

The Physiology of Thresholds in Netflix's *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018)



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Abstract: The present article focuses on Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Hill House*, a ten-episode series released on Netflix in 2019 and which the writers claimed was partly inspired by Shirley Jackson's acclaimed novel of the same name. Both narratives are articulated around the towering and bleak presence of Hill House and its crippling influence on a variety of characters. However, questions pertaining to the notion of adaptation or faithfulness will not be tackled here. Instead, we wish to examine the concept of adolescence through the study of boundaries, thresholds and, more generally, liminality. Our discussion will be informed by concepts aligning space and body with a view to shedding new light on the gothic paraphernalia of the show. It will first deal with the bleak and labyrinthine setting of Hill House as a porous and crumbling structure whose cinematic transcription challenges the traditional understanding of space. This contribution will then study the different members of the Crain family and how their characterisation borrows from gothic readings of the ailing and failing body. Finally, we wish to go beyond familiar (albeit fascinating) analyses of liminality (with, for instance, the heterotopic space and the liminal neophyte, our focal points in parts one and two respectively) and apprehend formal and stylistic playfulness through the study of thresholds and transitions in the very fabric of the television narrative.

Keywords: Haunting, Liminality, Threshold, Heterotopia, Gothic Body

Introduction



“A house is like a person's body: the walls are like bones, the pipes are veins, it needs to breathe, it needs light and flow, and it all works together, to keep us safe and healthy inside” (Olivia Crain, episode 2 “Open Casket”). Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Hill House* perfectly

fits the generic codes of the haunted/gothic house story which Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel so perfectly celebrated,¹ despite the numerous departures from and betrayals of the original content.² Released in 2018 as a ten-episode series, Flanagan's creation focuses on Hugh and Olivia Crain and their children (Steven, Shirley, Theo and the twins, Nell and Luke) as they move into a derelict house which they aim to recondition and sell during the summer of 1992. Throughout the ten episodes, the narrative shifts back and forth between 1992 and 2018, while showcasing each character's journey before and after their last night in Hill House – the night when Olivia Crain was last seen alive. The show therefore relies on templates of the gothic and most specifically of recent gothic cinema and television – trauma, depression, abject motherhood, addiction, and anthropomorphic spaces to name but a few – while offering new takes on the cinematic treatment of the haunted house itself.³ Indeed, Hill House is “cold” (Theo, episode 3 “Touch”), it was “born bad” (Steve, episode 10 “Silence Lay Steadily”), a carcass which smells of ruin (Hugh, episode 7 “Eulogy”) and watches every move one makes (Shirley, episode 2). It is a nodal space to which the Crain family keeps returning, after having tried so hard to flee it in their past. As Olivia's aforementioned words (as well as the promotional posters) suggest, the 2018 series toys with the familiar motif of the house-as-body.⁴ Matt Bernico details for instance the anthropomorphic (as well as animal) patterns one might glimpse on the wallpapers, doorknobs and pieces of furniture in Hill House (Bernico, 2020: 42). Flanagan even offers to explore this theme further by aligning house, body and filmmaking techniques, inviting the viewers to appraise the plasticity and flexibility of the surface, joints and thresholds of the television narrative itself. As Giuliana Bruno contends in “Bodily Architectures”, “[h]ouse, body, and the ‘film body’ are erotic surfaces. Their interior can be explored, analyzed, anatomized. Their exterior is clothed.” (Bruno, 1992: 110)

While the gothic of Flanagan's work doesn't need substantial justification or argumentation, the inscription of the present article in a collection dedicated to gothic television and teenagers certainly does. Indeed, the whole first season of the show is articulated around two timelines

1. Zachary Sheldon argues for a shift in genre: the show “beginning as a haunted house story with supernatural forces acting upon its characters and ending as a psychological horror drama, with the horror located in the minds and bodies of its central characters as affected by the pervasiveness of mental illness” (Sheldon, 2019: 45).
2. It has been countlessly argued that the show is loosely adapted from, or a reimagining of Jackson's novel. Two years later, Flanagan released a second season which drew its inspiration from Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*), and is currently working on a third instalment, this time based on Edgar Allan Poe's works and most specifically “The Fall of the House of Usher”. The present article does not wish to comment on the adaptation process nor will it refer to the critical reception of the show, be it positive or negative.
3. See for instance *Crimson Peak* (Del Toro, 2015), *The Hole in the Ground* (Cronin, 2019), *His House* (Weekes, 2020), *The Midnight Club* (Fong and Flanagan, 2022), etc.
4. “The house is more than a monstrous mother – it is a monstrous family” (Wetmore, 2020: 2).

