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It “Over-looks”: Movement and Stillness in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*

The zoom that engulfs Andreas at the end of *The Passion of Anna* shares traits with the ending of Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*, a haunted-hotel horror thriller adapted from Stephen King’s 1977 novel. The film tells the story of Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson), a writer and former school-teacher, who is hired as a caretaker at a large hotel located in the mountains of Colorado called the Overlook. Jack, his wife Wendy (Shelley Duvall), and their son, Danny (Danny Lloyd), must live and manage the Overlook during the winter season when the hotel is closed. As Jack’s writing goes nowhere, he becomes interested in the hotel’s violent past, particularly the story of Charles Grady, a former Overlook caretaker who killed his wife and twin daughters with an ax. Jack discovers that the hotel is possessed by ghosts, which leads him toward madness that culminates in his attempts to kill his own family. The final image of *The Shining* is a forward traveling shot, ending on a black-and-white photograph from July 4, 1921, which presents a group of wealthy people in the Overlook’s Gold Room dressed in black tie. Standing in front of the group, smiling, is Jack Torrance. Similar to *The Passion of Anna*, *The Shining* ends on a mysterious note, suggesting a circular narrative. In *The Passion of Anna*, the ticking of the clock and Bergman’s voice-over, “This time they called him Andreas Winkleman,” not only returns us to the film’s opening scene, but also follows Laura Mulvey’s description of the repetition of cinema’s secret: the still image. Andreas is mummified by the zoom—rendering him creaturely as he gets too close to his fantasy object. In *The Shining*, the photograph not only embalms Jack, who happened to freeze to death in the Overlook’s shrubbery maze while trying to kill Danny with an ax, but also suggests he has a secret and ghostly past. As the ghost of the former caretaker, Delbert Grady (Philip Stone) says to him in the Overlook’s Gold Room bathroom: “You’ve always been the caretaker. I should know, sir. I’ve always been here.” Jack even tells Wendy that he is having déjà vu: “When I came up here for my interview, it was as though I had been here before.”
The ambiguity of the photograph not only contributes to The Shining’s uncanny atmosphere, but also speaks to the excess of the gaze that energizes the film’s confined setting. Indeed, the mysterious photograph of Jack from 1921 follows Lacan’s theory that the gaze is on the side of the object. Here, the photograph of Jack takes on a double meaning. The photograph literally speaks to the Overlook’s mysterious and haunted past to which Jack is connected. At the same time, the gaze stands in for the blind spot within the field of representation which, as Lacan states, “photo-graphs” us the spectators.1 The mysterious picture of Jack looking back at us realizes our desire to look within the film. Yet our encounter with the picture of Jack unsettles our spectatorship because we are left with no resolution to the question that the film’s ending poses. Is Jack truly a ghost?2 The photograph of Jack looking back at us speaks directly to Lacan’s notion of the gaze. The photograph, as the embodiment of the gaze, sees us within the picture, because it signals how our desire distorts the visual field. If we felt disturbed by the ending of The Shining, it is because we have invested our desire to look into the film.

Perhaps more strikingly is the movement of the camera that finds the picture on the wall near the Overlook’s Gold Room. Whose perspective is this attributed to? The same can be asked of the zoom that engulfs Andreas at the end of The Passion of Anna. In writing on the technique of suture, Slavoj Žižek explains, “one of the standard horror movie procedures is the ‘resignification’ of the objective into the subject shot.”3 An example of standard suturing is the shot/reverse shot technique. Take, for instance, a woman facing the front of a beach house. Ocean waves crash behind her while a man speaks off-screen. As Žižek notes, “the spectator is confronted with a shot, finds pleasure in it in an immediate, imaginary way, and is absorbed by it.”4 Our immersion into the image is then undone by realizing that we are only seeing a partial view. It is the “Absent-one,” the “Other” that, as Žižek states, “manipulates images behind my back.” It is the Absent-one who runs “the show.”5 The complementary reverse shot is the image of the ocean and the man behind the woman. The complementary shot embodies the place in which the Absent-one looks. The objectivity of the shot is now mapped onto the film’s narrative space by a point of view. Reverse suturing, however, moves from objective to subjective; for example, the spectator sees an objective shot of a window, and suddenly a hand emerges off-frame and closes the curtain. The unoccupied space is now rendered with an observer.

