

Revisiting the Haunted House: Remi Weekes's *His House* (2020)



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Abstract: *His House* (2020) is an uncommon generic hybrid that infuses horror with social realism. The film centers on a South Sudanese couple who have fled their war-torn country and are now seeking asylum in Britain. As the ghosts of their traumatic past have followed them to Europe, the couple cannot make a home of the subsidized house they have been granted, which turns into a gothicized haunted house. The unknown world outside is also a source of terror, as it is shown to be fertile soil for insidious trauma. This article reads the film as an exploration of in-betweenness whose specificity lies in the way it articulates two narratives of liminality: that of asylum seekers as “threshold” people, and that of a couple placed in the liminal state of grief. The hinge articulating the two narratives is the concept of home and the question of (not) at-homeness. Remi Weekes rewrites the Gothic *topos* of the haunted house by making it a house of mourning where the wish to move on is impeded by the pull of the traumatic past. Not only are the couple in the emotional limbo of grief, however: they are also in the stage of uncertainty experienced by asylum seekers who do not know whether they will stay and live or be sent back to die. Though the film gives the narrative of mourning a happy end, the refugee narrative is left ambiguously open-ended.

Keywords: Haunting; *His House*; Liminality; At-Homeness; Refugee Narrative; Trauma

Résumé : Hybride générique, *His House* (2020) allie le réalisme social à l’horreur. L’histoire est celle d’un couple de réfugiés sud-soudanais qui a fui son pays en guerre et qui demande maintenant l’asile au Royaume-Uni. Cependant, hantés par les fantômes de leur passé traumatique, les Majur ne parviennent pas à faire un foyer du logement social qui leur a été attribué. La demeure délabrée devient alors une maison hantée qui évoque la tradition gothique. Le monde extérieur est lui aussi source de terreur, car il fait planer la menace du traumatisme insidieux. Cet article lit le film comme une exploration de l’entre-deux dont la spécificité réside dans la manière dont il articule deux états liminaux : celui des demandeurs d’asile, figures de l’entre-deux, et celui d’un couple en situation de deuil. Les deux fils narratifs ont pour pivot commun le concept de « chez-soi » (« *home* ») et la question de l’appartenance. Remi Weekes réécrit le *topos*

de la maison hantée pour en faire une maison de deuil où le désir d’aller de l’avant est empêché par le poids du passé traumatique. Mais les Majur ne sont pas seulement dans les limbes émotionnels du deuil : demandeurs d’asile, ils sont également entre deux mondes et traversent une période de grande incertitude marquée par la peur d’un renvoi au pays. Si *His House* donne une fin heureuse au parcours du deuil, les réfugiés restent des êtres en suspens quand le film s’achève.

Mots-clés : Appartenance, *His House*, liminalité, hantise, traumatisme, réfugiés

Introduction

His House premiered at the Sundance festival in January 2020 and was released on Netflix in October of the same year. It won Remi Weekes the BAFTA for “outstanding debut for a British writer, producer or director”, as well as the British Independent Film award for best director.¹

The film stages a South Sudanese couple, the Majurs, who have fled their violence-torn country in a perilous journey during which they lost a child (though not their child, as it will turn out). They are now seeking asylum in Britain, and the story proper starts when they leave the detention center and are taken to the shabby council house that will be their dwelling place while their application for refugee status is being reviewed. The events of the film open the possessive “his” of the title to different but equally valid interpretations. While Bol does all he can to assimilate and make Britain his home, his wife Rial soon becomes convinced that they don’t belong and decides to leave. In reaction, Bol locks her up in the house, so that the possessive “his” also designates a male-controlled space where the woman is imprisoned, in typically Gothic fashion. Finally, “his” also refers to the Apeth (or night witch), a spirit who has apparently followed the couple to Britain and manifests itself in frightening occurrences, taking possession of the house, and eventually trying to take possession of Bol’s body.

The film has been positively received by critics, who describe it as an atypical horror movie and often label it “post” or “elevated” horror. They use the label mainly to point out that *His House* goes beyond what are considered “cheap” scares as its horror arises out of the refugee experience. A French reviewer describes *His House* as “a horrific Ken Loach” (Delachapelle, 2020: n. p.), and the Ken Loach parallel is also used in *The Guardian*: “There has never been a whole lot of overlap between the social realism of Ken Loach and the twisted horror of *A Nightmare on Elm*

1. The two lead actors, Sope Dirisu and Wunmi Mosaku, were awarded the BAFTA for best performance by an actor/ actress. Wunmi Mosaku also won the BIF award for best actress in a leading role.

