‘You have always been the caretaker’:
the spectral spaces of the Overlook Hotel

M. Fisher

‘What is anachronistic about the ghost story is its peculiarly contingent and constitutive dependence of physical place and, in particular, on the material house as such. No doubt, in some pre-capitalist forms, the past manages to cling stubbornly to open spaces, such as a gallows hill or a sacred burial ground; but in the golden age of this genre, the ghost is at one with a building of some antiquity … Not death as such, then, but the sequence of such "dying generations" is the scandal reawakened by the ghost story for a bourgeois culture which has triumphantly stamped out ancestor worship and the objective memory of the clan or extended family, thereby sentencing itself to the life span of the biological individual. No building more appropriate to express this than the grand hotel itself, with its successive seasons whose vaster rhythms mark the transformation of American leisure classes from the late 19th century down to the vacations of present-day consumer society.’ (Fredric Jameson, ‘Historicism in *The Shining’*)

‘’[T]he strongest compulsive influence arises from the impressions which impinge upon the child when we would have to regard his psychical apparatus as not yet completely receptive. The fact cannot be doubted; but it is so puzzling that we may make it more comprehensible by comparing it with a photographic exposure which can be developed after any interval of time and transformed into a picture.’ (Freud, ‘Moses and Monotheism’)

Space is intrinsic to spectrality, as one of the meanings of the term ‘haunt’ – a place – indicates. Yet haunting, evidently, is a disorder of time as well as of space. Haunting happens when a space is invaded or otherwise disrupted by a time that is out-of-joint, a dyschronia.

The Shining – King’s novel, and Kubrick’s ‘unfaithful’ film version, both of which, I propose to treat as one interconnected textual labyrinth – is fundamentally concerned

with the question of repetition. In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida defines hauntology as the study of that which repeats without ever being present. To elaborate, we might say that the revenant repeats without being present *in the first place* - where 'place' is equivalent in meaning to 'time'. Nothing occupies the point of origin, and that which haunts *insists* without ever *existing*. We shall return to this presently (or would it be better to say, *it* will return to *us*?)

Precisely because it is so centrally about repetition, *The Shining* is a deeply psychoanalytic fiction. You might say that it translates psychoanalysis's family dramas into the stuff of Horror, except that it does rather more; it demonstrates what many have long suspected – that psychoanalysis already belongs to the genre of Horror. Where else could we place concepts such as the death drive, the uncanny, trauma, the compulsion to repeat?

Yet *The Shining* is about repetition in a cultural, as well as a psychoanalytic sense. Hence Jameson's interest. Jameson, after all, has theorised postmodernity in terms of repetition, albeit a repetition that is disavowed. The 'nostalgia mode' he refers to names an all-but ubiquitous yet largely unacknowledged mode of repetition, in a culture in which the conditions for the original and the ground-breaking are no longer in place, or are in place only in very exceptional circumstances. The nostalgia in question is neither a psychological nor an affective category. It is structural and cultural, not a matter of an individual or a collective longing for the past. Almost to the contrary, the nostalgia mode is about the inability to imagine anything other than the past, the incapacity to generate forms that can engage with the present, still less the future. It is Jameson's claim that representations of the future, in fact, are increasingly likely to come to us garbed in the forms of the past: *Blade Runner*, with its well-known debt to film noir, is exemplary here (and nothing makes Jameson's point more clearly than *Blade Runner*'s domination over Science Fiction film in the last twenty-five years).

According to Jameson, then, *The Shining*, then, is a 'metageneric' reflection on the ghost story (a ghost story that is about ghost stories). Yet I want to claim *The Shining* does not belong to postmodernity, but rather to postmodernity's doppelganger, hauntology. We could go so far as to say that it is a meta-reflection on postmodernity

itself. As Jameson reminds us, *The Shining* is also about a failed writer: a would-be novelist who yearns to be virile Writer in the strong modernist mould, but who is fated to be a passive surface on which the hotel – itself a palimpsest of fantasies and atrocities, an echo chamber of memories and anticipations – will inscribe its pathologies and homicidal intent. Or, it would be better to say, for this is the horrible dyschronic temporal mode proper to the Overlook, it *will have always* done.