But there is another reversal when, according to Žižek, “there is no possible subject within the space of diegetic reality who can occupy the point of view of this shot.”6 This reversal undermines the technique of suture because “the tension remains unresolved.”7 The ultimate threat is a “free-floating
“gaze” that is not assigned to a specific subject, as captivatingly depicted in the traveling shot that locates the photograph of Jack. Here, the Overlook (like the photograph of Jack) carries a double meaning. On the one hand, the Overlook is the place of a free-floating gaze—an Absent-one or “Other” that does not occupy a point of view. On the other hand, it is our failure to notice: namely, a blind spot in the form of the gaze—a gaze that happens to overlook us. As such, the end of The Shining is one of many instances that manifest the film’s exploration of the gaze in relation to the supernatural. From the very start of The Shining, Kubrick overwhelms and disturbs the viewer with excess information, as illustrated in the foreboding credit sequences of Jack driving to the Overlook (more on this later). From this perspective, the gaze is an unknowable force that lurks and haunts the visual field. It is an antagonistic power that makes its presence felt, but is not clearly identified as a spectral figure. The tension between showing too much and not identifying the force that follows Jack has to do with Kubrick’s exploration of the supernatural and the Freudian uncanny. The way in which Kubrick articulates the film’s narrative space and objects within the confined and haunted setting of the Overlook challenges us to question whether what we are experiencing is, in fact, the supernatural or the characters’ imagination. Blurring the boundary between reality and the fantastic renders the setting of the Overlook a place of unreliability. As I argue, Danny uses his gift of telepathy, a special ability that allows him to see into the future and past to investigate and, ultimately, undermine the ghostly past of the Overlook Hotel as a place of “impossible subjectivity.” Danny, from this perspective, operates as a supernatural detective. His ability “to shine” renders antagonistic and ghostly forces visible for the spectator, such as in his encounter with the Grady twins. Jack, too, operates as a detective into the Overlook’s past. Whereas Danny’s investigation of the Overlook is captured primarily by movement, Jack’s exploration of the Overlook is depicted by stillness as he examines the hotel’s archives (such as photographs and scrapbooks). As he says to Grady, “I saw your picture in the newspaper. You chopped your wife and daughters up into little pieces and you blew your brains out.” At the same time, Jack’s descent into madness renders him creaturely as he is mummified into a frozen archive at the end of the film. As such, examining the film’s engagement with movement and stillness provides insights into the film’s depiction of excess within the confined, haunted, and uncanny setting of the Overlook.
The Uncanny and Burnt Toast

It has been well documented that Kubrick and his screenwriter, Diane Johnson, read Freud’s 1919 essay “The Uncanny” in adapting King’s novel for the screen. For Freud, the uncanny manifests something “frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.” Through an analysis of E. T. A. Hoffman’s story “The Sandman,” Freud refutes Ernst Jentsch, who argues, in his 1906 essay “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” that the feelings of the uncanny are aroused by the new and unfamiliar. For Freud, the uncanny can only emerge through the old. Freud explains that the uncanny can manifest through a number of factors, including the castration complex, the return of the repressed, the double, the compulsion to repeat, the blurring of reality, the imaginary, and the animistic. Citing examples from literature, Freud specifically explains that fairy tales that channel the animistic have little impact in creating feelings of the uncanny: “Fairy tales quite frankly adopt the animistic standpoint of the omnipotence of thoughts and wishes, and yet I cannot think of any genuine fairy story which has anything uncanny about it.” This is because readers adjust their perception to accept the fairy tale’s animistic universe. As Freud puts it, “In fairy tales . . . the world of reality is left behind from the very start, and the animistic system of belief is frankly adopted.” But in the case of the realist setting in literature, according to Freud, when the “writer pretends to move in the world of common reality,” the uncanny has a greater chance to emerge. Freud’s notion of the uncanny in relation to the realist setting speaks directly to Kubrick’s interest in depicting the supernatural within a natural setting in The Shining, challenging us to decipher what is reality and what is supernatural. As such, The Shining avoids many of the conventions of the horror genre, opting instead to depict a realist setting as demonstrated in the Overlook’s elaborate production design, bright lighting, deep focus, and long-take cinematography. At the same time, these visual components render the space of the Overlook ominous and uncertain. Kubrick explained that he and the production designer, Roy Walker, devoted considerable research and time to photographing hotels: “We wanted the hotel to look authentic rather than like a traditionally spooky movie hotel. The hotel’s labyrinthine layout and huge rooms, I believed, would alone provide an eerie enough atmosphere.” Kubrick’s labyrinth aesthetic is reinforced by Ullman and Watson, who walk Jack and Wendy through the various sections of the Overlook early in the film. Kubrick films these sequences primarily using long and deep-focus tracking shots as we explore the spaces alongside Jack and Wendy. Yet, within these absorbing settings, an
obscene underside of horror and supernatural is at work, such as when Danny witnesses the Grady twins in the Overlook’s game room early in the film. Indeed, the scale and magnificence of the Colorado Lounge and the spectacular Art Deco design of the Gold Room—where Jack travels to the past and meets the ghost of the former caretaker, Grady—immerse viewers in the film’s confined setting of the Overlook. At the same time, there is something more in the Overlook’s space than space itself. Something sticks out within the Overlook’s grand setting that infuses the film’s constricted space with feelings of the uncanny. It is this excessive component that arouses our desire to look within the film, setting a trap for our encounter with the gaze.