Street. But that’s about to change with the release of *His House*” (Gilbey, 2020: n. p.). Both reviewers thus describe the film as an uncommon generic hybrid combining social realism and horror, its social realism residing in the cold look it takes at the way refugees are treated in the UK. Finally, another French reviewer situates Weekes’s film “somewhere between Ken Loach and Jordan Peele” (Léger, 2020, n. p.), which is hardly surprising since both *Get Out* (2017) and *His House* have black protagonists and incorporate social commentary. Jordan Peele’s overtly political film is often described as “social horror” as it pivots around racial inequality and “post-racial” liberal hypocrisy, delivering an incisive social critique. In the first book ever written on post-horror, David Church points out that it is rare for post-horror films to deal with urgent topical issues, *Get Out* being the main exception he discusses (Church, 2021: 39). *His House* is another such “exception”, and it is even more firmly and explicitly grounded in its contemporary context, that of the South Sudanese conflict which started in 2013 and triggered massive forced displacement.

When discussing his film, Weekes makes the concept of trauma central, stating that *His House* shows how “the suppression of our traumas and our past can only make the pain more powerful” (in Evans-Powell, 2020: n. p.). The two main characters are indeed traumatized subjects who are grieving the loss of a homeland and a child. The film thus exploits what David Church identifies as a major theme in post-horror, namely, mourning.² All the examples discussed by the critic noticeably involve trauma, the loved one(s) having died “too suddenly and violently to be properly mourned” (Whitehead, 2004: 06).³ The specificity of the traumatic experience of forcibly displaced people, however, gives the film a topical edge that impacts the viewer’s reception of the narrative of mourning. The film is clearly meant to have the Western spectator empathize with the plight of the migrant Other.

Thus, *His House* uses the *topos* of the haunted house to explore the nature of traumatic grief as psychological haunting. It belongs with the post-horror films featuring characters who are, in Church’s words, “trapped in an emotional limbo that they are unable to get beyond” (Church, 2021: 68). In what follows, I read the film as an exploration of in-betweenness whose specificity lies in the way it articulates two narratives of liminality: that of asylum seekers as “threshold” people, and that of a couple placed in the liminal state of grief. The hinge articulating the two narratives is the concept of home and the question of (not)at-homeness. First, Remi Weekes rewrites the Gothic *topos* of the haunted house

2. The third chapter of *Post-Horror* is entitled “Grief, Mourning and Familial Inheritance”, and it provides an in-depth examination of the theme of mourning in post-horror movies such as *The Babadook*, *Goodnight Mommy*, and *Hereditary* (68-101).
3. The major post-horror theme Church identifies may thus be more precisely described as “complicated mourning”, as trauma complicates the process the bereaved go through.

by making it a house of mourning where the wish to move on is impeded by the pull of the traumatic past. Structurally, the film's disruption of temporal linearity mimics the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, a disorder that prevents the characters from making a home of the present. Not only are the couple in the emotional limbo of traumatic grief, however: they are also in the stage of uncertainty experienced by asylum seekers who do not know whether they will stay and live or be sent back to die. Though the film gives the narrative of mourning a happy ending, the refugee narrative is left ambiguously open-ended.

The haunted house of mourning

In his *Mourning Films: A Critical Study of Loss and Grieving in Cinema*, Richard Armstrong repeatedly draws attention to the intersections between the horror genre and cinematic narratives of mourning, underlining that “archaic fears and phenomena link the mourning genre to horror cinema – fear of the dark, ghosts, primitive totems – resonating in the modern mourning film as dementia, hallucinations, and the susceptibility of children” (Armstrong, 2012: 4). Since then, an increasing number of scholars have pointed out that horror is particularly suited to represent the experience of grief. In “Horror Films and Grief”, Becky Millar and Jonny Lee explore this suitability in terms of narrative development, showing how the irruption of the horror monster mirrors “the disruption to the protagonist’s assumptive world caused by bereavement” (Millar and Lee, 2021: 174). *His House* is a mourning film that deploys what the two critics identify as the typical pattern of horror movies about grief: the child (and many other loved ones) dies prior to the events of the film, then the monster (the Apeth) intrudes and disrupts the characters’ understanding of reality, before it is finally defeated when Rial slays its throat. The film borrows its monster from Dinka folklore,⁴ and the fact that the Apeth of African legend has followed the couple to Britain ties the creature firmly to the traumatic events of the past. In the supernatural explanation of the haunting given by Rial, the night witch is the one who projects the sometimes horrific images the couple are made to see. The monster can thus be read as trauma embodied, but the film simultaneously makes it an embodiment of survivor’s guilt. Indeed, the monster tells Bol: “Your life is not yours. You stole it” (1:01:55). The film will reveal that Bol stole a child to escape imminent death, a girl he blames himself for not saving when the refugee boat taking them to Britain capsized. The shocking revelation thus provides a possible psychological explanation for