– that of the Crain siblings when they were children and living in the title house and that of the family members two decades later, struggling to cope with the violent death of the mother, Olivia (who killed herself in the same house). Therefore, the very period of adolescence seems, at first, to be missing (even if one may argue that young Shirley and Steven are in their early teenage years in the first timeline). However, what this contribution aims to put forward, is how the essence of adolescence permeates the whole show in its various acceptations and meanings, but also how the absence of the Crains as teenagers further exemplifies the ghostly subtext of the series. Indeed, the contrast between the show’s smooth transitioning from one timeline to another and the characters’ struggle to move on in life actually illustrates and complicates what adolescence stands for: evolution, growing up, maturing, crossing boundaries and thresholds; or, in the words of Glennis Byron and Sharon Deans, “that time of disturbance, change, and growth, [...] when there is as much an inversion of boundaries as there is in the Gothic” (Byron and Deans, 2014: 87).⁵ We therefore wish to contend that while the teenager as a thematic compound remains spectral, off screen and extradiegetic – at times the characters mention their stay with Aunt Janet, Olivia’s sister, and the progressive estrangement of their father, but these elements are never shown – it becomes a structuring device when applied to the symbolic and formal levels. What’s more, the numerous ghosts which prowl around Hill House are “unstable interstitial figures” (Weinstock, 2013: 63) that articulate the show’s discourse on leakage and porousness, as well as its innovative take on the motif of the threshold becoming a fruitful liminal zone baffling and playing with temporality, spatiality, narration and even more traditional television codes.

The following paper will thus analyse gothic adolescence in *The Haunting of Hill House* as a liminal construct, both temporal and spatial, in the broader framework of liminality theories, with a specific focus on the threshold as object and concept. Arnold van Gennep’s seminal *Les Rites de Passage* (1909), which famously determined three phases in the individual’s moving from one social position to another (the separation, transition and incorporation phases), considered puberty, alongside birth, marriage and death, as a key moment in life, a rite of passage (van Gennep, 1981: 13). According to Victor Turner, who further expanded van Gennep’s theories, while in the transition phase (the *limen*, or margin), the “neophyte” (or here, adolescent) remains structurally if not physically invisible (Turner, 1967: 95). This systemic invisibility naturally begets images of ghosts, haunting and spectrality, even death (“a neophyte is structurally ‘dead’” Turner, 1967: 96) and fits within a gothic narrative of

5. See also Catherine Spooner: “Contemporary Western culture constructs adolescence as a time of particular anxiety, a transitional phase between childhood ‘innocence’ and adult ‘knowledge’. Within this framework, Gothic narratives seem to offer one particular strategy for negotiating the terrors of the ‘unknown’.” (Spooner, 2006: 91-92)

social annihilation and subject dissolution. Conversely, more recent discussions on liminality tend to analyse occurrences and situations of instability in textual, filmic and television narratives as states of “perpetual adolescence” (McHugh, 2010: 5), which again bolsters the analogy between the two notions.

This paper wishes to explore the fertile interaction between space, body/family and film through the motif of the threshold. We will first examine the porousness of the structure of Hill House before focusing on the physiological and psychological thresholds between the Crain family members, and finally explore the “fruitful darkness” (Turner 1967: 110) which the breaching of boundaries begets in the filmmaking itself.

Porous membranes: the leaking house

The first shot of episode 1 does not shy away from its almost overwhelming legacy of cinematic gothic houses (from Robert Wise’s *The Haunting* to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* or Guillermo del Toro’s *Crimson Peak*) as it introduces Hill House at night, towering and organically alive. It playfully meets the viewer’s expectations with its steady walls, silent halls and angular geometry, as evidenced in the opening words (Jackson’s first lines quoted almost verbatim but here attributed to Steven Crain’s novel which – just like the house – feeds on the terror shared by the family members):

Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within. It had stood so for a hundred years before my family moved in and might stand a hundred more. Within, walls stood upright, bricks met nearly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut. Silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House. And whatever walked there, walked alone. (episode 1, “Steven Sees a Ghost”)