Early in the film, Danny and the Overlook’s head chef, Dick Hallorann (Scatman Crothers), converse about their gift of telepathy. Hallorann asks Danny how long he has been able to “shine.” Danny replies that Tony (his imaginary friend who lives inside his mouth) does not allow him to talk about his power. Hallorann asks if Tony has ever told him about the Overlook. Danny imparts that he is not allowed to say. Danny then asks if there is something “bad” about the Overlook. Hallorann replies: “Well, you know Doc, when something happens it can leave a trace of itself behind, say like someone burns toast. Not things that anyone can notice, but things that people who shine can see.” Hallorann’s burnt toast example not only provides an olfactory explanation of the Overlook’s bad past, but also offers a clue into Kubrick’s depiction of the supernatural. This is particularly revealing in Kubrick’s explanation to Michel Ciment: “As the supernatural events occurred you searched for an explanation, and the most likely one seemed to be that the strange things that were happening would finally be explained as the products of Jack’s imagination. It’s not until Grady, the ghost of the former caretaker who axed to death his family, slides open the bolt of the larder door, allowing Jack to escape, that you are left with no other explanation but the supernatural.”13 The evidence, or “proof,” of the supernatural arrives late in the film, when Wendy knocks out Jack with a baseball bat and locks him in the kitchen’s large food storage room. Grady is not Jack’s imagination or a manifestation of cabin fever, but is revealed to be a supernatural entity that frees him from the larder, with the stipulation that he will murder his family. Kubrick states that this “kind of psychological misdirection [is] to forestall the realization that the supernatural events are actually happening [in the Overlook].”14 Although Kubrick does not assign the Overlook’s strange occurrences to the supernatural until the climax of the narrative, this forestalled information does manifest throughout the film as “traces of itself left behind.” These traces are an excessive force that unsettles the confined setting of the Overlook.
The Unattributable Shot

One way in which Kubrick builds suspense and narrative tension without relying on traditions of horror’s supernatural is by utilizing Joan Copjec’s notion of the unattributable shot: a shot that cannot be connected to an observer. The unattributable shot, according to Copjec, “appears to be neutral or empty of subjectivity because . . . in contradistinction to the point-of-view shot, it is not filmed from a space that is proximate to, partially includes, or is spatially associated with a character, but from a space unaffiliated with any particular person.”\(^{15}\) The unattributable shot is not a reverse suturing of a subjective shot into an objective shot, but is what Žižek describes as “a place of impossible subjectivity.”\(^{16}\) For both Copjec and Žižek, the unaccounted bearer of the unattributable shot is the gaze—it is the excess that “spoils” the objectivity of the image. Yet the presence of the gaze affirms its “seal” of objectivity. Copjec specifically draws upon Jean-Paul Sartre’s keyhole example in *Being and Nothingness* to explain the objectivity of the gaze of the Other. The scene Sartre paints is of a voyeur looking through a keyhole, which is, subsequently, disrupted by the sound of rustling branches and footsteps behind him that suddenly stop. Copjec explains that the voyeur’s experience of the gaze “is neither an empty, transcendent One that unifies and guarantees existence, nor is it a concrete community of others, whose shared notion of reality acts as its own guarantee.”\(^{17}\) Rather, Sartre’s keyhole example assures the subject that “some others exist.” As Lacan similarly explains, “The gaze I encounter . . . is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.”\(^{18}\) As such, one’s encounter with the gaze provides evidence of objectivity. Yet this objectivity is also a failed or missed encounter with the gaze of the Other as a “surplus-object” that unsettles the unification of space. For Copjec, the gaze is felt through a sensible form, but it is not an object in the traditional sense: “The reference to a specific seer remains in suspense in the encounter with the Other’s gaze.”\(^{19}\) The subject is aware that he is being seen, that the Other’s gaze emerges aurally (footsteps and the rustling of leaves), but what is causing the noise is not to be seen. As Henry Krips explains, “the subject is brought to recognize that there is a hole, a lack, in the visual field” through his own scrutiny.\(^{20}\) The distortion within the visual field of representation is the gaze when the voyeur becomes aware of his looking as a subject of desire.

Suture helps to explain the inapprehensibility of the gaze and the suspension of the seer. Suturing is an exchange in which the gaze of the Other and the subject would recognize each other. By contrast, the failed encounter with the gaze is the gaze of the Other seeing the subject, but there is “no there” of the gaze. In other words, there is no “Absent-one”
as a bearer of the look to signify for the viewer.\footnote{21} As such, the “no there” of the gaze is the unattributable shot for Copjec. The unattributable shot make itself felt, but is not attached to a specific observer of the shot signified for the viewer. The inability to suture the excess linked to the gaze in \textit{The Shining} is something that lingers like “burnt toast,” as demonstrated in the opening aerial shots and rolling introductory credits.

Certainly, unattributable shots can be found in many movies. So what makes the aerial shots in \textit{The Shining} different? How do these shots, which lack a point of view, create narrative tension? The composition of cinematic space typically corresponds to narrative causality. Classical narrative cinema builds shots that adhere to narrative causality. Each shot and scene must push the narrative forward. Therefore, ambiguities will often be answered. For example, if we see a character framed far off to the right, we expect that something will fill in the extra space to the left. This is often the case in horror films, when the victim is being stalked. There are also shots that begin with an unattributed viewpoint, and are then suddenly filled with an observer, such as Hitchcock’s famous omniscient shot of Bodega Bay in \textit{The Birds} (1963), which turns out to be the birds’ malicious point of view. As such, a gap opens in cinematic space, which is then filled with the bearer of the look.