4. The Dinka are one of the largest ethnic groups in South Sudan.

the fact that Bol’s experience in the haunted house of mourning is much more terrifying than his wife’s.

Like Jennifer Kent’s *The Babadook* (2014), a horror film that revolves around the effects of traumatic loss,⁵ Weekes’s *His House* uses the Gothic trope of haunting in its exploration of grief, making a gothicized council house the mourners’ liminal space of transition. This house clearly becomes a projection of the haunted psyches of the protagonists. Significantly, though it is already in bad repair when the couple arrives, Bol further damages the house as his mental health deteriorates. He breaks through the walls with a hammer, the holes materializing the psychic wounds inflicted by trauma. The memories of the past that haunt the grieving mind are literalized in the ghosts both husband and wife see. More precisely, the spatialized representation of the mind is restricted to the two downstairs rooms, which reinforces the Gothic feeling of claustrophobia. The porosity of the traumatized mind is materialized by many openings within that confined, claustrophobic space, be they the holes in the walls or the open doorways on either side of the corridor separating the kitchen from the living room. The film makes ample use of these doorways to hint at the inner chamber where the traumatic past lurks. For example, when Rial tells the story of the Apeth, Bol is startled by a crashing sound from the kitchen, and the film cuts to a shot of the ominous doorway opening onto darkness (34:50). When he sees his “daughter” for the first time, she is framed in the living-room doorway, which locates her in the “beyond” as well as in a dark recess of the mind. Significantly, she is wearing a horrifying African mask, which externalizes the distortion induced by trauma (38:25).

The house being possessed by the ghosts of the past, the couple cannot make it their home. Like Amelia in *The Babadook*, Bol cries out to the disruptive monster: “This is my house” (50:02). But, to paraphrase Freud, Bol and Amelia are not masters of their own houses,⁶ which have been taken over by the dark force of trauma. Their sense of self has been shattered. These words, however, take on extra resonance when placed in the mouth of a forcefully displaced migrant who must make Britain his home. Indeed, grief is not the only reason why the couple are violently thrust into an “abnormal” world: they are also thrust into the unknown reality of a foreign land and, on a smaller scale, into an unfamiliar house that they are expected to make their home. In his *Mourning Films*, Richard Armstrong underlines that in many a mourning film the grieving characters experience a sense of displacement, and that they “fail to inhabit the ‘home’

5. The story starts seven years after Amelia’s husband died in a car accident while driving her to the hospital to give birth. The film shows her struggling with depression and her son becoming obsessed with a horrifying monster, Mister Babadook.

6. To emphasize the primacy of the unconscious in the psyche, Freud famously wrote that the ego “is not even master of its own house” (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 319).

they find themselves in”, even when it is theirs, and he likens the experience to that of dwelling in a haunted house.⁷ In *His House*, the mourners’ displacement is also literal, so that the sense of not-at-homeness is doubly encoded. The two characters, however, deal with the loss of their homeland in two different ways, Bol wanting to suppress the past, while Rial is shown maintaining a strong link with her home culture.

The film writes two different narratives of mourning, correlating each with the way the character negotiates his/her past identity. Thus, Weekes incorporates a reflection on the immigrant experience as triggering an inner tension between assimilationist and less assimilationist pulls. When discussing his film, he almost explicitly elucidates the device of doubling the narrative of mourning:

I feel like in many places in the West you’re pulled in two very different directions: there’s part of you that really wants to assimilate and fit in, and to not draw attention to yourself, but there’s another part of you that feels very suspicious that the place doesn’t particularly feel welcoming to you, so you find yourself pulling away again, wanting to rebel from that and to stick to your roots and stick out proudly. You’re often torn in these two directions and battle within yourself, especially when you’re trying to find your place in a new country. You find yourself always struggling to find a balance.⁸

