

A Ghost Story (David Lowery, 2017): A Quintessential Post-Horror Film?



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Abstract: The representation of the spectral on screen raises questions about the porosity of the boundary between the visible and the invisible, absence and presence, the living and the dead, the real and the imaginary. This article focuses on *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017), identified as representative of post-horror cinema and which stands out from Hollywood conventions with a refusal of the spectacular and graphic horror and a focus on temporality, contemplation, memory, and the impossible mourning of a loss. We will analyze some of the foremost features of the film, the way in which the ghost is represented, his relationships to space, to the human environment and to time. We will then examine the film's links with modernist literature and slow cinema and we will finally discuss its relation with the Gothic mode.

Keywords: Ghost, Post-Horror, Haunting, Memory, Time, Modernism, Gothic

Résumé : La représentation du spectral au cinéma pose la question de la porosité de la frontière entre le visible et l'invisible, l'absence et la présence, le vivant et le mort, le réel et l'imaginaire. Cet article se focalise sur *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017), film représentatif du courant « *post-horror* » à l'écran et qui se démarque de la convention hollywoodienne par un refus du spectaculaire et de l'horreur graphique et un travail sur la temporalité, la contemplation, la mémoire et l'impossible deuil. Nous analyserons les caractéristiques principales du film, la manière dont le fantôme est représenté, ses relations à l'espace, à l'environnement humain et au temps. Nous examinerons ensuite les liens du film avec la littérature moderniste et le « *slow cinema* » et pour finir sa relation avec le mode gothique.

Mots-clés : fantôme, *post-horror*, hantise, mémoire, temps, modernisme, gothique

Introduction

The figure of the ghost, present since the early days of cinematography, prominently manifests in Hollywood cinema of the 1940s/50s (*The Uninvited*, Lewis Allen, 1944, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, Joseph Mankiewicz, 1947, *The Portrait of Jennie*, William Dieterle, 1948, etc.), as well as in horror films of the 1970s-80s (*Fog*, John Carpenter, 1980, *The Shining*, Stanley Kubrick, 1980). It also takes on parodic forms as seen in Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1988) or Ivan Reitman's *Ghost Busters* (1984). The ghost film blurs genre boundaries, blending horror film codes with Gothic thriller, melodrama, and even satirical or burlesque comedy.

Some theoreticians go as far as identifying cinema itself as a narrative of revenants, perceiving a structure of “haunting” constantly at work, whether or not specific films explicitly deal with specters, ectoplasms, or ghosts. This is notably articulated by Jacques Derrida, who in Ken Mc Mullen's film *Ghostdance* makes observations about the spectral nature of cinema. Echoing Roland Barthes' analyses on photography in *Camera Lucida*, he states:

To be haunted by a ghost is to have the memory of what one has never lived in the present, to have the memory of what, fundamentally, has never had the form of presence. Cinema is a 'phantomachia'. Let the ghosts return. Cinema plus psychoanalysis gives us a science of the ghost. Modern technology, despite its scientific appearance, actually multiplies the power of ghosts. The future belongs to ghosts (Mc Mullen, 1996: 129. My translation).¹

Derrida also distinguishes between the “spectre” and the “revenant”:

In the series of roughly equivalent words that precisely designate haunting, 'spectre', unlike 'revenant', says something of the spectral. The spectre is first and foremost visible. But it's a visible invisibility, the visibility of a body that is not present in flesh and bone. It resists the intuition to which it gives itself, it is not tangible. 'Ghost' retains the same reference to 'phainesthai', to appearing for the sight, to the brilliance of day, to phenomenality. And what happens with spectrality, with ghostliness – not necessarily with revenance – is that what is almost visible becomes visible only to the extent that it is not seen in flesh and bone (Mc Mullen, 1996: 129. My translation).

1. Propos repris par Derrida dans son entretien avec Bernard Stiegler in *Échographies de la télévision*, chapitre « spectrographie », p. 129.