Unsurprisingly, the gothic setting of the house borrows from Gaston Bachelard’s poetics of space since its basement is mostly a place of fear and danger as it is illustrated in episode 4, “Twin Thing”, when Luke gets trapped in the cellar after having used the dumb waiter.⁶ The building up of tension is facilitated by an alternation of shots showing the Crain parents trying to rescue the boy and the terrifying apparition of a decomposed creature. As Bachelard argues, downward movements illustrate the descent into one’s subconscious, where deepest fears are repressed and

6. “Childhood experiences within the labyrinth of the gothic home are determined by increasing terror” (Georgieva, 2013: 173).

threaten to overwhelm one's sanity: "*la cave est alors de la folie enterrée, des drames murés*" (Bachelard, 1957: 37). Similarly, Maurice Lévy contends: "*La descente d'un escalier est toujours descente vers l'irrationnel. [...] Plus on s'enfonce profondément en nous-mêmes, plus totalement on s'affranchit de la tutelle de la Raison*" (Lévy, 1995: 630). However, in episode 3, the basement becomes a place of revelations: when she lies on the basement sofa, Theo understands the sexual abuse which her young patient, Kelsey, has been the victim of, despite the painful toll it takes on her. This argues for a fruitful confrontation with one's repressed fears. However, despite embracing Bachelard's reading of the outside space as dangerous and threatening, the show eventually disrupts his conception of the home as a safe haven ("*maison natale*", Bachelard, 1957: 32), as will be argued later.

However impenetrable the house may seem, most thresholds in Hill House are eventually breached: windows are smashed with rocks and hail (episode 6 "Two Storms"), characters sneak in and out of it (Abigail in episode 10). Moreover, the house turns out to be filled with airlocks, phones, dumb waiters, hatches, all of which many ways of trespassing and crossing boundaries. Thus, the motif of the threshold is reified in the topography of the Crains' home – as the opening credits suggests. During the one-minute opening titles, the camera focuses on crying statues before zooming out and revealing the labyrinthine aspect of a miniature version of Hill House. A backward tracking shot then positions the viewer as a voyeur peeking through the keyhole of the Red Room door. Relying on gothic templates (domestic horror, scopophilia), the opening credits also suggest a disruption of traditional dialectics: the lure of the locked door and the secret room is reversed, as the viewer is almost expelled from the locus of revelation (the womb/stomach of the house, where Olivia tries to trap her children forever). The quest for knowledge, typical of 18th and 19th century gothic fiction heroines, becomes a constant movement back and forth, a never-ending crossing of thresholds which begets fear and terror. As Anne Louvat and Héléne Machinal contend, "*la terreur se développe dans les lieux de passage*" (Louvât, 2002 : 13). Passageways and overlapping settings are also a source of terror in episode 6 when Nell is temporarily spectralised on the screen. While the family members gather in the hall after a hailstorm broke out, Nell suddenly disappears from the screen (representing the subjectivity of the whole family) and reappears several minutes later. As Melanie Robson argues, "[d]espite the continuity offered by the long take, it is not possible for the viewer to witness the various disappearances and reappearances enacted in the episode" (Robson, 2019: 13). During this long take, Nell's feet are first moved to the fringes of the frame as she is seen standing next to the carpet where the rest of the family (except Theo) are sitting, before vanishing completely. While Robson argues for a traditional reading of the opposition margin/centre, whereby

“the potential threat [is placed] at the edges of the frame” (Robson, 2019: 13), one can also point to the horrific potential of this in-between space. Nell, even though she claims having been there all the time, seems to have been lost in the “dark fabric of the house” (Sheldon, 2020: 58), momentarily sucked in by the threshold which the camera materialises.