The film externalizes this inner battle by projecting the opposite pulls onto the two main characters. Contrary to Rial, Bol is firmly decided to cut the link with the past and assimilate in the new country. His strong desire to suppress the past gives birth to a traditional haunted-house film, which features quite a few jump scares and several terrifying confrontations with the monster. In exploring this narrative, the film uses the visual codes of the liminal characteristic of Gothic film:⁹ the strange phenomena happen at night, and the use of low-key lighting often makes what comes from “beyond” hard to see. Most of the time, “it” remains on the threshold between visibility and invisibility. In striking contrast, Rial always sees the ghosts in the daytime, most often in broad daylight, and she never shows any fear. The most striking example occurs when she finds herself alone in the living room while Bol is at the immigration office. The static shot that shows her sitting motionless on the couch lasts for about five seconds and the accompanying music plays very low (54:07—54:12). When she hears

7. To quote Armstrong, the private space the mourners fail to inhabit “takes its cue from the charged ‘homes’ of classical and post-classical horror” (*Mourning Films*, 177).

8. Quoted in Nicholson, 2020: n.p. Remi Weekes is himself of mixed background.

9. These comments are based on Misha Kavka’s examination of the aesthetics of Gothic film in “Gothic on Screen”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, 2002, 209-228. In this article, Kavka establishes a clear distinction between horror and the Gothic in terms of aesthetics.

the call “Mama” coming from behind a wall, only her eyes move, but she eventually turns her head when an arm emerges from a hole and drops the daughter’s necklace on the floor. Rial then looks at the other holes in the walls, and the subjective shot shows ghostly faces peering in at her. Rial merely contemplates the ghosts, and her face remains expressionless. The scene thus pointedly excludes the traditional jump scare that may be expected in a more conventional horror movie. It may be described as “contemplative”,¹⁰ in striking contrast with Bol’s active battle with the ghosts of the past. The next time the spectator sees Rial, she has draped a red sheet over her body to re-create an African-looking dress, which clearly signals her not wanting to leave the past behind (56:30). In contrast, Bol dresses in exactly the same clothes as those he has seen advertised in a poster. Unlike her husband, Rial is engaged in a dialogue with the past, which she does not try to suppress. The film shows her in a literal dialogue with the night witch (43:34), even though the latter remains invisible to Bol (and the spectator) and might just be a hallucination.

In short, the film exploits the two narratives of mourning along different aesthetic lines, one of which perfectly illustrates the minimalist, austere style David Church identifies as a characteristic feature of post-horror. Though less restrained, the narrative of mourning centered on Bol can still be considered as belonging to the category of “quiet” horror as it mostly resorts to the visual codes of the liminal or what Joan Hawkins calls “the aesthetics of the Uncanny” (Hawkins 2017: 3).¹¹ The two narratives, however, are structurally alike in the way they mimic the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Trauma and temporality

Trauma theory has underlined trauma’s resistance to narration and suggested that it can only be represented through experimental forms. For example, in the introduction to *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead points out that Cathy Caruth’s conceptualization of trauma¹² suggests that its representation “requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence” (Whitehead, 2004: 6). Indeed, to render the psychic collision between past and present in the wounded mind, trauma fiction often resorts to such devices as temporal disruption, ellipses, or fragmentation

10. In *Post-Horror*, David Church repeatedly comments on the “contemplative aesthetics” of many post-horror movies. See p. 56 for example.
11. In her 2017 article, Joan Hawkins points to the emergence of a new Gothic impulse, which she further describes as “quiet horror”. As it considers the “post-slasher history of the Gothic genre” (2), her discussion of this new trend largely intersects with ongoing discussions on post-horror.
12. Cathy Caruth discusses the irrepresentability of trauma in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore, MA., The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