The Overlook and the Real

'Around him, he could hear the Overlook Hotel coming to life.' (King, 356)

There is no escape from the infinite corridors of the Overlook. It is no gloomy castle, easily relegated to an obsolete genre (the gothic romance); neither is it a supernatural relic that will crumble to dust when exposed to the harsh light of scientific reason. Concealed behind the alluring ghosts of the hotel's Imaginary which seduce Jack, the horrors that stalk the Overlook's corridors belong to the Real. The Real is that which keeps repeating, that which re-asserts itself no matter how you seek to flee it (more horribly, it is that which re-asserts itself *through* the attempts to flee it: the fate of Oedipus). The Overlook's horrors are those of the family and of history; or more concisely, they are those of family history (the province, needless to say, of psychoanalysis).

David A Cook has already shown how the film version is haunted by American history. In Cook's rendition, the Overlook, that playground of the ultra-privileged and the super-crooked (and no-one, in the still paranoid post-Watergate dusk when King wrote the novel, could be so naïve as to imagine that these two groups could be parsed), metonymically stands in for the nightmare of American history itself. A leisure hive built on top of an Indian Burial Ground (this detail was added by Kubrick); a potent image of a culture founded upon (the repression of) the genocide of the native peoples.

'It was as if another Overlook now lay scant inches beyond this one,
separated from the real world (if there is such thing as a "real world" Jack thought)
but gradually coming into balance with it.' (King, 356)

Important as Cook's reflections are, as I have already indicated, I want to concentrate, not on the macro-level of History, on the micro-level of the family. This, inevitably, brings us to Walter Metz's valuable reflections on the way in which *The Shining* is intertextually bound up with the melodrama genre. A central tension in the film – a tension which for some is never quite resolved – concerns how *The Shining* is ultimately to be generically placed: is it about the family (in which case, it belongs to melodrama) or is about the supernatural (in which case, it belongs to Horror or the ghost story).[i] This inevitably recalls Todorov's famous claim that the Fantastic is defined by the hesitation between two epistemological possibilitie; if spectral forces can be explained psychologically or by some other naturalistic means, then we are dealing with the Uncanny. If the spectres of the supernatural cannot be exorcised, then we are dealing with the Marvellous. Only while we oscillate between the two possibilities do we confront the Fantastic.

The Uncanny	The Fantastic	The Marvellous
Melodrama		The ghost story

Noting that most critics have regarded *The Shining* as a case of the Marvellous, Metz positions *The Shining* as an example of the uncanny.

But I want to argue that *The Shining* is important because it scrambles the terms of Tododorov's schema; it is, at one and the same time, a family melodrama *and* a ghost story. If the ghosts are Real, it is not because they are supernatural; and if the spectres are psychoanalytic, that is not to say that they can be reduced to the psychological. Just the reverse, in fact: rather than the spectral being subsumed by the psychological, for psychoanalysis, the psychological can be construed as a symptom of the spectral. It is the haunting that comes first.

Patriarchy as hauntology

The Overlook's ghosts are inescapable because they are the spectres of family history, and who of us is without a family history?[ii] *The Shining* is a fiction, after all, about fathers and sons. Its genesis lay in a fantasy from which King the father, still struggling with alcoholism, recoiled, but which King the writer was fascinated by. Finding his papers scattered by his son one day, King flew into a blind rage; later he realised he could easily have struck the child. The germ of the novel was King's extrapolation from that situation: what if he *had* struck his son? What if he had done much worse? What if King were an alcoholic failure who merely dreamt that he is a novelist?

Psychoanalysis could be crudely boiled down to the claim that we *are* our family history, although it is perhaps at this point that we can dispense with the term 'history' and replace it with 'hauntology'. The family emerges in Freud as a hauntological structure: the child is father to the man, the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. The child who hates his father is condemned to repeat him, the abused becomes the abuser.

The Shining is about patriarchy as hauntology, and that relation is nowhere more thoroughly explored than in Freud's essays on the foundations of religion. Here, Freud shows that the Holy Father, Jahweh, is indeed also a Holy Ghost: a spectral deity which can assert itself only through its physical absence.