This distinction between the “spectral” and the “revenant” is pertinent to the various ways in which cinema brings ghosts into being. Indeed, some ghost films do not present ghosts in an evanescent form supposed to “translate” their spectral dimension (often through photographic superimposition), but rather as characters displaying a body “in flesh and bone”, thus equating their presence in the film with that of (still) living characters, effectively blurring the distinction between worlds in the perception that is given.

The representation of the spectral, whether explicit or suggested, raises questions about the porosity of the boundary between the visible and the invisible, absence and presence, the living and the dead, the real and the imaginary. The ghost is a source of disturbance, whether perceptual, intellectual, or hermeneutic. It is an imprint, a trace of a reality often disturbing and associated with intimate or historical trauma. It also concerns temporal dimensions, the grip of the past on the present, inducing various narrative, enunciative, and figurative strategies. The ghost is a source of uncertainty. It is an intruder, a revealer, or a catalyst. It interrogates the relationship between what is on screen and what remains off-screen, appearance and disappearance, and it raises the question of the body that displays its spectral identity (through transparency, superimposition, shadow projection, heavy makeup, or more conventional attributes such as the white sheet, clanking chains, or more original signs like the scent of mimosa in *The Uninvited* (Lewis Allen, 1944).

This spectral body is sometimes represented in a way that makes it indistinguishable from a “normal” human body. This is the case in *The Sixth Sense* (Night Shyamalan, 1999) which subverts the spectator’s contract,² and *The Others* (Alejandro Amenabar, 2001), which revisits Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* with a new narrative twist. These two films, along with others such as *The Devil’s Backbone* or *Crimson Peak*, (Guillermo Del Toro, 2001, 2015), mark a renewal of the ghost figure at the turn of the 21st century. Among the most recent films, *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2015) offers an innovative treatment (despite various borrowings, particularly from John Carpenter), at the intersection of different figures. *The Awakening* (Nick Murphy, 2011) inventively exploits haunted house tropes and works with “jumpscare” effects on the viewer.

Some of these films featuring ghosts belong to a recent trend that has been labelled “slow horror”, “elevated horror” or “post-horror”. According to David Church who examines these different concepts and provides an

2. In classic cinema, the viewer expects to identify ghosts because they are differentiated in their appearance from living human characters. In *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others*, the true status of the ghosts is only revealed toward the end of the film though minor signs are provided as the narrative develops. The viewer is thus manipulated.

in-depth analysis of various films such as *It Follows*, these films constitute a cycle associated with the long tradition of art-horror³ cinema and with modernist literature and art. This cycle may be defined by specific narrative and formal features that go against the conventions of horror cinema:

Stylistically, post-horror films evince minimalism over maximalism, largely eschewing jump scares, frenetic editing, and energetic and/or handheld cinematography in favor of cold and distanced shot framing, longer-than-average shot durations, slow camera movements, and stately narrative pacing (Church, 2021: 11).

In this article we will focus on *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017) which has been identified as representative of post-horror. We will analyze some of the foremost features of the film, the way in which the ghost is represented, his relationships to space, to the human environment and to time. We will then examine the film’s links with modernist literature and slow cinema and we will finally discuss its relation with the Gothic mode and why it may not be a “horror film”.

A Ghost Story, an ambitious, original and inventive film, uses conventional props like the white bedsheet that ostentatiously signals spectral status, but it stands out from Hollywood conventions with a refusal of the spectacular and the horrific and a focus on temporality, contemplation, memory, and the impossible mourning of a loss. The male protagonist (Casey Affleck) is an unnamed musician only referred to as the letter C in the credits. Right after his accidental death, he returns as a ghost to the house where he lived with his partner M. (Rooney Mara) and becomes a silent witness to her life, her difficult mourning, and her eventual departure. The ghost remains in the house, a passive and mute observer of the lives of successive tenants, and ends up travelling through time, both past and future, while staying in the same space, in a constantly evolving setting, before returning to the initial situation, having experienced the destruction of the house and the moment of its first building.