in an effort to mirror the inner crisis of the characters, who cannot make a home of the present. In Weekes’s film, not only do the ghosts embody the intrusion of the past into the present, but linearity is repeatedly disrupted by intrusive memories as well as subjective flashback/nightmares that rarely announce themselves as such. For example, when Rial opens the door of a closet, she comes face to face with an image from the past (23:27—23:47). Here again, the film plays with the conventions of the scary movie, as what hides in the closet is not a monster that makes the character and the viewer jump, but an intrusive visual memory. The shift to Rial’s subjective point of view shows refugees packed together at the back of a pick-up truck and staring at the blinding light of what is probably a torch pointed at them. The image takes the attentive viewer back to the opening flashback/nightmare, where the Majurs and the child are shown boarding the very same Toyota truck in South Sudan. The inside of the closet thus reveals a haunting memory lodged inside Rial’s mind. It is to be noticed, however, that this visual memory crosses the spatiotemporal border of the doorframe since, before the image is revealed, Rial’s face is lit up from inside the closet. The intrusive memory thus contaminates an apparently objective shot, blurring the borderline not only between past and present, but also between memory and reality. As the distinction between two temporal-spatial zones (Africa/“then” and the UK/“now”) repeatedly collapses, the two main characters appear as spatially and temporally “unfixed”. They are neither here nor there.

The film provides many examples of the blurring of borderlines between reality and memory/nightmare, some with a startlingly disorientating effect on the spectator. When the couple is shown having a tense dinner at the kitchen table, the camera eventually lingers on Bol, and then very slowly zooms out to reveal that he is no longer in the house but sitting at the kitchen table in the middle of an ocean bathed in reddish fog (45:25—46:13). Rial has disappeared and only a portion of the now broken kitchen wall remains standing.¹³ The image is like a surrealist montage with a distinctly nightmarish tinge, and the film crosses into nightmare when zombie-like creatures (undead drowned migrants) appear and start closing in on Bol, who is then shown suddenly waking up in the living room (46:58). The striking ocean episode is obviously meant to disorient the spectator, who cannot at first “place it” within or without Bol’s mind. Even when it is revealed as a nightmare, it is difficult to determine when the nightmare begins exactly, and to logically account for the temporal disconnect between the couple having dinner in the kitchen and Bol waking up in the living room.

13. *His House* (46:03), <https://m.imdb.com/title/tt8508734/mediaviewer/rm2172573697/>.

The long sequence that follows Rial’s escape through the window is even more intricate and confusing, which makes it particularly difficult to summarize (1:05:12—1:15:02). When she climbs out of the window, Rial is suddenly back in Africa, the vivid colors and sunlight sharply contrasting with the grey suburban environment the viewer expected to see. Even Rial is surprised, but she allows herself to be overcome with joy when she is welcomed back by her female friends. The joyful reunion inside a schoolroom turns darker when Rial states that she knows that she is dreaming and asks about her daughter. As the singing of the women suddenly stops, the film cuts to a shot of Bol outside the doorway of the same schoolroom, looking for Rial (1:07:35). The dream has in fact turned into a (subjective?) flashback where Bol finds Rial coming out of the closet where she had been hiding while her friends were massacred. After a brief shot of the butchered bodies, the film shows fragments of the couple’s escape journey from their country, before taking the viewer back to the schoolroom and an old woman telling Rial that she has “no daughter”, before the (invisible) Apeth tells her it can bring the child back. The film finally cuts back to Rial lying beneath the window through which she escaped, having apparently and inexplicably fallen asleep after climbing out. The ten-minute sequence repeatedly crosses the borderline between flashback and fantasy, and it mirrors the disruption of temporality caused by trauma. Furthermore, the film does not attempt to make the insertion of this dream/flashback sequence plausible, but rather flaunts the absurdity of Rial falling asleep at such a time. The viewer is thus taken to a world where rationality is suspended, and (s)he is simultaneously made to experience the breaking up of the linear thread of time that characterizes the experience of the traumatized subject.

The narrative twist that occurs in this dream/flashback sequence is also a crucial turning point in the film’s narrative of the overcoming of trauma. The spectators discover that they have been so far misled since the girl who died in the boat-wreck was not really the couple’s daughter. As Rial herself had apparently repressed the knowledge, the discovery is made by the viewer and the “mother” at the same time. Because the film withholds the crucial information, it has the spectator go through the same shock as the traumatized character when the “dark secret” of child theft comes back to the surface of consciousness. Rial is now placed in a position where she may be able to “move on”, but she only does so when Bol is being killed by the consuming demon in the film’s final confrontation. In a sort of waking dream that takes her back to her friends in Africa, Rial is finally able to say goodbye to them, and she adds: “I’m going home” (1:21:58). “Home” is now the present. Home is the council estate house in Britain, her new homeland.

