen's body. In a burst of desperation, Annie dashes forward, snatching the sketch book from his hands. When she throws it in the fire, contrary to her belief, the one who goes up in flames is Steve, as per Figure 51.

The narrative agent shows this scene in a long shot that captures both characters within the frame, thus making this an instance of zero ocularization—an objective shot. As a result, there is little hesitation over whether Steve really burst into flames—although the cause of the fire could still be interpreted as either supernatural or a homicide.

*Figure 50 – View of Steve's body in flames.*



(HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:46:37)

The other scene that falls under this strategy can be seen when Annie, now under Paimon's control, charges at Peter from a dark corner (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:53:05) and chases him into the attic. While earlier depictions of Annie perched on the walls might give rise to ambiguous interpretations, the objective display in zero ocularization in this sequence, in combination with an actual attack and Peter's reaction leave little room for hesitation. As a result, when the narrative agent shows Annie attached to the ceiling, knocking her head on the attic door, the viewer might feel strongly inclined towards the supernatural explanation.

In the following sequence, Annie is shown midair cutting her own head off with a piano string (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:55:44). Peter tries to deny the plausibility of what is happening, telling himself to wake up, which could lead the viewer to expect the scene to cut and reveal him still lying in bed. Still, the cinematography employed seems to reinforce the supernatural reading. The shot/reverse shot connecting the sight of Annie floating in the air to Peter's subjective perception is not followed by any indications of misperception. Furthermore, a close-up shot of Annie looking down is matched with a reverse shot that suggests that Peter is the object of her gaze. By aligning itself with her in depicting her as a source of perception, the narrative agent acknowledges her existence. Yet again, this effect is counterbalanced with another scene that might open ambiguous readings due to its dissonance from what was taking place at that moment. From a close-up shot of Peter, the scene cuts after an intradiegetic cue to show three naked people waving at him from a corner of the attic, in medium shot and secondary ocularization (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:56:13).

Trying to escape the madness, he jumps through the window (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:56:16). Whether or not the fall killed him, the beam of light sets on his back, growing smaller and dimmer, as if entering his body. As a result of this merging, he now makes the recognizable pop with his mouth, just like Charlie did (HEREDITARY, 2018, 01:57:46). He gets up in a depersonalized state and follows his mother's decapitated body as it floats into Charlie's tree house. The extradiegetic soundtrack tunes in with a tranquil tune that swells as the film closes with the cult celebrating Paimon's arrival, confirming the supernatural explanation.

In *The Lodge* (2019), we will indicate two moments that fit this category. The first one would be the scene in which Grace does self-flagellation to atone for her sins. Hence this scene is thematically different, not dependent upon Grace's struggle to survive. Nonetheless, this scene denotes helplessness, loss of sanity, and the descent into the new reality. Additionally, it represents the growing risks for the siblings' wellbeing. Having found her dog dead because of the cold, Grace accepts that they must in fact have died. Regressing into the cult mentality, she then refuses to accept the siblings' admission that they were behind all the unexplainable events of the past few days. At this point, she does become as monstrous as she was initially perceived, nothing more than the psychopath who was featured in one of Richard's books.

In the self-flagellation scene, the narrative agent displays Grace in long shot from behind as she places burning logs on the fireplace threshold, as per Figure 52. This moment is followed by a reverse shot of the siblings in long shot, thus connecting what is seen with their vantage point in an instance of secondary ocularization. As a result, the sight of Grace kneeling on the logs and groaning in pain is depicted as their subjective perspective. While displaying this scene in secondary ocularization does not elicit ambiguity, it aligns the narrative agent and the children, promoting more identification with them. As they see this grueling act of self-mutilation, the viewer is invited to feel horrified with them.

*Figure 51 – View of Grace's preparation for self-flagellation.*



(THE LODGE, 2019, 01:27:36)

The second moment to be discussed takes place when Grace goes up into the attic after the siblings. The extradiegetic soundtrack sets an unnerving tone as the children cower on the furthest wall. The children are shown initially in long shot, hugging one another in fear. The reverse shot shows the attic's entrance in long shot, as Grace slowly wakes into the frame (THE LODGE, 2019, 01:32:44). The use of a reverse shot, and thus secondary ocularization, promotes identification with Aiden and Mia, much like in the previous scene described; as a result, the viewer shares in the dread as she moves closer. Calmly she approaches them and kneels down, proceeding to tell them that they have nothing to fear, for death is behind them. Aiden tries to reason with Grace, repeating that they are not dead, and everything was only pretend; in response to this claim, the woman raises the gun she has on her hand and asks them to trust her. At this moment, Richard arrives at the lodge, honking to signal his presence (THE LODGE, 2019, 01:34:16). When he meets them while going up the stairs, Grace tells him that God is punishing them for what they did. He tries to reason with her, but just like moments before, she raises the gun to offer proof. When she does pull the trigger, the barrel is empty, and nothing happens. To Grace, this is confirmation that they are all in fact dead, left in purgatory because of their sins. Since Richard does not accept this reality, Grace shoots him to give him definite proof; only this time the hammer hits a bullet. Although this sequence features the use of shot/reverse shot, no hesitation is elicited. It is possible to argue that here too, its purpose is promoting identification to heighten the apprehension.