3. This concept was first coined by Noël Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990). Carroll defines art-horror as an emotion felt when we read a text or watch a film in which a monster (Dracula, a zombie, etc.) triggers emotions like fear, threat or even disgust because the reader/spectator identifies with the protagonists. Thus we are “art-horrified” by an object like Dracula or any other monster. This concept was revisited by Joan Hawkins’ *Cutting Edge. Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-garde* (2000). Hawkins refers more specifically to films (and other art works) that blend the codes of horror with the stylistic and narrative strategies of “art films” such as *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1935) or *Eyes Without a Face* (Georges Franju, 1960).

Featuring the ghost and playing with conventions



While this film also deals with themes of solitude, trauma, and the relationship between the living and the dead, it distinguishes itself from previous films in various ways. Whereas *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* relied on a dual state of ignorance — both the audience and the characters being unaware of their ghostly status — the character C is fully aware of his spectral identity, as is the audience. Additionally, the ghost is visually identified from the outset — in stark contrast to the other films where the spectral figure is indistinguishable from the living — in the most stereotypical way possible, depicted as a body draped in a sheet with two eye holes, reminiscent of children's stories and comics.

However, this representation harkens back to a 17th-Century tradition where corpses were buried in shrouds. Thanks to the meticulous work of the costume designer, this portrayal avoids comedy or ridicule and the character imposes its presence, often motionless, in almost every shot, even evoking a form of emotion and a process of identification despite the lack of a face, another stark difference from the films mentioned above where facial expressiveness is highlighted (Nicole Kidman, Bruce Willis, and child actors in *The Others*). Hence another specificity, the constant association of the viewer with the ghost's point of view, even though many shots are not subjective. The ghost, hyper-visible to the audience, remains invisible to the other characters in the diegesis, except in one sequence where the two small Spanish-speaking children seem to sense his presence without actually seeing him.

Another distinctive feature is the choice of a square format, which is relatively rare in modern cinema. This suggests a form of nostalgia (claimed) for the classic cinema of the 1950s and also creates an impression of claustrophobia, the idea that the ghost is a prisoner of the house as he is of the box-like frame. The vintage aspect is reinforced by the rounded edges of the frame and the slightly desaturated pastel photography. This aspect ratio (1.33.1) accentuates the centripetal nature of the image, as also seen in Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) highlighting the foreground and background and certain details that escape the wide format. The sense of confinement is reinforced by numerous frame-within-the frame shots that circumscribe the figure of the ghost, often filmed behind the cross-bars of a window, restricting his space. While the camera often films the ghost whole and center frame, numerous metonymic shots fragment the ghost's body, relegated sometimes to the edge of the frame, such as at the moment when M.'s hand stretches towards C. almost touching the bottom of his sheet while the upper part of his body remains off screen.

Despite the deliberately conventional physical appearance,⁴ the film rejects most tropes of classic ghost films and all spectacular effects, except at certain moments that seem to function as parodic nods to the horror genre’s tradition, particularly in the scene where the ghost, taking advantage of its invisibility, terrifies the children of the Latino woman who rented the house after his partner’s departure. Here, we find the most classic effects of poltergeist films: door knob slightly moving, door hinges creaking, objects seeming to move by themselves, plates and glasses breaking, etc. The difference with classic poltergeist films is that we do see the ghost holding a glass of milk as if it were suspended in the air, then throwing it on the floor. An earlier scene already conveyed the ghost’s emotions, the moment it expresses a form of jealousy (as M. appears to be courted by another man) by knocking books off a shelf, allowing a glimpse of Dostoevsky’s *Notes From Underground*, another of *Love in the Time of Cholera* (Gabriel Garcia Marquez) and, most notably, Virginia Woolf’s *A Haunted House and Other Stories*. These literary references will be analyzed later. Aside from these two sequences, the ghost only manifests himself to human beings once through an initially unidentified gesture in a scene shown twice from different angles with a parallax effect. The first occurrence takes place at the beginning of the film before the ghost’s emergence, when C, who died in a car accident, is still alive. A loud noise heard at night awakens the couple, who cannot identify its source. The scene is repeated towards the end of the film, but this time we see the ghost, after observing the couple in bed, abruptly sitting on the piano keys, causing the intense noise that signaled its presence in the first occurrence. *A Ghost Story* portrays a being aware of his own painful spectral presence in a world that is no longer his own. Instead of following a character unaware of his status, we are identified with the viewpoint, if not the consciousness, of this supernatural being.