Because of the way it manipulates time and space, the film does not provide an easy ride in the haunted house of trauma. It may be deemed a rather “difficult” film as it repeatedly disorients the viewers and forces them to reconstruct the linear development of the couple’s story. Compared to this overall complexity, the ending may seem a simplifying resolution of what has been shown to be an intricate inner crisis. The psychic wound of trauma apparently closes and a new life begins.

The birthing house



What is at stake throughout the film is the “rebirth” of the couple at the end of the transitional stage of grief. Indeed, rebirth is explicitly discussed by the Majurs during their first night in the house, when they both state in turn that they are “born again” (11:35). What follows will, unsurprisingly, show how wrong they are.

The film makes use of birth imagery in several places, for example when Bol has his hair cut, an obvious symbol of a wish for renewal. The most striking birthing episode, however, happens at night and shows the impossibility of moving on. After a length of wallpaper peels off, Bol finds himself confronted with a vagina-like opening in the wall (20:23). In this hole he finds a wire that becomes highly suggestive of an umbilical cord. As it keeps unrolling, it turns into a rope entwined with seaweed, an obvious return to the traumatic boat-wreck. The monstrous birth finally takes place when the doll that belonged to the “daughter” emerges from the wall (22:02). Suddenly, a hand springs out, grabs the doll, and pulls it back into the darkness. The episode makes it clear that Bol has not cut the umbilical cord tying him to his motherland and the past. It simultaneously hints at repression or suppression through the evocative power of “something” emerging from the depths of darkness. Throughout most of the scene, Bol’s shadow on the wall can be seen pulling at the rope, too, and this shadow self is significantly bigger than the character who has lost control of himself.¹⁴ As Bol cannot resist the pull of darkness, he is relentlessly heading towards madness and self-destruction. He becomes “the beast”, as the night witch tells him in an exchange that comes very close to explicitly stating that the monstrous Other is in fact the self (01:02:11). The final confrontation with the Apeth predicates the monster’s birth on Bol’s death. After the latter cuts his arm to make the monster come and take his life, the Apeth emerges from the kitchen floor in another monstrous birth scene (1:19:49-1:19:59). A subjective shot even shows the now fully, if monstrously, embodied Apeth emerging between Bol’s open legs. The whole

14. *His House* (21:42), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8508734/mediaindex/?ref=tt_mv_sm.

episode may be read as a suicide attempt, which Rial interrupts when she decides to save Bol’s life. After she slays the monster’s throat, the estranged couple reunite and can now truly inhabit the house. When immigration officials visit for the last time, Bol and Rial have fixed the holes and started painting the walls white, symbolically making them a blank page on which to start a new story. The Majurs seem to have moved past the “acting out” of trauma, that is, the repetition of the traumatic events in nightmares or hallucinations. They have at least partially “worked through”¹⁵ their trauma, and, significantly, Bol is able to verbalize his now pacified relationship with the past. He tells their case worker: “Your ghosts follow you. They never leave. They live with you. It’s when I let them in, I could start to face myself” (1:24:23-36). Rial then adds: “This is our home”.

The epilogue makes ample use of doorways again, but it uses them in a strikingly different manner from the rest of the film. After the immigration officials leave, the couple sees Nyagak in the kitchen doorway. The scary mask has been removed and the girl stands perfectly still.¹⁶ At the end of the film, the doorway is no longer an opening onto a frightening world that may intrude, but rather a frame around the photograph of a dead one. Photography is very often described as a ghostly medium, but it fixes the past and contains it within a frame. The framing and “taming” of Nyagak echoes the scene where Rial sees the ghostly faces through the holes in the wall, faces that are like framed photographs which Rial quietly contemplates. The image of the now framed child is followed by a shot from her point of view, in which Bol and Rial are standing among a group of South Sudanese in a sort of family picture (1:25:28), except that the group overflows the frame and spills into the corridor and the kitchen. There is something disturbing in this overflowing, but the film switches back to framed photographs, first of the “daughter”, then of the couple, who are holding hands and looking straight at the viewer when the screen switches to black. As in *The Babadook*, the traumatic past has been “tamed” when the film ends, as the couple have made peace with their ghosts.