In these last scenes, the lingering ambiguity over the nature of events is resolved; nonetheless, the film ends with an open ending. Failing to flee in their father's car, the children are left at her mercy. After showing all of them arranged by the table, the narrative agent shows Grace putting tape with the word "sin" over their mouths. The film then closes with a close-up shot of the pistol over the table, just like the one shown at the opening sequence, implying but not showing the possible ensuing violence.

As the stakes increase in these films leading up to their end, the degree of hesitation between real-life plausibility and supernatural explanation decreases sharply. In *Absentia* (2011), Callie fails to convince the detectives until the very end. The level of identification and emotive convergence between the protagonist and the viewer likely play a big role in the resolution of the narrative tension. Despite the possibility of integrating the events as a product of her mind because of drug use, the indications to the contrary are overwhelming. The viewer has reason to believe, for example, that Callie was sober when Tricia was taken. In the end, the aural cues and the alignment of the narrative agent with Callie as she tries to sacrifice herself in an attempt to save her sister invites the viewer to despair with her. The same can be said about *Hereditary* (2018); as the unexplainable events become more and more pervasive, the counterpoints offered with a psychological explanation, albeit plausible, begin to sound like appalling denial. Since Steve was present during the séance that summoned Charlie back into their home and witnessed her action upon the physical world, his vehement stance that Annie needs medical help does not sound completely justified. Even though Peter and Annie might be experiencing the onset of a psychological condition, this possibility fails to account for the actions of the cult. Additionally, the alignment of the narrative agent with Annie and Peter as they navigate these strange events encourages the viewer to believe them. As for *The Lodge* (2019), the narrative tension is resolved in the narrative. The ambiguity begins to dwindle as soon as the speaker broadcasting the dogmatic messages is revealed, and the possible supernatural explanation is refuted when the siblings admit that they were behind everything.

## 5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS, OR A QUEST FOR COHERENCE

This research came into existence out of the desire to understand the distinctive effect that films favoring ambiguous narratives caused in me some seven years ago; as such, it seems fitting to say that it was a quest for coherence, to use the words of Sternberg (2012). In essence, this analysis is an integrating effort motivated by the lingering effects of other underlying integrating efforts: that is, an attempt to assimilate the workings behind narratives that undermine coherence and logic.

Having been motivated in the first place by films such as *Absentia* (Mike Flanagan, 2011) itself, *Under the Skin* (Glazer, 2013), and *The Babadook* (Kent, 2014), the term post-horror eventually emerged as a *sine qua non* condition for an analysis of the aesthetic choices and strategies that cause apprehension over the plausibility of the threats featured in these narratives. As a result, our quest for coherence begins with an effort to understand what makes this genre different from other horror productions. Post-horror is described for distinctively employing lingering dread and slow pacing that creates a haunting and oppressive atmosphere. It avoids dynamic editing and jump-scares, as well as overtly abject depictions of the monster and violence, favoring instead the activation of negative affect without object-directed apprehension. As such, the use of this minimalistic approach to explore fraught moods and subjectivity centered around grief, mourning, and sadness displaces horror's conventional *locus* for generating fear and disgust, eliciting uneasiness and dread in connection to hesitation, thus being associated with the concept of "the fantastic", by Tzvetan Todorov (1973), and figurations of the uncanny.

Yet, informed by the work of Botting (1996), we see that the Gothic evokes a gloomy and mysterious atmosphere, and deals in negative affects. The genre threatens the loss of sanity and obscures single meaning, transgressing the limits of reality and possibility. Additionally, by holding the audience in expectation, in the words of Summers (1969), the Gothic employs long-drawn suspense in its stories, often with elusive specters and apparitions that cause hesitation. Modernist cinema explores Gothic themes, rejects empathetic storytelling, and subverts Hollywood's classic narrative mode. Postmodern horror portrays the unspeakable and sheds light onto the private life with depictions of decentered, less outwardly looking monsters (WOODS, 2003). Post-9/11 horror features films that refuse to restore normalcy, privileging instead bleak narratives without any possibility of a fun viewing experience. Additionally, some fashion of ambiguity is described in all these trends.



*Absentia* (2011) employs ghosts and a marginally visible monster to create apprehension and fear. The same can be said about *Hereditary* (2018), with the many appearances of ghosts and the presence of an actual cult; ultimately, monstrosity and abject imagery are present in the trend. Additionally, we can also observe some degree of dynamic editing and fast paced rhythm in *Hereditary* (2018), while *Absentia* (2011) features jump-scares. So, what can be pointed out to be perceptibly different? While this comparative effort is not the focus of this work, it does figure at its core. Following our discussion on the work of David Church (2021), we can speculate that what makes post-horror feel dissonant from other horror films is the use of horror tropes in combination with a predominance of slow pacing and static shots over dynamic editing and camera workings. Additionally, informed by Church's discussion (2021), we can further suggest that these alienating strategies are successful in evoking apprehension and uneasiness for retaining some degree of real-world plausibility. This leads us back to our quest for coherence and our effort to make sense of the workings of ambiguous narratives.