C. is mute, can’t communicate with M. or any other human being and we do not have access to his inner thoughts or desires. In the Greek tradition, the souls of the dead have no memory or desire. Here, only physical reactions to certain events and postures outline a psychological portrait of the ghost whose emotions we feel — solitude, nostalgia for the past, a sense of loss, jealousy, anger, and even a form of metaphysical anxiety. The ghost, deprived of memory, is a simple witness, a passive spectator of events unfolding before its eyes. It has no notion of the passage of time and cannot distinguish between different forms of experienced time.

4. In fact, it took costume designer Annell Brodeur a great deal of work to create the sheet, and we’re a long way from a simple stage prop. Underneath the sheet a hoop skirt and tulle petticoats provide more amplex to the costume, enabling aesthetic shots of the ghost (comment in DVD bonus).

Spectral temporality

The film indeed plays with the temporal dimension on several levels, with the ghost oscillating between different temporal layers — present, past, and future — with moments of intense stasis, moments of acceleration, and dizzying ellipses.⁵

One of the characteristic traits is the temporal stretching through the choice of fixed shots and particularly long, static takes, early on in the film. Just after the accident scene, the camera shifts from a close shot of C.’s bloodied head thrust on the steering wheel to an overhead shot of a white sheet covering the corpse. The low angle reverse close shot of M.’s face, seen from the dead man’s perspective conveys the emotion of the character, without melodramatic effect. A hand lifts the sheet, revealing Affleck’s face in close up. We cut to a carefully composed long take under a cold greenish light. First the camera frames M. and a nurse standing close to the body lying on a slab. After the nurse’s departure, the camera remains static with M. watching over the body and finally covering it before leaving. The static shot endures for almost a minute before C. suddenly rises, as if answering our expectations. During the whole scene, diegetic sounds fill that space, footsteps, pops and buzzes, but mostly a low drone which intensifies when the ghost revives.

The most daring and provocative sequence occurs when M., the pie in real time. Through a series of subjective shots of the ghost, first off-screen then within the frame, we see how a woman (Linda, the landlord) enters through the front door, leaves a pie wrapped in aluminum foil, and a note. A subjective zoom denotes C.’s desire to decipher the written message, which motivates his actions. M. then enters the room, moves toward the ghost’s location, reads the message (the ghost is behind her), and grabs the pie, placing it on a table. She washes dishes, then starts to cut and eat the pie, framed by a motionless camera. Then, she abruptly shifts her position and the camera cuts to her, sitting on the floor, almost prostrated at the base of a kitchen cabinet as she slowly goes on eating the pie, observed by the ghost, now very visible in the background. This perfectly static long take lasts nearly four minutes, aiming to express both M.’s pain and resilience. Very suddenly, M. gets up and runs to the bathroom to vomit, crossing through C.’s space. The ghost, having entered her visual field, remains out of focus and we have no subjective shot from his point of view. We, viewers, on the other side of the screen are identified with the ghost, witnessing a disturbing scene, seemingly outside of human experience.