Similarly, the Crains quickly discover that the once imposing walls of the house are actually penetrable and “squishy”. When Hugh and Steven try to get rid of the black mould which is progressively invading the foundations of the house, they knock down a load-bearing wall in the basement and discover that its insides are rotten and contaminated with the black substance (episode 7). The further they look, the more mould they find while exposing their lungs to its damaging spores. Here the black mould is seeping both into the walls and lungs of the family, threatening their health and sanity. As Dawn Keetley convincingly argues, black mould as microbial life “unmakes what we think is the fixed and impermeable border between life and death” (Keetley, 2020: 116). The image of corrupted foundations and seeping evil reaches its climax when father and son discover a corpse, that of mad William Hill who immured himself back in 1948. Flanagan here toys with the conceited motif of walls teeming with pest and evil (Lovecraft’s rats, Poe’s black cat)⁷ or hiding the ugly truth of the death of previous tenants. By doing so, the narrative anticipates Olivia’s final act of despair and madness while highlighting the porousness of human, physical and mental frontiers: “*Si l’ordure signifie l’autre côté de la limite, où je ne suis pas et qui me permet d’être, le cadavre, le plus écœurant des déchets, est une limite qui a tout envahi*” (Kristeva, 1980: 11). Not only does the abject corpse signify the impending collapse of the house (and the family), but it also manifests the Crains’ incapacity to exist beyond the limitations of the house: “*Étrangeté imaginaire et menace réelle, [le cadavre] nous appelle et finit par nous engloutir.*” (Kristeva, 1980: 12)

The family’s obsession with Hill House is therefore one of the main subplots of the 1992 timeline, and culminates in the mystery surrounding the red door which appears locked in and impenetrable. It is however revealed in episode 10 that the mysterious room which seemed at first to resist trespassing is actually a shapeshifting place adapting to every family member’s inner wishes – a dance studio for Theo, a tree house for Luke, a toy room for Nell, a game room for Steve, etc. The Red Room can therefore be read as both heterochronia and heterotopia, a place that is “outside of all places,” characterized by “temporal discontinuities” (Foucault, 1994: 179).⁸

7. Hugh believes the scratching sound he hears is made by rats, but he soon discovers that it was probably made by the corpse trying to “scratch his way out” (episode 7).
8. More generally, the show is rife with heterotopic spaces: apart from Hill House, the series features a motel room, a graveyard, a mortuary and a night club. Even Shirley’s car could be seen as a heterotopia.

According to Bertrand Westphal, “[l]’*hétérotopie est l’autre nom de la sphère d’intimité, que les codes éprouvent les pires difficultés à décrire et que chaque individu s’efforce d’étendre à loisir*” (Westphal, 2007: 108). The room’s fluidity reaches its visual climax during the revelation scene as Flanagan uses a still frame and quick editing to express both the timelessness of the place and its morphing capacities. Such an overlapping of intimate spaces is once again reminiscent of Foucault’s heterotopia (the theatre stage, he argues, “juxtapose[s] in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves [...] a whole succession of places that are unrelated to one another,” Foucault, 1974: 181), while the window being the only common point to all those shots ties once again the Red Room to the liminality of the threshold. More specifically, this room is a heterotopia of compensation, “creating a different space, a different real space as perfect, as meticulous, as well-arranged as ours is disorganized, badly arranged, and muddled” (Foucault 1994: 184), the entry to which is necessarily ritualised, albeit differently for each sibling/family member. The central room of the show’s main setting therefore offers a continuum of space, it is a liminal space which encapsulates all the fringes and margins of Hill House and where young characters risk being entrapped forever and thus denied the possibility to grow and mature.⁹

Between limes and limen: the leaking body



It is generally contended that liminality originates from the Latin word *limen*, as Westphal reminds us: “*On aurait à garder à l’esprit que la liminalité relève du seuil (limen) et non de la frontière (limes): le seuil suppose le franchissement libre, contrairement à la frontière, qui peut se révéler étanche,*” (Westphal, 2007: 163), but the homophonic proximity between *limen* and *limes* expands the hermeneutic scope of our understanding of thresholds in the show. The series indeed thrives on this etymological ambivalence, especially through its treatment of time. Despite alternatively exploring the two timelines, the series counteracts gothic expectations of explaining the ghosts of the present by looking into the trauma of the past. Rather, the storyline is adamant in showing the importance of intersubjective relationships, but it also lays the emphasis on each of the characters’ adult trajectories in a centripetal movement around the haunted house. By choosing to give the Crain couple five children, the perception of whom is the focus of the first five episodes, Flanagan and his writers explore different ways of dealing with one’s own haunting. Somehow, each child appears as a dysfunctional limb or organ of a broader structure – family and society – which, just like the house, is transcribed on screen with the