In the films that compose our corpus, we can surely point out the use of exposition to discredit the impossible events: in *Absentia* (2011), Tricia's therapist explains that the sightings are a product of her mind trying to cope with grief; Callie is a drug addict who is met with skepticism by her sister and by the detectives. In *Hereditary* (2018), the viewer is made aware of the family's history with psychological conditions, moreover, Steve discredits Annie's claims and says she needs professional help. In *The Lodge* (2019), the children constantly question Grace and try to convince her to accept the new perceived reality. And yet, should diverging perception and discourses be enough to resolve ambiguity, we would surely not hesitate when presented with further sightings. Moreover, should diverging discourses be enough to resolve ambiguity, the viewer would readily side with the siblings in *The Lodge* (2019). Thus, we ponder on what kind of narrative strategy and cinematography is at use to make us question logic.

Considering Cahir's proposition (2006) that it is necessary to understand the language of cinema to create meaning from a visual narrative, we have considered the effects of conventionalized cinematography strategies, such as camera, sound, editing, and filmic focalization—complemented with the concepts of ocularization and auricularization (JOST, 2004)—to propose a discussion on the formal aspects seen at use in these narratives to elicit ambiguous readings and hesitation in the viewer. Based on the analysis of the three films in our corpus, a pattern seems to arise.

In the scenes fitting Urbano's first strategy (1998), we see how figurations of the uncanny are introduced into the narrative. The use of soundtrack seems to be extremely important in eliciting negative affects in connection to what is shown. With a different aural cue—a happy one—the dollhouse sitting in the lit room in *The Lodge* (2019) could be perceived positively. The initial establishing shots seem to underscore visually the underlying themes, the creatures in the tunnel, occult practices, religious zeal, and the organizing force behind the events that transpire in the lodge. Similarly, the possible psychological explanations are also presented. As such, when the monster eventually appears, the viewer will know not to completely trust the character's perception.

Considering our analysis of the second and third strategies proposed by Urbano (1998), we seem to find a correlation between the characters' reactions to the monster and their ambiguating potential. The scenes that feature a static representation seem to be met mostly with awe or confusion for their unlikelihood—as such, they seem to be closely related to the use of figurations of the uncanny. Additionally, they heighten the apprehension over the nature of the events. Conversely, when the monster charges at the characters, physically attacks them, or otherwise displays behavior that heightens the anticipation for an attack, the characters' guttural attempt to avoid their touch seems to reinforce their plausibility. As such, we can consider the possible emotive convergence between viewer and character to play an important role in causing hesitation. Nonetheless, when the physical assault is displayed back-to-back with another shot that proves the attack to be a dream, or when the action of another person dispels it, the hesitation over the nature of the monster is reinforced.

Regarding the instances that might indicate misperception, these sightings seem to be overall short lived. They seem to be grounded on subjective perspective with the use of shot/reverse shot and are mostly shown obfuscated with the use of soft focus, low lighting, or otherwise other trappings that limit vision. Additionally, on top of being overall not witnessed or acknowledged by other people in the scene, they are dispelled with a shift in camera position; or when the characters turn on the lights, and the change in luminosity proves that there is nothing there. This *mise-en-scène* of misperception seems to reinforce rationalizing interpretations.

In these films, perception is also put at issue with disembodied aural cues. Much like with visual instances of misperception, they seem to be grounded on character perception as instances of secondary auricularization. Their potential for ambiguating the narrative seems to be dependent on visual cues. When they are paired either with a sighting of the monster or a

mundane source, they can ease the hesitation either way—the monster really exists, or it was just a tree branch hitting the window. When their source is indefinite, they might influence the viewer towards a rationalizing interpretation—the character might be going insane.

Finally, the analysis of the scenes conforming to Urbano's fourth strategy (1998) seems to underscore the prevalence of the identification between viewer and protagonist over rationalizing discourse that might question their perception. Despite the existence of additional indications towards a psychological explanation as the film comes to a close, the escalation of unexplainable events coupled with the emotive convergence might lead the viewer to accept the supernatural interpretation. In this regard, the different dynamic seen in *The Lodge* (2019) seems to underpin the importance of identification between viewer and character. The narrative agent at first follows the siblings, and their bias towards Grace is reflected in her representation as potentially malevolent or uncanny. After arriving at the lodge, the narrative agent leaves the children to side with Grace. As such, the viewer shares in her anguish for the impossible scenario and its plausibility. After her dog dies and she completely regresses into the cult mentality, the narrative agent sides with Aiden and Mia again. As a result, the last minutes of the film are filled with apprehension for the risk that Grace poses against them.

While these ambiguating strategies seem to close the thread in our quest for coherence, other possibilities may arise upon further investigation of other films in the post-horror cycle or otherwise. Ambiguous narratives existed in previous cinematic trends, as they will likely do in future ones; as such, we hope to offer footing on the threshold of narrative uncertainty. For the brave souls scrutinizing the monster's flesh, we hope our quest for coherence may offer help in understanding how the creature moves and help see beyond its mask.

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