Julia Seltnerajch

iD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0143-4874

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Department of English and American Studies

Plac Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4a, 20-031 Lublin; e-mail: julia.seltnerajch@mail.umcs.pl

Echoes of Evil: Haunted Houses and Lingering Terrors in *The Amityville Horror* and *The Conjuring*

Abstract

Bruce F. Kawin defines horror by its recurring motifs and its primary goal: to frighten and unsettle the audience (4). Beyond its entertainment value, horror functions within a dynamic semiotic space, where spatial structures encode tensions between order and chaos. Within Lotman's semiosphere, the haunted house serves as a centre-periphery battlefield, where the supernatural disrupts domestic stability, shifting the house from a structured centre into a peripheral, liminal space. This article examines the haunted residence trope in Andrew Douglas' *The Amityville Horror* and James Wan's *The Conjuring*, analysing how spatial boundaries define the interplay between demonic forces and human attempts to reclaim domestic space. Both films, despite distinct narratives, construct the haunted house as a contested space, where supernatural peripheries threaten to consume the centre. In *The Amityville Horror*, the house undergoes total peripheralization, rendering it uninhabitable and reinforcing the idea of an irredeemable periphery. In contrast, *The Conjuring* presents a liminal haunting, where the periphery can be exorcised, restoring the house's central function. The periphery — comprising of basements, attics, gardens, and liminal spaces — functions as an intermediary zone, where supernatural incursions blur the boundary between the mundane and the horrific. By mapping the spatial dynamics of horror, this article explores how haunted houses embody cultural anxieties about the fragility of domestic order, demonstrating how the centre-periphery dichotomy structures horror's evolving semiosphere.

horror genre; Yuri Lotman; the haunted house; centre-periphery dichotomy; possession

Where Gothic Meets Horror: The Transformation of Fear in Space
The Gothic tradition has long been recognized for its preoccupation with the eerie, the liminal, and the uncanny, forming a literary mode that explores transgressions of space, morality, and human psychology. Emerging in the late 18th century, Gothic fiction built its aesthetic around foreboding atmospheres, supernatural intrusions, and the destabilization of reality, often set within isolated, decaying structures that serve as both physical and psychological prisons. These conventions solidified into a recognizable set of tropes, including "supernatural, mysterious or ghastly events and the apprehension or production of terror, and which were usually situated in wild, stormy landscapes, eerie manors or castles" (Wolfreys, Robbins, and Womack 2006: 47). The overwhelming presence of setting in Gothic fiction reflects its dual function: it is both a catalyst for fear and a manifestation of internalized anxieties, as narratives "focus both on the darkness outside, as well as the one inside the human soul" (Rata 2014: 108).

Although the Gothic tradition first emerged in literature, its influence gradually extended, ultimately shaping the broader horror genre. The structural and thematic concerns of Gothic fiction — notably its reliance on setting, its obsession with the supernatural, and its tendency toward psychological unease — found fertile ground in horror narratives, where the genre adapted and reshaped these elements to fit new cultural and artistic contexts. As Andrew Smith notes, "[i]n the twentieth century the term 'Gothic' tends to become replaced with 'Horror'" (2007: 140), reflecting how the two traditions became increasingly intertwined. The flexibility of Gothic conventions is evident in how "Gothic elements crept into filmic genres from science fiction to movie noir and from thriller to comedy […], merging into a wider definition of 'horror movie' including monster movies and slasher movies, anything dealing with the supernatural or nightmarish fears" (Kaye 2012: 251).[1]

One of the most enduring thematic links between Gothic fiction and horror is the centrality of setting as a mechanism for fear and instability. Horror's preoccupation

---

[1] Films such as *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Dracula* (1931) demonstrate early cinematic engagements with the Gothic, while later works such as Psycho (1960) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) showcase the genre's ability to manifest Gothic horror within psychological spaces rather than solely supernatural ones.

with place is not merely aesthetic but structural, ensuring that terror is shaped as much by spatial arrangements as by narrative developments. The genre's effectiveness often relies on its ability to transform familiar environments into sites of terror, rendering what should be safe into something deeply unsettling. As Manuel Aguirre emphasises, "the tangibility of place is a central preoccupation of Gothic, and has remained important to the horror genre" (2008: 1). This concern manifests in two primary ways: through the vast, overwhelming, and unfamiliar landscapes of classic Gothic horror and through the intimate, familiar, yet corrupted spaces of modern horror.[2] The genre's "appropriation of the known and of the familiar" (Pascuzzi, Waters 2019: xvii) allows horror to subvert everyday spaces, ensuring that what should be comforting and safe becomes fraught with tension.[3] Horror settings are not simply static locations but dynamic spaces that absorb, distort, and intensify the anxieties of the era in which they are produced. The importance of place in horror is evident in its structural logic, as "the basic structural premise of the horror film is to show the restoration or reconstruction of an order in a portrayed society" (Odell and Le Blanc 2007: 8). However, this reconstruction is often delayed or denied, as horror thrives on unresolved disruption, forcing characters to navigate spaces that resist order and stability.[4]