But there are unattributable shots that are stressed in form, or have unusual emphasis and are not assigned to a point of view. These shots carry something that “sticks out,” as in the opening images of the mountainous terrain in \textit{The Shining}. The sublime aerial images are juxtaposed to Jack’s yellow VW Beetle as he drives along the mountain to the Overlook for his interview (see figure 4.1). Indeed, Kubrick’s expressive use of the unattributable shot captures the presence of the gaze that prowls its subject. The first image is a low aerial shot of Saint Mary Lake in Glacier National Park, as the image quickly approaches Wild Goose Island. The oddity of this opening image not only sets the uncertain tone of the film, but also establishes its connection to water as a form of rebirth, which may offer a clue to the mysterious photograph of Jack from 1921 in laying claim to the film’s circular narrative. As the image moves past the lake, it tilts toward the mountains, dissolving into a very high omniscient shot of a yellow VW Beetle driving along the road. Kubrick’s use of Wendy Carlos and Rachel Elkind’s haunting synthesizer soundtrack, voices, and the wide-angle lens unsettles the enormous beauty of the mountains, expressing some sort of threat that follows or “overlooks” Jack. Like the clouds that dim the sun on the horizon in the opening of \textit{The Passion of Anna}, the breadth of the wide-angle aerial photography resonates with something foreboding. At one point, the camera swoops alongside Jack’s car as a note from the soundtrack loudly sustains itself. The image then
trails off the road, flying over the cliffs as we hear extra-diegetic dissonant sounds of a human voice. As such, the opening images of the film and haunting score are composed with unusual emphasis in order to evoke the notion that “some others exist”—that a gaze not identified with a specific observer lurks around Jack. The unsettling effect of the skulking aerial shots is reinforced by the film’s blue rolling credits (often reserved for the end of a movie), suggesting, again, that *The Shining* is a circular narrative: the end is the beginning.22

The ethereal energy in the opening sequence carries over into the film’s confined setting of the Overlook, particularly Danny traversing the corridors on his Big Wheel bike. Whereas the scope of the aerial images of the American frontier engulf Jack’s VW Beetle, the wide-angle lens that captures Danny on his bicycle suggests something excessive that cannot be incorporated within the confined, maze-like setting of the Overlook. This is particularly enhanced by the loudness of Danny’s wheels that roar throughout the Overlook’s corridors. Not unlike the aerial images that follow behind Jack’s vehicle, the mobile camera that trails behind Danny’s Big Wheel suggest the presence of something that both visually and aurally prowls, as when Danny encounters the Grady twins in the west wing during the Saturday sequence.
While Jack types away in the Colorado Lounge, Wendy communicates with the Forest Service via radio about the downed phone lines from the snowstorm. After the Forest Service instructs Wendy to keep the radio on at all times, the image cuts to a long shot of Danny driving his Big Wheel down a green corridor. Whereas the earlier traveling shots of Danny positioned the camera in close proximity to his Big Wheel, the framing of the bike in the green corridor is kept at a far distance (see figure 4.2). Danny turns his bike and exits frame right, but the camera continues to creep forward within the empty space of the green corridor. The lingering movement of the camera and the ominous score draw unusual attention to themselves, suggesting something threatening. The emphasis on the lingering camera in the corridor is not only an anomaly that captures our desire, but also sets a trap for our encounter with the gaze. The image cuts to Danny as he pedals along the west wing corridor. He turns a corner and instantly stops as he sees the Grady twins holding hands, an encounter punctuated by a non-diegetic gong. The twins say in unison: “Hullo, Danny. Come and play with us. Come and play with us, Danny. For ever . . . and ever . . . and ever,” as the image intercuts with a shot of the twins lying on the floor covered in blood. Danny’s movement is thus met with a violent halt that triggers his shining. Danny covers his eyes, looking through his fingers until the vision of the Grady twins disappears. Danny lowers his hands and talks to Tony, saying that he is scared. Tony reminds him, saying: “Remember what Mr. Hallorann said. It’s just like pictures in a book, Danny. It isn’t real.” Tony’s words both comfort and challenge us, as Kubrick toys with the notion of what we are seeing: is it Danny’s imagination or the supernatural? Indeed, the camera’s stressed movement as Danny rides his Big Wheel in the green corridor after he exits the space sticks out, creating a sense of uncertainty that elicits our desire. It is this stain (the unusual emphasis on the empty space in the green corridor) that not only builds anxiety, but also sets up Danny’s (and our) encounter with the gaze. The gaze realizes a blind spot in our looking, one that is further emphasized by the claustrophobic corridor in which Danny encounters the twins, and Kubrick positioning the camera behind Danny. These obstructions reveal that the logic of desire is not based on mastery but on absence, or what we cannot know. At the same time, the lingering camera movement within the corridor is a sensible form that cannot be attributed to a bearer of the look that unsettles the confined setting of the Overlook. This uncertainty captures the mystery of the Overlook—something in the space more than the space that cannot be apprehended. As such, the uncanny feelings of the Overlook’s confined setting realizes our investment in the narrative as situated within the film and not as a transcendental spectator. As Copjec
states, “Point-of-view structure depends on there being no total view, no transcendent position from which an all would, if only in principle, come into view.” Kubrick’s expressionistic movement of the Steadicam, wide-angle framing, and sinister soundtrack manifest the excess of the gaze. At the same time, the unattributable bearer of the look suggests the presence of others that exist in the Overlook. Danny’s ability to manifest the past confirms what lurks in the corridors and may not just be his imagination. As I will explain in the final section of this chapter, exploring the reverse-angle shot offers a potential clue to uncovering the Overlook’s ghostly dimension.