9. Also explored in Georgieva’s study: “borderline spaces outside of society – forests, islands, abandoned cottages, ruins, prisons,” (Georgieva, 2013: 197).

language of the body and of physiological thresholds. Steve, the eldest of the Crain siblings, is the first character to be introduced to the viewer. The contrast between young Steve's role as the comforting big brother, which he appears to pride on, and adult Steve's capitalising on his past, with his successful novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, provides a guideline to the mechanics of the Crain family throughout the show. Steve ties the family together in his book which appears as a fraud, and one of the reasons why it dislocates (Shirley and Theo resent him for using the traumatising events in their childhood for profit). His own marriage is on the verge of collapsing, and the vasectomy he secretly gets further points to his dysfunctional body. He could be analysed as the (short-sighted) eyes of the Crains – however well he pretends to see through ghosts, he remains blind to his inner tragedy. Shirley, as a mortician, tries to restore the integrity of corpses – their skin and appearance, “filling their wounds with modelling material” (Laredo, 2020: 67) – and thus to capture the picture of the dead as they used to be. Her job constrains her to remain on the margins of society and of her own house. The show cleverly exploits the ambiguous continuity between her house and mortuary in space, time, but also in her identity, as there is no radical distinction between her job and personal life (she works with her husband). Shirley is the brain, constantly processing death, feeling responsible for her younger siblings and family's safety. And yet, she turns out to be lying about her own integrity (moral and physical), since it is revealed that she had an affair a few years earlier and never told her husband (which she does in episode 10, asking him to forgive her). As for Theo, her skin is no barrier as it can be penetrated by the feelings and the past of someone or something she touches. Despite using this preternatural gift to assist her young patients, Theo feels plagued by it and constantly wears gloves even in moments of intimacy.¹⁰ Theo obviously embodies the hands of the Crain body, her sensitivity forever hampered and controlled by her angry and aloof attitude – Steve ironically describes her as a “clenched fist with hair” (episode 8 “Witness Marks”). As for Luke, he is a drug addict, living off his siblings' limited generosity (Shirley pays for his rehab for some time, but eventually gives up on him). His liminality is also explicit in his relation to space (he is mostly seen outside, in the street, in other people's homes) and in his obsession with the Bowler Hat Man's feet, which metaphorically lay the emphasis on his always running away from responsibility, his family, his rehab centre. Finally, Nell is also pictured as an outcast (her job remains ambiguous), battling depression in her messy room. It seems that she is expelled from the heteronormative structure when her husband dies (after a short-lived marriage). Nell's sleep paralysis also suggests a disrupted boundary between slumber and wakefulness, a liminal space in which she loses control of her body. Her

10. The treatment of her lesbianism has been much discussed, as well as her commitment to a long-term relationship at the end, which places her once again in an ambiguous societal position.

disturbingly large, open and silent mouth translates Nell's inability to be listened to by her own family,¹¹ as well as her marginalised position within the show itself (in most shots of her ghost, she appears in the background or to the side of the frame) and within linear time itself. In other words, not only do the Crains embody the diversity of physical and psychological responses to trauma (depression, denial, anger, addiction...), but they also remain "betwixt and between all the recognized fixed points in spacetime of structural classification" (Turner, 1967: 81), failing to meet both family and societal expectations.

Unequivocally, *The Haunting of Hill House* ties the liminality of the Crain siblings to their conflicted relationship with their mother. Olivia, just like the other mother figures of show – Poppy, one of the previous tenants of Hill House, Mrs Dudley, the housekeeper – embodies the anxious, overprotective and devouring mother figure whose obsession with her children's untimely deaths (which she keeps having visions of) sets the story in motion.¹² While the first episode lays the emphasis on the mystery surrounding Olivia's disappearance, the penultimate ("Screaming Meemies") adopts the mother's point of view to account for her anxiety verging on pathological insanity.¹³ As the show progresses, her mental deterioration translates in sleepwalking, dreadful headaches and a growing obsession with her abode. For instance, when she shows to her husband the master blueprint she has been working on for days (episode 7), Olivia doesn't understand why Hugh points to her that what seems to be mere doodles are actually miniature houses endlessly replicated inside the master print, an "endless extension of surfaces" (Link, 2020: 126). Such fractal vision of entrapment, containment and oppression betrays Olivia's determination to create a forever house for her family, to the point when Olivia becomes the house (or is it other way round?).¹⁴ Hill House is hailed as a fortress by Olivia, a protective skin which, in the words of Ian Conrich, becomes "a layer that is part of the integumentary system, that protects and retains the body within" (Conrich, 2017: 181), here the body being the Crain children. Olivia's red dress is a cinematic cue to her becoming a ghost haunting the equally Red Room. Borrowing from the Terrible Mother archetype its "destructive and deathly womb, which appears most frequently in the archetypal form of a mouth bristling with teeth" (Neumann, 2015: 168), Olivia/Hill House wishes to protect her children against the hungry world out as she is urged to "hold the door" by Mrs Dudley (episode 9). However,