Unlike direct, tangible threats — such as a monstrous entity or a visible assailant — ambiguous horror settings cultivate unease through their refusal to reveal the full extent of their menace. Francis McAndrew notes that "houses that send signals of being haunted give us the creeps not because they pose a clear threat to us, but rather because it is unclear whether or not they represent a threat" (2020: 52). This uncertainty forces both characters and audiences into a heightened state of awareness, where fear is generated not by what is seen but by what is anticipated. The sense of unease is intensified by horror's reliance on atmosphere and setting, which, as Irina Rata points out, are key to inciting "uncanny and sublime feelings" in the audience (2014: 109). The uncanny emerges when what is familiar becomes destabilized, as settings that once promised safety are gradually exposed as deceptive or even malevolent.[5]

---

[2]   While early Gothic fiction often took place in ancient castles, ruins, or storm-ridden landscapes, contemporary horror has adapted these settings to suburban homes, mental asylums, or even public institutions, ensuring that fear is generated not only through isolation but also through the violation of everyday spaces.

[3]   For instance, in *It Follows* (2014), horror is rooted in unassuming suburban environments, creating a world where terror is not confined to eerie castles or remote landscapes but pervades spaces that resemble the audience's own reality. Similarly, *Paranormal Activity* (2007) transforms a generic suburban home into a site of escalating dread, proving that horror no longer requires a visibly ominous location to unsettle viewers.

[4]   This is especially true in narratives where characters are physically or psychologically trapped, as seen in *The Lighthouse* (2019), where the oppressive maritime setting mirrors psychological deterioration. However, isolation does not always require physical remoteness — it can also be achieved through a sense of entrapment within social and domestic spaces. The home, for example, is often portrayed as both a place of refuge and a potential prison, reinforcing horror's ability to turn safety into vulnerability. In *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), the protagonist is trapped within her own domestic environment, surrounded by seemingly ordinary but ultimately malevolent neighbours.

[5]   In *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), for instance, the inexplicable loss of orientation in a seemingly ordinary forest creates psychological terror, proving that horror does not necessarily require a visibly haunted space to unsettle its audience.

Among diverse horror landscapes, the haunted house remains one of the most recognizable and symbolically charged settings, serving as both a physical structure and a narrative construct. While Gothic fiction traditionally placed its horrors within ruined castles and ancient mansions, modern horror has repurposed this trope, ensuring that the haunted house is not merely an architectural relic but a dynamic site of terror. Francesco Pascuzzi and Sandra Waters describe haunted house narratives as "narratives of dispossession in which the protagonist's home is first threatened and subsequently taken over by an antagonist whose presence, oftentimes not justified or altogether unexplained, otherizes the domestic by rendering it alien and unsafe" (2019: xvii). This thematic displacement and alienation is particularly evident in the films at the centre of this analysis — *The Amityville Horror* (2005) and *The Conjuring* (2013) — both of which exemplify the haunted house narrative, where domestic spaces become arenas of supernatural intrusion and psychological deterioration.

Echoes of the Damned: The Haunted House as a Space of Fear
As Dale Bailey notes, the fundamental formula of the haunted house narrative "gained maturity in the 1970s and [...] continues to influence horror writers of the present" (1999: 47). While its earliest depictions in Gothic fiction often centred around ancestral mansions, castles, or isolated ruins, modern haunted house narratives have increasingly migrated to suburban settings, reinforcing the horror of domestic invasion. The contemporary haunted house, however, is no longer merely a vessel for the unquiet spirits of past human inhabitants; rather, it frequently becomes an active force of terror itself. This transition signals a fundamental shift in haunted house narratives, one that "displaces the supernatural focus of the text from the figure of the ghost — the revenant spirit of a human being — to the house" (Bailey 1999: 21). The house is no longer merely a setting; it is an entity, a dynamic force that disrupts the boundary between past and present, reality and nightmare.