Television Screens

The mobile long take both energizes the confined setting of the Overlook and suggests a spectral presence that unhinges the film’s confined space. But equally powerful is Kubrick’s use of stillness, as demonstrated in Danny’s encounter with the Grady twins in the Overlook corridor.
Stillness and movement are pitted against each other, not only to disturb our viewership, but also to explore the past and future of the Overlook, as demonstrated in both Jack’s interview for the caretaker position and Danny’s premonition early in the film.

Kubrick films Jack’s interview with stillness, cutting between shot and reverse shot, between Jack and Stuart Ullman (Barry Nelson) and Bill Watson (Barry Dennen). At one point, Ullman tells Jack about a past event involving the former caretaker, Charles (or is it Delbert?) Grady, who killed his family with an ax and “stacked them neatly in one of the rooms in the west wing.” The police believed it was a result of cabin fever, of being shut in for a long period of time. Jack ironically says: “Well, you can rest assured Mr. Ullman, that’s not going to happen to me.” Yet we sense uncertainty in Jack’s reaction. We learn that he was once a violent drinker, but has now been sober for five months. After Jack’s interview, the film cuts to an apartment complex in Boulder, Colorado. Danny brushes his teeth in a bathroom. The camera creeps toward him as Tony tells Danny that Jack got the job at the Overlook. This is confirmed when the image cuts to the phone ringing in the kitchen. Wendy answers as we learn that Jack has, in fact, been offered the job. After Danny finishes brushing his teeth, he continues to talk to Tony, a conversation that occurs in the mirror, an object often connected to the supernatural in The Shining. Danny asks Tony why he does not want to go to the hotel. Tony will not say. Danny begs him to tell him as the image zooms into his mirror image. The image cuts to a low and still shot of two red elevator doors at the Overlook hotel. The perfect symmetrical framing of the elevators and still camera are unsettled by a wave of blood slowly gushing out of the left side of the elevator door. As the blood flows toward the camera, Kubrick intermittently inserts two images of the Grady girls holding hands in a corridor, looking directly at the camera, and an image of Danny scared, with his mouth wide open, also looking directly at the camera. After the third insert shot, the blood reaches the camera, flowing upwards, filling the screen with darkness. Whereas Jack is tragically confronted with the Overlook’s past of Grady murdering his family, Danny is horrifically and traumatically confronted with a future event. If we did not take Tony seriously when first meeting Danny and Wendy over lunch at the beginning of the film, the blood gushing out of the elevator certainly cements our investment within the film’s narrative. Something is not “correct” about the Overlook hotel. Indeed, the past and future events manifest through movement and stillness. Ullman informing Jack of Charles Grady’s murderous act and Danny seeing the Grady twins not only teleport us to the past and future, but establish The Shining’s suspense that carries over into the rest of the film. Additionally, these events provide us with surplus-
knowledge pertaining to the Overlook, rendering the confined setting with uncertainty, or something that lingers like “burnt toast.”

Perhaps most importantly, Danny’s premonition of the blood gushing out of the elevator doors takes place in the bathroom, a recognized site for acts of violence in horror/thriller cinema. Two scenes worthy of note include the death of Marion (Janet Leigh) in *Psycho,* and the blood emerging out of the toilet in *The Conversation.* After Marion’s death in the shower, Norman mops up the mess to eliminate all traces of the crime. However, in *The Conversation,* Harry Caul encounters a bathroom devoid of any evidence of a murder. Yet, when he flushes the toilet, he notices that it is not working properly. Suddenly, blood gushes out of the toilet, as Harry steps back with disgust. Slavoj Žižek explains Harry’s encounter in the hotel bathroom as a reference to a “preontological realm,” a “netherworld” or void that is kept submerged by way of the drain. As Žižek observes, “What is ‘Real’ in the scene from *The Conversation* is thus not primarily the horrifying and disgusting stuff reemerging from the toilet sink, but rather that toilet’s drain itself, the hole that serves as the passage to a different ontological order.” The drain not only flushes away “excrement” into a void, but can also return “things” back to us in the form of the gaze. Not unlike the big window in Brandon and Phillip’s penthouse in *Rope,* the drain functions as an empty fantasy screen that filters the real. When the fantasy screen crumbles, we encounter a nightmarish form of reality, as captured in the elevator sequence in *The Shining.* On the one hand, the elevator operates as something that physically carries people to the various levels of the Overlook. On the other hand, it serves as a passage of time in terms of the hotel’s past and future, as depicted in the interview sequence and Danny’s premonition. Additionally, the blood gushing out of the elevator door exhibits a supernatural force unleashed from within the void of the Overlook, an unknowable force that unsettles its confined spaces.