11. "I was right here and I was screaming and shouting, and none of you could see me." (Younger Nell, episode 6)
12. "Violence wrought upon the young child is the necessary stage through which all narratives pass so that the plot can be set in motion." (Georgieva, 2013: 176)
13. "I wish I could just freeze them. Keep 'em just like this forever" (episode 9). In the same episode, she actually sees her twins dying as adults (Nell's corpse on Shirley's mortician table, and Luke having an overdose).
14. Aguirre reminds us that fractal objects are "inbetweeners" which "challenge the neat contours of Euclidian geometry" (Aguirre, 2000: 70).

Olivia's Red Room/Womb is equally hungry and seeks to absorb the Crain children,¹⁵ when she desperately attempts to protect the twins by giving them tea with rat poison in the middle of the night to wake them up from the horrid dream of life which she equates with sadness, solitude, disease, and loss.¹⁶ Luke and Nell are fortunately rescued by their father, but the latter cannot save Abigail, the Dudleys' daughter who had snuck out of her bed in order to play in the Red Room with the twins and their mother.

Abigail's ghost appears to her grieving parents in the aftermath of her poisoning. The makeup used on the young actress testifies to her spectral nature, but it doesn't make her inhuman. Just like Nell's, the ghost of the little girl carries inculpatory information about Olivia's actions and appears as a solacing, albeit mute, presence to the Dudleys. In that respect, spectral corpses in the show, the most prominent of which being obviously Nell, are "nodal figures" (Rabaté, 1993: 51-52), connecting characters' subjectivities with places and timelines. At times, they can elicit horror and disgust (Nell's gaping mouth, her bent neck), but abjection and rot are usually not shown and retained in the liminal space of the in-between. The abject nature of Nell's corpse is hinted at when Theo touches her with her bare hands, it is in the words of the mortician whom Shirley remembers from Olivia's funeral: "I ripped out [Nell's] organs and eyeballs, and I sucked out the blood and the shit, and plugged her holes so she wouldn't leak" (episode 10), it is in the corners of the frames, it is what the viewers' imagination fills those liminal spaces with: « *Frontière sans doute, l'abjection est surtout ambiguïté* » (Kristeva, 1980: 17). The liminality of the abject resonates with the Crains since they are most of the time portrayed as mourners – both timelines being articulated around the death/suicide of one (female) family member. Dara Downey posits that:

[t]hose in mourning are caught in the indeterminate position between life and death, as figured by the uncanny presence of the corpse. In this sense, liminality is disorientating; the limits and borders of personality and/or cultural and social identity become ambiguous or dissolve, as do the limits and borders of space and/or time, as the mourners enter into and pass through the mourning period, and assume new structural and relational identities to the deceased. (Downey, 2016: 7)

However, one could argue, alongside Arpad Szokolczai, that some mourners can be "permanently stuck in rites of separation" and experience

15. As Nell says of the Red Room: "This room is like the heart of the house. No, not a heart, a stomach." (episode 10)

16. In Poppy Hill's words: "A dream about sick and sad and disease and rot and loss and darkness. If they was stuck in that dream, you'd wake 'em." (episode 9)

permanent transitioning (Szokolczai, 2000: 212), which the show is keen to exploit in its aesthetics.

The Autonomous Territory of the Margin: Thriving in this In-between



In his introduction to *Beyond the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature*, Hein Viljoen borrows from van Gennep's theorisation of liminality and defines the boundary as a demarcation between zones of meaning. He even contends that borders are like membranes, filters opening up to liminal spaces and margins which can widen and become autonomous zones (Viljoen, 2007: 10). In *The Haunting of Hill House*, thresholds can not only be analysed as visual props, but also as innovative filming devices.