At the heart of the haunted house narrative lies a formula that reinforces spatial, psychological, and narrative patterns. A defining characteristic is that the house "must be old, it must be large, it must have a troubled history" (Bailey 1999: 57). The traumatic past — whether an act of violence, betrayal, or supernatural disturbance — is imprinted upon the structure, transforming it into a repository of unresolved horror. As Lorraine Warren[6] explains, "[i]f there's been a murder, a suicide, or some other form of tragic death in the house, then the chances of encountering earthbound spirit activity are enhanced" (Brittle 2002: 227). These events imprint lingering traces on the space, reinforcing horror's fixation on trauma's lasting effects, as "haunting mobilizes the distinction between place and space by introducing unregulated and irrational spatial supplements [...] a disruptive event that has left a dimensional trace" (Curtis 2008: 13). These traces emerge as subtle disturbances that escalate into psychological

---

[6]   Edward (1926–2006) and Lorraine (1927–2019) Warren were world-known American paranormal investigators. Whereas Ed is claimed to have been the only lay demonologist recognized by the Vatican, Lorraine was "a penetrating clairvoyant and light-trance medium [...], endowed with the Biblical gift of discernment of spirits, which St. Paul spoke of in his First Epistle to the Corinthians" (Brittle 2002: 7).

and physical assaults on the inhabitants, reinforcing the role of the building as "a microcosm for the clash of good and evil" (Bailey 1999: 34).

While traditional haunted house narratives focused on restless spirits, modern horror films increasingly integrate demonic possession, adding a theological dimension to supernatural conflict. As David Punter and Glennis Byron note, "what is common to these movies is an apparent return to age-old themes of satanism and possession" (2004: 68). Unlike ghosts — typically lingering echoes of human souls — demonic entities are malevolent, intelligent forces seeking corruption and destruction. These inhuman entities, characterized by preternatural intelligence and hostility, differ from spectral hauntings, which merely imprint past events. Instead, demonic hauntings introduce an active, sentient force that manipulates its surroundings to maximize suffering.

The theological dimension of demonic hauntings often intersects with the horror tradition's depiction of possession as a form of bodily and spatial invasion. Robert Liardon points out that "[t]he first choice of any demon would be to possess a human body — primarily because it gives him a chance to indulge himself in the sins of the flesh" (1998: 69). However, when possession of a human host is not possible, demons may instead attach themselves to spaces, corrupting the very structure of the haunted home. This aligns with Gerald Brittle's assertion that a "preternatural entity, the inhuman spirit, is considered to be possessed of a negative, diabolical intelligence fixed in a perpetual rage against both man and God" (2002: 5). The relentless and intelligent malevolence transforms haunted houses into more than sites of supernatural disturbance; they become battlegrounds for forces beyond human comprehension.

To fully understand the spatial and semiotic dimensions of the haunted house trope in *The Amityville Horror* (2005) and *The Conjuring* (2013), it is useful to apply Yuri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, particularly in reference to its centre-periphery dynamic. Lotman defines the semiosphere as a "specific sphere […] possessing signs, which are assigned to the enclosed space" (2005: 207). In horror, spaces are not merely neutral containers of action; they are imbued with meaning, history, and signs that dictate the boundaries of fear. Winfred Nöth reinforces this spatial materiality, explaining that the semiosphere "can be a concrete space with a real geographical topology" (2015: 12). In the context of haunted house narratives, the house itself constitutes the semiotic centre — an enclosed environment where meaning is structured, lives are lived, and reality is stabilized. This centre functions on multiple levels, serving as both the protagonist's primary locus of meaning within their personal semiosphere and the epicenter of supernatural activity. For the inhabitants, the house represents stability, identity, and domestic continuity, anchoring them within a structured semiotic space where reality is governed by familiar codes and expectations. However, in horror narratives, this centre of lived experience is simultaneously destabilized by the intrusion of the supernatural, transforming it into a nexus of disruption and fear.

Within this structured domesticity exist liminal peripheries — attics, basements, crawlspaces — zones at the margins of the structured space. Lotman argues that "one and the same space of the semiosphere can be both in one sense a centre and in another sense a periphery" (1990: 150), reinforcing how haunted houses simultaneously house structured domestic life and supernatural chaos. The centre of the haunted building — living areas — initially appears structured and ordered, proving that the centre is "the

most developed and structurally organized" (Lotman 1990: 127). The peripheries of the house represent a semiotic instability, a space where meaning breaks down, aligning with the claim that "structures [there] are 'slippery', less organised and more flexible" (Lotman 2005: 214). It is where "dynamic processes meet with less opposition and, consequently, develop more quickly" (Lotman 2005: 214), reinforcing the horror tradition's reliance on spatial escalation — hauntings that start in the shadows of the periphery before fully invading the home's structured interior.