Indeed, the elevator becomes an animistic object, generating feelings of the uncanny that Freud posits as the return of the old. A notable film in this regard is Tobe Hooper’s *Poltergeist* (1982), which tells the story of a Californian suburban family whose home is invaded and overtaken by malevolent ghosts that abduct the family’s youngest daughter, Carol Anne Freeling (Heather O’Rourke). Early in the film, Carol Anne becomes fixated with the television set, which transmits static after the station signs off. In a well-known scene, the passing of a scary thunderstorm propels Carol Anne and her brother to sleep with their parents. As the family sleeps, the television plays the national anthem. The television signal signs off as flickering blue light floods the room with static and white noise. Carol Anne awakens and approaches the television, placing her hands against the screen. The hand of a ghost suddenly emerges from
the television, followed by what appears to be an earthquake. A bolt of energy shoots out of the television and burns a hole in the wall above the bed. The family awakens shocked to see Carol Anne in front of the television frighteningly saying: “They’re here.” Not unlike the drain in the bathroom in The Conversation, the television (as a “haunted media,” to use Jeffrey Sconce’s term) is a breakdown of the fantasmatic barrier that becomes a passageway into an unknown “netherworld.” As such, the collapse of the television fantasy screen in Poltergeist is an encounter with the gaze, where unknown and evil forces from another dimension emerge and invade the Freelings’ home. Here, the television’s flickering blue light is not unlike the panoply of the city lights that flood the apartment through the windows in the climax of Rope as an embodiment of the gaze. In both cases, the barrier between reality and the real falters, as unknown entities invade the domestic space with disturbing results.

Televisions are also connected to the supernatural in The Shining. When Jack telephones Wendy to tell her that he was offered the job, a television can be seen in the background of the Overlook lobby. When the image cuts to Wendy on the phone, she stands in the living room with a television in the visual space behind her. Their conversation occurs at the same time as Danny’s moment of shining in the bathroom, illustrating the presence of the lurking supernatural. Although the television behind Jack is turned off, its uncanny presence speaks to the film’s exploration of the paranormal. Writing on Raymond Williams’s notion of “planned flow” in television, Jeffrey Sconce explains, “TV is a world that is always there, at least in unrealized form, even when the set is turned off.” Even when we turn off the television, the live flow of television never stops. Television continues to show up in The Shining, such as when Danny explains to Jack that he learned about the Donner Party on television as they drive to the Overlook. As many have observed, the cramped shot of Jack, Wendy, and Danny in the VW Beetle alludes to Jack’s mental collapse due to cabin fever. At the same time, the tight composition of the three in Jack’s VW is reminiscent of television’s squared-frame screen. Indeed, the Torrance family on display is not the wholesome family typically depicted in shows such as Father Knows Best (1954–60) or The Donna Reed Show (1958–66)—sitcoms often nostalgically interpreted as representing the innocence of the 1950s. Perhaps the most striking connection between the television and the supernatural is Danny’s use of telepathy to contact Hallorann for help after being attacked in room 237. Hallorann, who happens to be watching TV in Miami, receives Danny’s message as they both “tune in” to “watch” Jack “live” as he enters room 237 and encounters the shape-shifting ghost who attacked Danny.

When Jack encounters the ghost in the bathroom of room 237,
he too encounters the “netherworld” of the Overlook. A young woman emerges naked out of the bathtub, approaches Jack, and begins to kiss him. The image cuts to a reverse shot of Jack in the bathroom mirror, which shockingly reveals that the woman is now covered in grotesque scars. When Jack looks directly at the woman, she is now an old woman. Jack slowly backs away as she laughs, approaching him with outstretched arms. The image cuts to a dead corpse slowly rising out of the bathtub. Both the shape-shifting ghost and the corpse in the bathtub not only unsettle Jack’s sexual desire, but are also “things” from the spectral dimension of the Overlook that unsettle the confined space. Here, the post-effect of the gaze has captured not only Jack’s creaturely movements out of room 237, but also the harsh laughter and repulsive outstretched arms of the ghost that suggest bodily jouissance. The mummified movement of the shape-shifting ghost correlates to what Lacan terms the “sinthome.” Whereas the subject’s symptom can be analyzed and interpreted, the sinthome withstands meaning. The sinthome, as Žižek explains, is “the kernel of enjoyment that simultaneously attracts and repels us.”29 Certainly, the strange laugh of the old woman and her creaturely extended arms portend Jack’s freezing to death in the maze at the end of the film, captured in his animal-like noises, and raising his ax in the air—all signifiers that lack meaning but remain intimately connected to the Overlook’s supernatural dimension.30

The Reverse Shot

The reverse shot plays an important role in unleashing the Overlook’s apparitions. During his talk with Hallorann early in the film, Danny asks: “what is in room 237”? Danny bluntly says to Hallorann, “You’re scared of room 237. Aren’t you?” Hallorann forcefully instructs Danny to stay out of room 237. Later in the film, while riding his Big Wheel, Danny stops at room 237. He tries to open the door, but it is locked. Kubrick quickly inserts an image of the Grady twins, reminding him not to further his investigation. During the Wednesday sequence, Danny plays with his toys on the maze-designed carpet, not far from room 237. A yellow tennis ball, the same ball Jack throws against the wall in the Colorado lounge earlier in the film, rolls into Danny’s circle of toys. The image cuts to a reverse shot that reveals an empty hallway and then cuts back to a front shot of Danny as he stands and looks down the empty hallway. He shouts: “Mom.” Here, Kubrick’s use of the wide-angle lens engulfs Danny within the space of the corridor, suggesting an unknowable presence at work.
The image cuts to a reverse angle, still revealing an empty hallway, and then returns to a front shot of Danny slowly walking down the hallway. As he approaches room 237, the image shows Danny’s point of view as he sees the door mysteriously open ajar. Indeed, the reverse shot carries extra meaning. As explained, suturing replaces the position of the “Absent-one,” the diegetic space behind the subject, with an observer. What cannot be sutured, however, is the “impossible subjectivity” assigned to the gaze. Kubrick emphasizes this impossibility by including Danny’s body within the filmic space when cutting to the reverse shot of the empty hallway rather than to Danny’s point-of-view perspective. As such, the ball rolling into the frame follows Copjec’s premise of the unattributable shot in that “some others exist.” But we are not granted a bearer of the look when cutting to the space from which the ball came, demonstrating Kubrick’s depiction of the supernatural as leaving “a trace of itself behind.”