First, it should be noted that the show's *mise-en-scène* also participates in its overall gothic paraphernalia. The twins, Luke and Nell, fit the liminal gothic child pattern as they experience the horrors of oppressive spaces: endless corridors barely lit at night, towering closets and their creaking hinges, inaccessible basements concealing monsters in the shadows, etc.¹⁷ The gothic display of terror is constructed around the children's fantasies and fears – which they either speak out or which the camera materialises by adopting their perspective. This is obvious in episode 4, when young Luke awakes at night and catches a glimpse of a tall silhouette in the corridor. A series of shot/reverse shots invites the viewer to hide behind Luke and to discover that the man is merely gliding a few inches above the floor, blindingly looking for the young boy with the tapping of his walking stick. Terrified, Luke then hides under his bed and waits for the ghost to leave – but he is eventually discovered. The scene ends with the ghost putting on a hat which he has just found on Luke's bed and bending down, his long fingers reaching out for a screaming Luke. The hackneyed trope of the child hiding under the bed allows for a distorted and unnatural perception of space (the bedroom) but also of the human form as it is reduced to its metonymic and gigantic feet. The obfuscation of meaning and vision reflects both the child's terror and the viewer's inability to make sense of ghost from a rational perspective. In his adult timeline, Luke is also haunted by the Bowler Hat Man who appears as a towering presence behind him. Despite the director no longer using low angle shots or floating spectres, the scene conveys the same sense of oppression

17. "the gothic child is thus always to be found in some sort of transition between one state and another, something that, far from being contradictory, follows the lines of Hegel's dialectical combining of opposites which, on a spiritual and psychological level, is frequently termed 'liminality'" (Georgieva, 2013: 196).

as it focuses on the character's subjectivity and inability to find closure. Is the Man a metaphor of his trauma and subsequent addiction? Or is Luke haunted by his future plight right from his early days in Hill House? Are "young people [...] vessels for adult projections, hopes and fears" (Georgieva, 2013: 186)? Or is it the other way round? Similarly, Nell is confronted with the reversal of chronological time, as episode 5 ("The Bent-Neck Lady") reveals that the ghost who had terrified and persecuted her in her childhood is actually a manifestation of her death by suicide. The twins, even more than their brother and sisters, embody liminal time and the "short-circuiting [that] is bound to happen between the different time periods of one's life"; in other words, "the present becomes past and the past present" (Szakolczai, 2000: 41). The notion of crossing thresholds and moving on is thus negated and this impossibility is materialised in the fabric of the show. Ghosts as generic props are like threads piecing the two timelines together even more efficiently than the characters themselves.

The constant narrative shift between past and present either manifests itself in hard cuts between the young and adult versions of the characters, or with smoother transitions such as the traditional doors opening and closing, characters falling asleep, etc. But the show also offers a variety of transitions which more than often suggest breaching physical and material boundaries. Flanagan uses match cuts with sound continuity for instance: when Shirley's husband, Kevin, nails a picture on the wall, the banging overlaps with the clanging of metal pokers inside the chimney in Hill House, when Hugh and Mr Dudley try to unclog it, in episode 1. He also uses voice continuity when young Shirley says "you fixed her" to the mortician who took care of her mother and then transitions into her older self standing in front of her dead sister's body while the same voice whispers "you fixed her" another time (episode 2). One character can also cross temporalities: in episode 4, a terrified Luke jumps over the last steps of the grand staircase after seeing a ghost on the phone and is seen landing on his adult feet in his rehab dorm; likewise, Nell hears the banging of fists against her hotel room door before the camera moves to reveal a younger version of Hugh, about to enter the same space decades earlier (episode 5). Sometimes, as critics have noted, the past and the present are intertwined in the same shot, the most conclusive illustration being the technically challenging sixth episode, "Two Storms", which lasts 55 minutes and is composed of only five sequence-shots. In this episode, older Hugh is given a peculiar role as he is physically able to move from one dimension to another: looking for the bathroom, he crosses the corridor of the funeral parlour and finds himself in 1992 Hill House, travelling through "a kind of architecture of anachronism," as Mark Fisher suggests in his analysis of the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* (Fischer, 2012: 20). Earlier, as the camera is circling around him, he interacts with his children in their young form and in the few seconds that they are offscreen, they become