Freud repeated the 'speculative myth' of the dismemberment and devouring of the Father Thing in 'Totem and Taboo' thirty years later in 'Moses and Monotheism', a text which is itself full of repetitions and refrains.

In Freud's account, there are two Fathers: the obscene 'Pere Jouissance' (Lacan) who has access to total enjoyment, and the Name/ No (Nom/Non) of the Father – the Father of Law, the Symbolic Order in person, who forbids and mortifies. As Zizek has shown[iii], one of the most significant aspects of 'Totem and Taboo' was to have established that the austere Father of Symbolic Law is not originary; it is not, as the theory of the Oedipus complex had assumed, that the father is a pre-existent block to enjoyment. This 'block' only comes into place once the father is killed.

In the story as Freud recounts it, the primal horde of beta males, jealous and resentful of the tribal Father, rise up one day to kill him, anticipating that they will now have unlimited access to jouissance. But this is not what transpires. The 'band of brothers' are immediately remorseful, guilt-stricken, melancholic. Far from being able to enjoy everything, the gloomy parricidal brothers are unable to enjoy anything. And far from ridding themselves of their Father's loathsome domination, they find that the Father dominates them all the more now that he is absent. The Father's ghost preys upon their conscience; indeed, their conscience is nothing other than the reproach of the dead Father's spectral voice. In heeding this absent voice, in commemorating and propitiating it by initiating new ceremonies and codes of practice, the brothers introduce the rudimentary forms of morality and religion. God, the Father, the Big Other, the Symbolic does not exist; but it *insists* through the repetition of these rituals.

The Father is doubly dead. He asserts his power only when he is dead, but his power is itself only a power of death: the power to mortify live flesh, to kill enjoyment.

A child is being beaten

'Like father, like son. Wasn't that how it was popularly expressed?' (King, 437)

The Shining shows us patriarchal dementia – with its lusts, its ruses and its rationalizations - from inside. We witness Jack gradually succumbing to this dementia as he becomes intoxicated by the hotel and its temptations, promises and challenges. In the soft-focus, honeyed space of the Gold Room, Jack parties with the hotel's ghosts.

'He was dancing with a beautiful woman.

He had no idea of what time it was, how long he had spent in the Colorado Lounge or how long he had been there in the ballroom. Time had ceased to matter.' (TS 362)

In the grip of these fever-dream fantasies, Jack descends into the unconscious (where, as Freud tells us, time has no meaning). The unconscious is always impersonal, and especially so here: the unconscious that Jack subsides into is the unconscious of the

hotel itself. His family come to seem like 'ball-breaking' distractions from his increasing spells of enchanted communion with the hotel, and *being a good father* becomes synonymous with delivering Danny to the Overlook. Jack becomes convinced by the hotel's avatars – which seem to reconcile the demands of the superego with those of the id - that it is his *duty* to bring Danny into line.

Beyond the Imaginary no-time of the Gold Room, there is another mode of suspended time in the Overlook. This belongs to the Real, where sequential, or 'chronic', clockface time, is superseded by the fatality of repetition. It is the Imaginary pleasures of the Gold Room, with their succulent promises of enwombing fusion, which allow Jack to fall increasingly into the hold of the hotel's Real structure – the structure of abusive repetition. Danny confronts this structure as a vision of man endlessly a pursuing a child with a roque mallet (in the film, an axe).

'The clockface was gone. In its place was a round black hole. It led down into forever. It began to swell. The clock was gone. The room behind it. Danny tottered and then fell into the darkness that had been hiding behind the clockface all along.

The small boy in the chair suddenly collapsed and lay in it at a crooked unnatural angle, his head thrown back, his eyes staring sightlessly at the high ballroom ceiling.