More significantly, the reverse shot not only suggests the presence of the Overlook’s “netherworld,” but also operates as a key that unlocks doors to the Overlook’s ghostly dimension—such as Jack’s encounter with Lloyd the Bartender (Joe Turkel) in the Gold Room. Having been blamed by Wendy for hurting Danny, who was attacked in room 237, Jack enters the Gold Room and sits at an empty bar. In a medium-close shot, Jack covers his face with frustration and says: “God, I’d give anything for a drink. My goddam soul, just a glass of beer.” Jack uncovers his face, smiles, and says: “Hi, Lloyd. A little slow tonight, isn’t it?” The reverse-angle shot shows Lloyd standing behind the bar, which is now filled with liquor bottles. Lloyd appears through the reverse perspective, demonstrating that ghosts are connected to mirrors and doubling in *The Shining*. Yet we are not entirely sure if Lloyd is a product of Jack’s imagination or is truly a ghost. Wendy finds Jack at the empty bar to tell him about the woman in room 237. After his horrific encounter with the ghost in room 237, Jack meets Wendy at their living quarters. He lies, saying that he “didn’t see one goddam thing.” He strikingly suggests that Danny hurt himself. Wendy emotionally reacts by saying that they need to leave the Overlook, an urgent assertion that upsets Jack, who forcefully responds: “It is so fucking typical of you to create a problem like this when I finally have a chance to accomplish something. When I’m really into my work. I could really write my own ticket if I went back to Boulder now, couldn’t I? Shoveling out driveways, work in a car wash, any of that appeal to you? Wendy, I have let you fuck up my life so far, but I’m not going to let you fuck this up.” Jack storms out of the room and heads back to the Gold Room. He hears music from the 1920s and enters the Gold Room, which is now filled with people of the past, signaled by the elaborate Art Deco design of the setting. Jack buys another drink from
Lloyd, but this time drinks are on the house. Notably, Jack did not have money to pay for his drink when he first encountered Lloyd. Now he has money, calling into question what is real and what is supernatural. Moreover, the economic and class concerns that Jack expresses to Wendy proffer another clue to the mysterious photograph from 1921 at the end of the film. As Roger Luckhurst notes: “This is not the photograph of a janitor but one of those jet-set-before-the-jet-set playboys. This is Jack the celebrity, an F. Scott Fitzgerald in his pomp, not the later Fitzgerald, a struggling alcoholic.” As Jack leaves the bar, a waiter, Grady, spills a drink on him. Grady escorts Jack into the red bathroom to clean his jacket. Not knowing that the waiter is Grady, Jack asks him what they call him. The waiter answers: “Delbert Grady, Sir.” The image cuts to a reverse angle of Jack and Grady. Jack realizes Grady was the Overlook’s past caretaker who killed his family and himself. Jack tries to get Grady to admit that he was the caretaker. But Grady denies it. Jack explains that he saw his picture in the paper and read the article. The image cuts to a reverse angle, holding for a moment, and then back to the two-shot of Jack and Grady, creating a mirroring effect. Grady says to Jack: “You’ve always been the caretaker. I should know, Sir. I’ve always been here.” He explains that Danny has a special talent which he plans to use against Jack’s will. Jack blames Danny’s willfulness on Wendy. Grady suggests that maybe “they need a good talking to. . . Perhaps a bit more.” Not unlike Danny’s encounter with the open door in room 237, or Lloyd the bartender’s first appearance, the reverse angle opens a door into the Overlook’s ghostly past. Through the use of the reverse shot, Delbert Grady becomes Charles Grady, the caretaker who killed his family in 1970. Like Tony, Grady is a supernatural messenger who informs Jack of Danny’s talent, which poses a threat “against Jack’s will.” Indeed, Kubrick offers a twist on the suturing effect in the use of the reverse shot in relation to the supernatural. The Absent-one is sutured for the viewer by cutting between shot and reverse shot in the bathroom. At the same time, Kubrick subverts the suturing effect by using the shot/reverse-shot technique to open a portal into the Overlook’s haunted realm. In this sense, the Absent-one allocates and signifies a bearer of the look through the use of the reverse shot. Paradoxically, the occupied space of the Absent-one is filled in with a subject (Charles Grady) who is indeed absent. Kubrick explained to Michel Ciment why he depicted the apparitions as physically real rather than as see-through ghosts: “From the more convincing accounts I have read of people who have reported seeing ghosts, they were invariably described as being as solid and as real as someone actually standing in the room.” This explanation certainly follows Freud’s claim that there is a stronger possibility of the uncanny emerging within a realist setting.
Instead of showing Grady, the Grady twins, or Lloyd the bartender magically appearing as ghosts in a cliché form, Kubrick employs the reverse angle and mirrors, as well as staging ghosts as real people in order to produce the effect of the uncanny.