Abandon Hope All Ye... Who Buy a Haunted House
Andrew Douglas's *The Amityville Horror* (2005), a remake of Stuart Rosenberg's 1979 film, revisits one of the most infamous haunted house narratives in American horror. The film follows the Lutz family, who relocate to 112 Ocean Avenue in Amityville, initially believing the residence to be their dream home. However, their idyllic new beginning swiftly unravels as unexplained occurrences escalate into full-fledged supernatural terror. As Xavier Aldana Reyes observes, "the true crime story of Ronald DeFeo, Jr, who murdered his whole family, is combined with a series of visitations that torment the Lutz family upon arrival at his house" (2014: 390). The house, a repository of past trauma and residual malevolence, soon forces the family into a desperate struggle for survival.

James Wan's *The Conjuring* (2013) similarly constructs its horror around a family plagued by supernatural phenomena within their home, though its narrative is embedded within *The Conjuring Universe* — a franchise centred on the real-life cases of Ed and Lorraine Warren, demonologists and paranormal investigators. The film recounts the experiences of the Perron family, who, like the Lutzes, purchase an expansive mansion — this time in Harrisville, Rhode Island — only to find their dream home harbouring a sinister presence. The discovery of a hidden entrance to the basement by one of the daughters sets off a chain reaction of eerie occurrences, which gradually intensify into full-scale supernatural attacks. As the disturbances become increasingly violent, the family enlists the help of the Warrens, whose intervention becomes essential in unravelling the house's terrifying history and confronting the forces at play.

As both narratives unfold, the haunted house transforms from a space of domestic comfort into an active, disruptive force. However, while the escalation of horror follows a similar trajectory, the semiotic structure of each house differs, revealing distinct modes of supernatural disruption. In *The Amityville Horror*, the house becomes a site of progressive corruption, pulling George Lutz into a state of possession-like derangement, as the boundaries between external haunting and internal psychological breakdown collapse. The house itself is an active antagonist, feeding on the trauma of past violence and perpetuating its cycle through new inhabitants. In *The Conjuring*, however, the semiotic disintegration of space is more gradual, as the Perron family home resists the supernatural intrusion for a longer duration. In both movies, the basement emerges as peripheries of supernatural instability, sites where the malevolent presence first manifests before expanding its influence into the structured domestic spaces. The question, then, is not merely whether the house is haunted, but how its semiotic structure dictates the form and progression of the haunting.

The haunted residences thus function as a contested semiotic space where supernatural peripheries disrupt the stability of the domestic centre. Lotman's semiosphere,

structured around the interplay between the family's "'ours', […] 'cultured', 'safe', 'harmoniously organized'" (Lotman 1990: 131) and the paranormal "'their', 'other', 'hostile', 'dangerous', 'chaotic'" (Lotman 1990: 131) is evident in these films, where the home initially represents a structured, "rigidly organized and self-regulating" (Lotman 1990: 134) environment before succumbing to supernatural forces. As Curtis explains, "haunting implies a temporal disruption that has a de-structuring effect on perceptions" (2008: 34–35), breaking down the conventional spatial and psychological order. This transformation is also inherently linked to Lotman's notion of the centre and periphery, where the home shifts from a protective core to a liminal, threatening space, instead becoming permeable to the peripheral chaos, challenging its very definition as a home.

The past serves as the primary source of haunting, linking supernatural disruption to unresolved historical violence, since "some secrets […] haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story" (Hoggle 2002: 2). In *The Amityville Horror*, the spectral presence of Ronald DeFeo Jr.'s murders permeate the house, forcing the Lutz family into a preordained cycle of violence. Similarly, in *The Conjuring*, Bathsheba's curse ensures a lineage of suffering, binding successive inhabitants to its demonic influence. The Lutzes and Perrons consciously transgressed the border between "their" world and demonic space the moment they purchased their residences. Hence, the past inscribed in these homes become their present, "a site of terror, of an injustice that must be resolved, an evil that must be exorcised" (Spooner 2006: 18). Evil spirits bedevilling George Lutz and Carolyn Perron are connected to the events taking place in these mansions in the past; thus, the setting is the direct container of the demonic forces searching for mortals to possess as "[d]emonic spirits don't possess things, they possess people" (*Conjuring* 2013).