5. See on that aspect Victor Iturregui-Motiloa (2020). Article in Spanish.

During the evening party organized by new tenants after the departure of the Latino family, this temporal stretching is also conveyed — though differently — in the long nihilistic monologue of a character called the “prognosticator” (played by Will Oldham, an indie musician) trying to convince his friends that all human action is insignificant, that we are all doomed to disappear, and so is any work of art and even the earth and the universe. This monologue, lasting over six minutes and edited with few cuts, starts with a form of dialogue but shifts very quickly to a single discourse filmed in two one minute takes crosscutting at times on the listening ghost. At the end of the scene, electricity crackles and the speaker lifts his eye towards the overhead lamp shining more brightly, signaling the ghost’s presence. As the sound of the pop music subsides, we cut abruptly to the same lamp now deprived of bulb. The house is now empty, the floor full of litter, torn wall paper, plaster debris, and silence prevails. We only hear the wind whirling and a scratching noise as the camera exploring the place discloses the ghost fumbling for the hidden scribbled note left by M.

This emphasis on time in the prognosticator’s speech (“time is a big one”) prepares for C.’s subsequent temporal escapades. The passage of time is here conveyed through changes in the setting (the house empties or fills, walls crack, paint peels), but sometimes through seasonal changes or day/night alternation. It is also marked by dissolves, camera movements, particularly lateral tracking shots, and sharp cuts.

Temporal order is also disrupted by three partial flashbacks, related or not to the main storyline. Lowery does not provide explicit markers indicating a chronological alteration (camera movement on the face indicating a dive into interiority, superimposition, dissolve). The first flashback takes place just after the ghost’s fit of jealousy and alternates between two temporalities: the present moment and the couple’s past around the motif of the song “I Get Overwhelmed” composed by the deceased musician just before the accident. The scene starts after a fade to black, revealing first M. then C. still alive discussing about whether or not to leave the house. C. refuses to speak about it and instead asks M. to listen to his new song. While we hear the first measures, the camera closes up on M.’s face listening intently through earphones. After a quick reverse shot on C. we shift abruptly to a medium shot of M. lying on the floor filmed from above, listening to the same song. We are back to the present before shifting again to the past and a close up on M.’s wistful and melancholy look only to revert in the following shot to the present. This time the camera follows M.’s movement as she stretches her arm to the left until her fingers almost touch the bottom of the ghost’s sheet whose body remains off screen and who may be unaware of this gesture. The two timelines are distinguished by contrasts in filming and chromatic choices: cold blue light for the present, warmer tones for the happy past, close shots for the past,

medium shots filmed at ground level for the present. The scene ends with a long take in close up of M.'s face still listening followed by two quick shots (overhead and ground level) of her lying on the floor, this time separated from the ghost who is totally out of frame, just before his partner's departure. This moving scene associated with M.'s memory conveys affects that are close to nostalgia, melancholy and sadness.

The second flashback occurs just after the ghost's "suicide" attempt by jumping into the void from a high-rise building which has replaced the house, torn down by excavators. Instead of "dying" (plunging into the beyond or another level of existence), C. finds himself in the 18th century, at the time of pioneers and westward expansion. The ghost arrives in a virgin territory where a family of five immigrants (father, mother and three kids) in period clothing, settles down, the first inhabitants of the house of which they will lay the first stone. A little girl writes a message on a scrap of paper that she buries under a stone. This scene reminds the viewer of an earlier scene where M. told C. of her habit to hide secret messages in the walls of the houses she left when compelled to move.

However here tragedy soon follows when the family is brutally and unexpectedly slaughtered by Native Americans, identified only by their wild war cries off-screen and never represented. We only see the aftermath of the attack by means of a long diving shot on the victims with the ghost featuring in the frame, then two shots each intercut by a close shot of the ghost witnessing the scene: a closer shot of the father's pierced by two arrows and a shot of the younger girl's inert bloodied body. Strikingly, the camera cuts abruptly to the same body but the head has become a skull. Lowery condenses the fate of the little girl whose corpse decomposes in three brief shots until it merges with the lush grass, suggesting also the swift passage of time. Lowery ostentatiously avoids special effects, particularly morphing.