The epilogue is an optimistic happy end that may be used as an argument against the inclusion of the film in the post-horror cycle, which usually favors more ambiguous or disturbing endings. Church considers *The Babadook* as a peripheral film in the cycle mainly, though not exclusively, because of its happy resolution (Church, 2022: 79). Yet, *His House*’s happy (and perhaps oversimplifying) closure of the trauma narrative is

15. In *Representing the Holocaust*, trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra uses the concepts of “acting-out” and “working-through”, which are derived from psychoanalysis, to distinguish between two forms of remembering trauma. He underlines that the relation between the two, however, should not be reduced to a from /to relationship as they are interacting processes. “Acting-out” may never be fully overcome.
16. *His House* (1:25:52), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8508734/mediaindex/?ref=tt_mv_sm.

counterbalanced by the open-endedness of the refugee narrative, as the fate of the couple is still hanging in the balance when the movie ends. In this narrative, the “monster” is not a supernatural creature but the UK asylum system, as well as the hostility the Majurs often face.¹⁷

Housed but unhomed: the transitional home



Remi Weekes also revisits the trope of the haunted house by making it a transitional place for liminal or “threshold” people. The couple have lost their homeland, but Britain is not yet their home, as they are reminded by immigration authorities before they leave the detention center: they are not citizens yet, they are “released on bail” (4:22). Because they have not fully transitioned, they are neither “here” nor “there”. Thus, they are in the stage of uncertainty experienced by asylum seekers, a stage presented in the film as a sort of probationary period in which they are to demonstrate that they are part of “the good ones”. This may be seen as a rite of passage, that is, as a liminal state of transition before they are incorporated into the host country as citizens.¹⁸ The film, however, emphasizes how degrading this indefinite period of in-betweenness is. Their assigned dwelling is a prison-like house, which they are forbidden to leave until their case is processed. They are not allowed to receive friends, let alone to organize parties. They are not allowed to work either. Furthermore, as they live under the constant threat of being sent back to die, they are positioned between life and death. The film twists the meaning of a common warning in haunted-house fiction, when the creepy next-door neighbor tells Bol: “I’ll give it a week” (55:05). She does not mean that the new dwellers will be scared away from the house, but that they will soon be kicked out by the authorities anyway. The other meaning, however, is not erased since the night witch has already started tormenting Bol.

That the couple is in a state of limbo is emphasized by the fact that the house looks deserted. Rubbish has accumulated in the front yard, an obvious comment on immigrants being considered the refuse of society. Because it looks unoccupied, a girl peeing in the backyard is surprised at seeing Rial through the window, and she exclaims to her off-screen friend(s) “I think there is someone living there” (29:32). Rial’s existence

17. Jordan Peele labels *Get Out* a “social thriller”, which he sees as a way of pointing out that the monster in his film is “society itself”. See Max Webstein, “Society is the Monster: Jordan Peele on Racism as Horror”.

18. Research on asylum seeking often uses Victor Turner’s concept of liminality to define the experience the seekers go through. Many point out that the rite of passage is in fact a “ceremony of degradation”. See for example Marina Gold, “Liminality and the asylum process in Switzerland”, *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 235 (2019), 16-19.

thus seems to remain uncertain, which points to her ghost-like, liminal status. In this episode, she is seen through the kitchen window, which simultaneously reflects the brick wall of the backyard. The image encapsulates Rial’s liminality, since the superimposition of image and reflection makes her ontological status unclear: she is no more “solid” or “real” than the reflected image on the windowpane. Furthermore, the house is not precisely located in space and becomes a sort of “no-place”. The film draws attention to this indeterminacy when Bol asks the barber to confirm that they are in London. Rather than setting him right, the man answers “why not?” (17:43). The place is never given a name and thus, even though the refugees are housed, they are still “unplaced”.

This transitional home turns out to be almost as porous as the characters’ haunted minds. Not only does a girl pee in their backyard, but the Majurs seem to be constantly spied upon by their next-door neighbor. Immigration can apparently visit whenever they please to check that the rules are followed. They have the right to intrude on the couple’s intimate sphere and their intrusions act as a constant reminder of the threat of deportation. One scene establishes a clear link between intrusion from the outside and irruption within the mind. While Bol is standing alone in the dark living room, the voices of young people loitering in the street can be dimly heard in the background. Suddenly something is thrown through the window (13:00) and the shattering sound triggers a post-traumatic auditory hallucination in Bol, who stops his ears in a desperate attempt to silence the screams inside his head. Thus, a micro-aggression is put in parallel with the traumatic violence of the past, suggesting that there are also sources of terror outside the haunted house. Rial also faces such micro-aggression when she ventures outside the house for the first time. Weekes has underlined the influence of *The Shining* on this sequence,¹⁹ which shows Rial losing her way in a labyrinth of narrow alleys, where she twice comes upon the same boy playing football against a wall (24:59-26:38). At the symbolic center of the maze, she comes face to face with “the monster”. Thinking the three black boys she comes across will help her find her way, she walks up to them, only to be mocked for her accent and fooled with, before eventually being told to go back to “fucking Africa”. Though they share the same skin color, the three boys in school uniforms turn out to be fierce guardians of the border, excluding Rial as one who does not belong. In short, the film presents the host country as fertile soil for what is now commonly called “insidious” trauma, that experienced by people targeted by racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.