Down and down and down and down to –

- the hallway, crouched in the hallway, and he had made wrong turn, trying to get back to the stairs he had made a wrong turn and now AND NOW –

- he saw he was in the short dead-end corridor that led only to the Presidential Suite and the booming sound was coming closer, the roque mallet whistling savagely through the air, the head of it embedding itself into the wall, cutting the silk paper, letting out small puffs of plaster dust.' (King, 319)

Here we can turn again to the image of fatality Freud uses in 'Moses and Monotheism', which I cited at the beginning of this essay. '[T]he strongest compulsive influence,' Freud writes, 'arises from the impressions which impinge

upon the child when we would have to regard his psychical apparatus as not yet completely receptive. The fact cannot be doubted; but it is so puzzling that we may make it more comprehensible by comparing it with a photographic exposure which can be developed after any interval of time and transformed into a picture.' (Freud, 374)

This passage is especially piquant and suggestive when considered in relation to *The Shining* given the famous final image of Kubrick's film: a photograph taken in 1923 showing Jack, surrounded by party-goers and grinning. At this moment, we cannot but be reminded of Delbert Grady's ominous claim that Jack has 'always been the caretaker'.

What I want to draw from Freud's photographic metaphor is precisely its concept of effects being distanced in time from the events which produced them. This is the psychoanalytic horror which *The Shining* anatomises. Violence has been imprinted upon Jack 'psychical apparatus' long ago, in childhood (the novel details at some length the abuse that Jack has himself suffered at the hands of his own father), but it requires the 'spectral spaces' of the Overlook hotel to transform those impressions from an 'exposure' into a 'picture', an actual act of violence.

If Jack 'has always been the caretaker', it is because his life has always been in the abuse-circuit. Jack represents an appalling structural fatality, a spectral determinism. To have 'always been the caretaker' is never to have been a subject in his own right. Jack has only ever stood in for the Symbolic and the homicidal violence which is the Symbolic's obscene underside. What, after all, is the father if not the 'caretaker', the one who (temporarily) shoulders the obligations of the Symbolic (what Jack calls 'the white man's burden') before passing them onto the next generation? In Jack the ghosts of the past are revived – but only at the cost of his own 'de-vival'.

Of course, the dyschronic nature of the Overlook's abusive causality – events stored in the psyche will yield their effects only after time has elapsed - has implications for Danny's future as well. As Metz puts it: 'When Jack chases Danny into the maze with ax in hand and states, "I'm right behind you Danny", he is predicting Danny`s future as well as trying to scare the boy. … [T]he patriarchal beast is within [Danny] as

well.' (Metz, 57) Jack might as well be saying, 'I'm just ahead of you, Danny': I am what you will become. In the Overlook, a child is always being beaten, and the position of the abused and the position of the abuser are places in a structure. It is all-too-easy for the abused to become the abuser. The ominous question *The Shining* poses, but does not answer, is: will this happen to Danny (as it happened to Jack)? Is *The Shining*, that is to say, 'Totem and Taboo'/ 'Moses and Monotheism' – where the Father retains his spectral hold on the sons precisely through his own death - or is it *Anti-Oedipus*?

In the novel, Danny can only escape death at the hands of his father by catatonically communing with his double, Tony, whom King reveals to be an avatar of his future self:

'And now Tony stood directly in front of him, and looking at Tony was like staring into a magic mirror and seeing himself in ten years...

The hair was light blond like his mother's, and yet the stamp on his features was that of his father, as if Tony – as if the Daniel Anthony Torrance he would someday be – was a halfling caught between father and son, a ghost of both, a fusion.' (King, 437)

In the film, Danny escapes from his father by *walking backwards in his footsteps*. Yet we do not know if the (psychic) damage has already been done – will Danny, in surviving his father, end up taking his father's place?

For Metz, these hesitations leaves the text open: 'it is up to Danny to grow up and build a better world, throwing off the demons of the past but always knowing that deep inside of him, the demons that possessed Jack and all Americans are right beneath the surface. Danny has inherited Jack's legacy.' (Metz, 57) If Danny can throw off the spectres of the past, there is a possibility of freedom, then, but have the 'strongest compulsive influences' already done their work? Is Danny, too, destined to always have been the Overlook's caretaker?

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[i] Metz in fact argues that the situation is more complex, arguing that Horror, as well as melodrama, has taken the family as its subject.

[ii] See, for instance, Lisa Gye's online hypertext project 'Half Lives' (http://halflives.adc.rmit.edu.au/haunt/index.html), which explores the concept of hauntology through her own family history.

[iii] See Zizek, 1997