The third flashback occurs just after this episode. Without transition and by means of a straight cut, we jump forward in time as the ghost returns to a moment of his recent past, the couple's first discovery of the house. The ghost is framed in medium shot, motionless in an empty room. As the camera closes up on him, a noise is heard off screen. A reverse shot shows the couple (C and M.) visiting the house with Linda the real estate agent who brought the cake in a previous sequence. Seen from the ghost's point of view, the couple is sometimes clearly visible, sometimes out of focus, only filmed in silhouette in the dim light. The song composed by C. is heard again. A montage of a series of short scenes follows, summarizing the couple's life in their daily activities, including fragments of earlier scenes until the scene where the ghost produces the noise (the piano ringing) that triggers fear in M. is repeated.

The film also makes extensive use of ellipses, creating a sense of temporal acceleration. Shortly after his return to the house, we see C. observing M. in a sequence shot (digitally edited). M. repeats the same gesture of opening the front door three times, each time wearing different clothes, while the ghost watches motionless always in the same position in space. This repetition signifies different moments in M.’s life while C. remains fixed in space and time. This is a good example of Gilles Deleuze’s “crystal image”,⁶ associating several temporal layers in the same long take. An ellipsis also occurs after M.’s departure, another after the Latino mother and her children leave, and another when the house is demolished and replaced by a modern building.

Temporal jumps are also conveyed by sharp cuts: between a shot of the ghost turning just before an off-screen noise behind him and the reverse shot of what caught his attention, an ellipsis occurs summarizing hours or weeks. The editing becomes tighter, the shots shorter, and the sound fragmented into overlapping temporal flows.

Before she left the house, M. hid a secret message inserted in a chink of the wall partition that she covered with paint. C. tries several times to retrieve this piece of paper, but is always thwarted by an external circumstance, particularly when a bulldozer demolishes the house. Only at the end of his temporal journey, returning to his recent past, does he manage to retrieve the secret message, and upon reading it, he disappears, leaving only the tangible trace of the sheet, resembling a flower corolla. The content of this message remains unknown to the spectator but seems to appease the ghost, finally at peace like Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) in *The Sixth Sense*, leading to his vanishing bodily presence (“death”).

Special effects nonetheless



Despite the minimalist staging and the desire to avoid special effects, Lowery uses a range of visual effects, from artisanal tricks inspired by theatre and magic shows—like the ghost’s final disappearance where the “body” dissolves—to more sophisticated and imperceptible effects developed by Weta Digital. Visible effects include the galaxy images at the beginning (with digitally added stars), the added smoke during the accident, the luminous effects and color changes when the ghost is offered a passage to the beyond, filmed from behind facing a door opening in the wall, a secondary screen traversed by light (actually a miniature). More imperceptibly, many shots of the ghost are filmed at 33 frames per second,

6. See Gilles Deleuze, *L’Image-temps*, Cinéma 2, Éditions de Minuit, 1985, p. 92-128.

creating a fluid and gliding effect. A motion control platform is sometimes used by cinematographer Andrew Droz Palermo. The ghost is generally filmed separately, with images then digitally assembled. The “suicide” scene of *C.* is shot on a green screen, and when the ghost falls from the top of a newly built skyscraper, the building’s inclination, filmed in an oblique overhead shot, is treated digitally. The apparent simplicity of the film is partly an illusion, and the director exploits contemporary technology to create effects that verge upon the fantastic.

A Ghost Story and “elevated horror” or “post-horror” cinema



To what extent may we then consider *A Ghost Story* as representative of the “elevated horror” or “post-horror” trend?