In the climax of the film, Jack chases Danny through the Overlook’s shrubbery maze during a blizzard. Mirroring his movement on his Big Wheel bike, the camera lurks behind Danny. Jack shouts: “I’m right behind you, Danny,” as he follows Danny’s footsteps in the snow. Danny realizes that in order to survive he must trick Jack. Danny stops and slowly steps backwards into his own footprints in the snow in order to create a trail that ends nowhere. Once Jack encounters the end of the trail, Danny quickly sneaks off and follows his tracks back to the entrance of the maze. While Danny is working on his escape plan, Wendy (who has been encountering ghosts in the Overlook) is traveling down a red corridor, an area we have not seen in the film. She suddenly stops as she sees two elevator doors. Suddenly, blood gushes out of the left elevator door. It is the premonition Danny had seen at the start of the film, suggesting that this future event (by way of Tony) was his mother’s perspective. Wendy’s encounter with the elevators occurs in an unidentified area of the Overlook, thus demonstrating a sort of déjà vu effect upon the viewer. On the one hand, we are familiar with the Overlook elevators by way of Danny’s premonition. Yet something is rediscovered when Wendy travels down the red corridor, an uncharted space in the film. We have and have not been here before, as we experience something old within the new, demonstrating what Freud attributes to the uncanny.

By moving backwards in his snow prints, Danny outwits his father and escapes the maze. Danny reunites with his mother outside the maze, and they leave the Overlook. Meanwhile, Jack stumbles along the maze, lost and freezing as he hears Wendy and Danny drive away. Kubrick abruptly cuts to Jack frozen to death in the maze. The still image is both hilarious and frightening. Moreover, the still image mummifies Jack, an image that mirrors the black-and-white photograph of Jack from July 4, 1921, in the Gold Room revealed at the end of the film. Kubrick’s surprise by way of the photograph is not unlike horror films’ trick finales. As explained in the introduction, both Alien and Carrie draw on the trick ending that the “horror” is not over, though in the case of Carrie, it was all in Emily’s mind. Nevertheless, these endings offer a shocking surprise as an embodiment of the gaze. Here, Kubrick’s surprise ending follows a convention of horror cinema, denying narrative closure. As the camera reaches the photograph, we are unsure whom we should be focusing on. After two dissolves, which bring us closer and closer to the figure in the photograph, we see that the person is Jack dressed in black tie, looking
directly at us as he stands with a group of wealthy people from the past. Jack’s smile in the photograph is not unlike his laugh and smile when first meeting Lloyd the bartender early in the film. This raises a question: are the photographs on the wall in the Overlook ghosts acting as Poe’s purloined letter—hidden in plain sight?

Many factors that Freud argues produce feelings of the uncanny are at work in The Shining, particularly the compulsion to repeat, as when Wendy discovers Jack’s manuscript that endlessly reads: “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” Certainly, the ending of the film on the photograph of Jack from 1921 suggests a circular narrative. At least, according to Roger Luckhurst, the elusive meaning of the photograph invites and challenges us to review and decode the film again and again.35 As depicted in the documentary Room 237 (Rodney Ascher, 2012), fans and academic scholars have taken up Kubrick’s challenge in numerous interpretations of, and debates about, the film’s ambiguous meanings. Perhaps the need for repeated viewings of The Shining speaks directly to the death drive and the monotony of never finding the solutions to the questions posed by the film. Here, the feelings of the uncanny are intimately connected to the film’s exploration of excess within the confined setting of the Overlook. Just as Jack finds that Danny’s snow footprints abruptly end in the maze, we are forced to tarry with the film’s uncanny and unexplained ending. Like the opening images that hauntingly track Jack across the mountains, the film leaves us with uncertainty. At the same time, it is the antagonism that captures our desire of looking. Desire manifests from absence and lack, which enables us to encounter the shocking impact of the gaze. But, unlike most Hollywood films, The Shining does not offer a solution to the question it poses at the end of the film.

Finally, the photograph from 1921 not only suggests the Overlook’s ghostly dimension, but closely follows Laura Mulvey’s description of cinema’s secret: the still frame, cinema’s index of light and space. As Mulvey observes, “Although the projector reconciles the opposition and the still frames come to life, this underlying stillness provides cinema with a secret, with a hidden past that might or might not find its way to the surface.”36 For Mulvey, digital playback devices now allow one to conjure cinema’s still image as a “ghostly presence” by delaying and halting the flow of images.37 Indeed, Danny’s ability to shine operates like a “haunted” playback device (by way of Tony) in investigating and resurrecting the Overlook’s ghostly past—to detect and explore the “traces of itself left behind.” But at the end of the film, Danny and Tony are long gone and cannot teleport us to the past to find the answers to all of the questions the film raises, particularly the mysterious photo of Jack from 1921. As such, we, too, are left inside a maze with no trail or map to find our way out.