19. Director Remi Weekes includes Polansky’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) and Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980) among his favorite horror movies. The two films are usually considered as major influences on the post-horror cycle.

In several places, the film very subtly establishes the continuity between past and present. The importance of doorways opening onto the traumatic past has already been underlined. The film makes a striking use of a doorway when the couple leave their room in the detention center. When walking along the corridor, they go past the open door of another room where a migrant is being violently beaten up by the figures of authority (03:37). Thus, doorways also open onto violence in the “here and now”, which recalls the violence of the couple’s past. The film also invites the viewer to see a parallel between what happens inside the haunted house and what happens in the immigration office when Bol tries to convince his case worker to move them to another house. Bol cut his hand when tearing at the walls, and he is still wearing a bandage when he visits the office. He cuts the same hand again when he crushes the glass he is holding, overwhelmed by distress and frustration at not being heard (53:44). More importantly, the muted electronic-sounding music that plays at the end of this scene carries on into the next, the sound bridge inciting the viewer to see the parallel between the two. The next scene (which has been discussed above) shows Rial looking at the ghostly faces that appear through the holes in the wall. The still faces are a visual echo of the faces of the two immigration officials staring with hostility at Bol after pointing out that their houses are smaller than the one the couple has been granted (53:58). Thus, though the film’s focus is on inner demons, it also points an accusing finger at the “monsters” outside.

The film locates the sources of terror both inside and outside the house, and the parallel between the two reinforces the negative judgement the film passes on the way migrants are treated in the UK. *His House* is also social horror, though the incisive social critique remains peripheral to the film, being outweighed by the narrative of trauma.

Conclusion: “Pictures can’t hurt me” ... or can they?



In its depiction of the plight of forcibly displaced migrants who are not made welcome in the new country, *His House* evinces an intense awareness of the contemporary lay discourse on trauma. As this is also true of many of the post-horror movies discussed by David Church, one may hypothesize that the emergence of this new cycle is concomitant with the popularization/ trivialization of the academic discourse on trauma that thrived in the 1990s and crossed the borderlines between different disciplinary fields.²⁰ Trauma has indeed become a household word and the

20. Trauma studies developed in the 1990s, with such key figures as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman. For an overview of this development, see for example Michelle Balaev, “Trauma

subject has thoroughly permeated popular culture. The underlying ethical question is whether post-horror is exploitative in its use of trauma, a question even more acutely raised by *His House* as it is so firmly grounded in the “reality” of the refugee experience.²¹

“Make yourself at home. Pictures can’t hurt me”, Bol confidently tells the Apeth when he realizes that the latter can only project frightful images (1:03:28). The film shows that pictures can indeed hurt, to the point of one choosing death over seeing. Bol’s defiant statement takes on an obvious metafilmic dimension, asking the question of the impact of horror movies on the spectator. Indeed, the context in which Bol utters the words is strongly evocative of a moviegoing experience. After deciding to summon the Apeth, Bol settles on the couch in front of a window that becomes evocative of a screen. The light progressively dims, and he finds himself in a dark room in front of the bright window/screen. When his eyes close, he enters the “other world”, and an embedded horror movie starts. Bol is thus placed in the position of a horror-movie spectator, and the experience does have a physical effect on him, as revealed when his wife finds him in a state of stupor and notices that he has wet his pants.

Horror movies attempt to provoke a bodily response of fear and/or disgust in the spectator, and *His House* does trigger this reaction in several places. As trauma fiction, however, the film also attempts to trigger empathy for the plight of traumatized refugees. Through its aesthetic and structural choices, it has the viewer go through “something like” the inner crisis triggered by trauma. But contrary to the horror-movie spectator, Bol cannot turn his head, as the Apeth physically forces him to watch. This is how *His House* envisions the experience of the traumatized subject: as being shown a horror movie you cannot not watch.

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