The most obvious device is the decentering of the conventional monster figure who is no longer an object of fear but rather a pitiful subject with whom the viewer may empathize, but also the constant association with the ghost’s point of view which goes against the codes of the classic ghost film where the narrative rather adopts the perspective⁷ of the human protagonists as in *The Uninvited*. The lack of spectacular action and the foregrounding of minor day-to-day events and small details is another dominant feature. We won’t insist on the formal features already analyzed which all associate the film with the post-horror trend. However, we would like to focus on two important features of the film: first the link with high culture, second the affiliation to slow cinema.

The film’s epigraph testifies to the overt influence of modernist literature. Just after the opening shot of the happy couple embracing on a sofa, the film quotes the incipit of Virginia Woolf’s short story “A Haunted House”: “Whatever hour you woke there was a door shutting” (1943). The story evokes the way in which the female narrator evokes the presence of a ghostly couple seeking some kind of treasure in the old house she inhabits with her partner. The narrator seems to hear the ghosts whispering and she also searches the house for signs of the ghosts, such as open doors and drawn curtains. Woolf’s ghosts, contrary to a well-established tradition, are not threatening but harmless and benevolent. They whisper trying not to awake the living couple. In the same way, Lowery’s ghost is unthreatening and harmless (most of the time). Like in Woolf’s story the two lovers were first separated by death, but contrary to the film, in the text they were reunited in death.

7. *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* adopt the perspective of ghostly characters who are not aware of their ontological status. Neither is the viewer until the end.

Later in the film, one of the books that falls to the ground when C. shakes up the bookshelf is a collection of Woolf’s stories. The book opens on the page of “A Haunted House” which M. starts reading. Several close shots focus on the printed text. Some sentences of the story seem to echo the ghost’s plight. Words mention the wind which we can also hear howling on the soundtrack. A passage refers to the separation of the ghostly couple (“death was between us”), another to “leaving the house”, adumbrating M.’s move, leaving C. alone. The reference to seeking a treasure is also echoed in the film with the ghost’s frantic search for the written message left in the wall. At the end of Woolf’s story the narrator becomes aware that the lost treasure that the ghosts seek is the love they once experienced and that is reflected in the living couple. We might consider that the message the ghost finally found in the film evokes that “treasure of love”, enabling him to vanish or reach another level of consciousness.

Another important influence on the film is slow cinema, as also highlighted by David Church and confirmed by David Lowery himself who refers to the influence of Terrence Malick’s first films and quotes among other sources Tsai Ming-liang, Bela Tarr, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and also Chantal Ackerman’s *Jeanne Dielman* (1975).⁸ The main formal features of slow cinema emerging⁹ in contemporary world cinema are highlighted by Matthew Flanagan: “The employment of (often extremely) long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday” (2008). As we saw, time and specifically empty time and the sense of duration is an essential feature of *A Ghost Story*. Long takes are frequent and the film downplays eventfulness to foreground small incidents and daily routine activities, repetitiveness inducing a form of ennui. Stress is laid on observation and contemplation rather than action. The film provides numerous shots of the lonely ghost simply watching either natural processes (the change of seasons) or human activities, a witness of drama, even murder (the killing of the pioneers) without reacting. The film is mostly devoid of dialogue and silence prevails in several scenes, favoring a form of immersion in the fictional universe and identification with the protagonist. The musical score emphasizes this mood with long soundscapes¹⁰ (DVD bonus) which convey in particular the overwhelming nature of mourning and a sense of nostalgia for what is lost.

8. See Lowery’s commentary of the film in DVD bonus.

9. Obviously there are some precursors of this trend such as Andrei Tarkovsky, Theo Angelopoulos, Antonio de Oliveira and many others.

10. Composer Daniel Hart explains how he slowed down his song: “I took the separate elements of the song, like the strings or the guitar or my own vocals, and I ran them through *PaulStretch* to make these long soundscapes out of the different elements of the song, then used that as one of the recurring themes throughout the score”. DVD bonus.