their adult selves. Thanks to this technical tour de force, Hugh is staged as the one who was supposed to accompany his children through their process of maturing (their teenage years) but who failed (his children went to live with their aunt Janet, and barely reunited with their father after that). Alternatively, the same movement will provide visual and sound continuity: older Steve seems to be trapped in Hill House as he sees the door of the Red Room closing on him (episode 10), but he concomitantly shuts down his laptop back in his home. In this sequence, again, the frontier between reality and dream/nightmare is blurred, and what seems at first to be an anecdotic conversation between a husband and his pregnant wife is unveiled as a grotesque vision of marital bliss (due to Steve's vasectomy, Leigh cannot possibly be pregnant). The signifiers of dream and reality become interchangeable: the vision of Leigh's pregnancy belongs to the realm of nightmare, while the congregation of the remaining Crains in the bleak setting of Hill House is the reality to which the eldest child must cling. The shows goes even further when some actors are seen in scenes where they are not supposed to appear: Olivia's hallucinations of her dead twins are haunted by Luke and Nell in their adult and ghostly form – once again, the past is haunted by the future. Finally, Steven quoting Shirley Jackson at the beginning and the end annihilates more borders (mediums, writers, genders, the realms of the real and the imaginary) and testifies to the self-reflexive nature of the show. As Olivia states in episode 2: "when we die we turn into stories... we're all stories in the end". Mike Flanagan not only acknowledges his literary legacy and influences through Steven's words, but he also endows his creation with a playful self-reflexivity which jars at times with the realistic treatment of the main themes of the show.

The filming technique therefore toys with the very notion of boundary: the fragmented narrative which the show relies upon is at times complicated by the absence of cuts, material limits and frontiers, and artificially reassembled with what Melanie Robson qualifies as "seamless transitions" (Robson, 2019: 9). Not only does the show explore further the notion of point of view and character projection (Robson, 2019: 9), but it also unsettles the traditional coding of time, space, memory and reality. Limits in the show are narrative and diegetic blanks filled with uncanny voices, corpses, black mould, ghosts and camera tricks (the face of an elderly woman on the phone used by Luke and Nell in episode 4 for instance), thus becoming autonomous territories, zones of creativity. What's more, the unlimited availability of Flanagan's production which Netflix provides (as well as the possibility to consume and digest the television narrative without the imposition of any time or space limits) opens up new perspectives for viewers. While freed from physical constraints, they are encouraged to breach barriers and to remove filters or skin layers until the very object of mystery and terror is laid bare. For instance, many YouTube videos offer to spot the numerous hidden ghosts, which are an

estimated 43 according to several of them, thus prompting new ways of navigating those liminal spaces in an anachronic and asynchronous experience of temporality mimicking that of the series itself.

Conclusion

The Haunting of Hill House as a television narrative is not naïve in its exploitation of gothic conventions (Spooner, 2007: 45), while tentatively playing on ambiguity: despite Steve's claims that the tendency of his family to see ghosts can be genetically accounted for, the eldest sibling acknowledges their presence in the last episode, as she shuts the main door on a variety of spectral presences, including his dead family members. This hermeneutic ambiguity could be seen as a template of gothic television, as Eddie Robson argues about X-files:

The entire series can therefore be seen as a labyrinth in which Mulder is trapped by the oppressive relics of an earlier regime, pursuing cases which may or may not be significant to the bigger picture, and never able to locate the definitive truth: a rendition of the Gothic narrative which is specific to television, and specifically to post-1980s television. (emphasis mine, Robson, 2007: 248)

The truth about Hill House's ghosts is likely to remain hidden; instead, viewers are given gothic margins: creative, even playful but most of all vividly real. Filled with modern society's deepest fears and traumas, they resist the either/or logic and encourage new debates: about margins and marginals in our lives (society, family, sexuality, health, etc.) but also margins of and on the screen (hidden, unsaid, undisclosed). This wilful relinquishing of assumptions resonates with modernity's tentative grappling with present fears: "*La modernité est spectrale parce qu'elle s'expose au retour sans fin d'un passé infiniment révolu, dont elle ne peut néanmoins faire le deuil.*" (Guidée, 2009: 12)

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