Finally we may discuss the idea that *A Ghost Story* is a “horror film” by considering in particular its links with the Gothic mode,¹¹ but also its specific approach of the ghost motif. The film clearly uses Gothic conventions and tropes such as the haunted house and its gradual degradation (the ruin motif), or disquieting uncanny sounds. It also emphasizes a form of interaction between the living and the dead. The constant presence of the ghost (a central Gothic figure) testifies to his unwillingness to go away, the encroaching of the (recent) past into the present. The rare poltergeist effects partake of the Gothic paraphernalia, albeit with a parodic and ironic touch. The motif of the double is another link with the Gothic, with the ghost returning to watch his living self at the end of the narrative, and the female ghost next door waiting for someone she can’t remember. The sense of isolation and imprisonment, typical of the Gothic, is underlined by the numerous frames within the frame, such as shots of the ghost watching behind window panes, etc.

However the film departs from the Gothic tradition in various ways. The house is a simple ground floor house, not a grandiose vertical architecture triggering a sense of the sublime. There is no stately staircase, no underground cellar or other subterranean dark place. Contrary to the Gothic tradition, the ghost does not come from the beyond. He actually refuses the beyond (signified at the beginning of the film by the door motif and an intense light) to go back to his house (an extreme high angle long shot of the solitary ghost shows him crossing through the fields back home, a poignant vision). Contrary to the tradition, this ghost is not seeking revenge, neither is he a monster that triggers terror or horror. Even when C. manifests his telekinetic powers, increases the intensity of lamp lights, or produces disturbing sounds, he may be a source of fear for the human beings (the Latino family), but not for the spectator who knows the origin of the deed and enjoys the parodic and meta-filmic wink while he/she may feel sorry for the victims. When her books are strangely thrown off the shelves, M. hardly reacts, she is only intrigued and attracted to the Woolf volume she starts reading, as if she had an intuition of a presence. Gothic narratives are mostly about transgression, hubris, paranoia, sexual tension and we have nothing of the sort here, neither have we an “uncanny return of something which has been expelled or thrown off (ab-ject)” (Kavka, 2002: 211). The film also distinguishes itself from the Gothic theatrical tradition by its overall lack of dramatization and spectacular effects. The only true horror scene is the shot on the dead bodies of the pioneer family and the decaying corpse of the little girl.

11. On the relation between horror cinema and Gothic cinema see also Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Gothic Cinema* (2020).

However the ghost imposes his presence to the viewer in almost every shot which means there is no Todorovian¹² hesitation, no perceptive or intellectual uncertainty. The supernatural here is blatant. There is no need to explain it away with a rationalist discourse. Finally if we feel some "negative emotions" such as sadness, melancholia, a sense of loss, these emotions are never excessive. The only obsession that triggers the ghost's activity is the search for the hidden note left by M., his perusal of the written text leading to his collapse and liberation.

Conclusion

David Lowery's film may indeed, to some extent, be defined as "elevated horror" or "post-horror" if we consider the term "horror" as generic. The film shares with this corpus of works a number of features, both narrative and formal that we tried to delineate. However it seems to baffle the spectator's expectations. There is no tension between seeing or not seeing, no monstrosity, no feared object, no deep psychological trouble, no elusive sense of menace. *A Ghost Story* blurs the boundaries between Gothic, horror, fantasy and melodrama, with at times comic or comedic touches. It offers in a way an ostensibly conventional spectral fiction, but one that leads to reflections on time and memory and provides metaphysical escapes, a reflection on the human condition and fate and a cosmic¹³ feel. Misha Kavka, theorizing on Gothic film, offers a good approach of what *A Ghost Story* has to offer: "A medium through which things are allowed to pass, from the past into the present, from death into life, from the beyond to here and back again" (Kavka, 2002: 228).

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12. See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to A Literary Genre*, New York, Cornell UP, 1975. Originally published in French under the title *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1970.
 13. In his analysis of the film, David Church refers to Lovecraft's cosmic horror fiction, because of the "transformation of the monster into an existential wanderer across time" (2021: 226).

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