Catherine Spooner's assertion that "the past returns with sickening force: the dead rise from the grave or lay their cold hands upon the shoulders of the living" (2006: 18) is particularly relevant here, as both films explore how trauma is embedded within the home itself, ensuring that history cannot simply be erased. These hauntings not only intrude upon the domestic sphere but actively rewrite it, transforming a site of familial unity into a liminal, unstable terrain where past and present collide violently. When Lorraine Warren finally unravels the mystery of the supernatural occurrences, she reveals in terror: "I know what she [Bathsheba] did. She possessed the mother to kill the child. She visits Carolyn every night. That's what the bruise marks are! She's feeding off of her!" (*Conjuring* 2013). At the very beginning of *The Amityville Horror*, it is said that Ronald "told police he heard voices coming from within the house, telling him to murder his family" (*Amityville Horror* 2005), and the same fate would have awaited the Lutzes if not prevented in due time. Thus, in the discussed movies, the solution to the mystery lies in the familiarization with the past of the mansions, in getting to the roots of their history. The houses function as mnemonic devices that force their inhabitants to relive and re-enact historical traumas, reinforcing the notion that supernatural peripheries infiltrate and destabilize the semiospheric centre.

Lotman's semiosphere, inherently "marked by its heterogeneity" (1990: 125), suggests that such spaces are subject to continual transformation, where past and present collapse into one another. The Lutzes in *The Amityville Horror* initially dismiss the house's violent history, with George stating, "Well, houses don't kill people. People kill people"

(*Amityville Horror* 2005). He does have a point since "a home has no soul; the devil has no soul. Only a person has a soul; and it is that unique commodity, that key to immortality that the demonic seeks to possess—if only to destroy it" (Brittle 2002, 194). Yet, this rationalization quickly disintegrates as supernatural forces exploit the unresolved violence within the home, demonstrating how peripherisation does not merely entail spatial disruption but an epistemological one as well. Similarly, in *The Conjuring*, Lorraine reveals, "Something awful happened here, Ed" (*Conjuring* 2013), further explaining to the Perrons: "I've been seeing a dark entity that haunts your house and your land" (*Conjuring* 2013), emphasizing the house's role as an agent of residual trauma.

Still, what serves in both movies a crucial role of the locus of peripherisation, where the structured domestic centre collapses under the influence of supernatural forces, is the basement. These spaces, inherently separated from the core of the home, act as transitional zones where imposed norms fade, exposing the home to external threats. As Curtis explains, opening the doors to the basement functions as the transition "from the realm of the domestic into the abject spaces of hell and the underworld" (2008: 110). Both movies exemplify this transformation, as the basement operates as a semiotic gateway between the structured domestic sphere and the chaotic supernatural periphery.

In *The Amityville Horror*, the basement embodies the house's malevolent force, drawing George Lutz deeper into its influence. His frequent descents signify his psychological deterioration, reflecting Sylvia Ann Grider's assertion that "once inside the haunted house, the action of the ghost story usually takes place in the attic or the basement or on the connecting staircase, locations rich with psychological symbolism of isolation and evil" (2007: 152). The basement becomes his retreat, a space where his mind is gradually reshaped by the house's sinister presence. Furthermore, the house's supernatural force is intrinsically linked to its history, reinforcing Grider's observation that "ghosts and monsters do hide in basements and cellars, where they lure unsuspecting humans to suffer unspeakable terrors" (2007: 155). George's increasing aggression and detachment from his family mirror this haunting presence, as he becomes an extension of the home's violent past.

Likewise, in *The Conjuring*, the basement represents a concealed realm of past atrocities, only uncovered when the Perrons unwittingly disturb its dormant evil. As soon as the basement door is opened, the house's supernatural oppression intensifies, proving "the house and the ghosts that haunt it are partners in the supernatural assault upon humans who invade their domain" (Grider 2007: 144). The basement is not merely a repository of forgotten objects but a manifestation of the home's suppressed horrors, reinforcing its peripheral function within the semiosphere. This aligns with Lotman's assertion that "on the periphery of the semiosphere, this ideal norm [of the centre] will be a contradiction of the semiotic reality lying 'underneath,' and not a derivation from it" (1990: 129). The Perron house initially appears as a structured domestic space, but the presence of the basement contradicts this illusion, revealing the home's underlying instability.

The structure of haunting occurring after opening the door to the basement follows a three-stage progression — infestation, oppression, and possession — which dictates the gradual but inevitable peripherisation of the domestic centre. Infestation marks the

initial phase, where the barriers between the familiar and the supernatural weaken, allowing paranormal forces to begin asserting control over the household. There appear "the whispering, the footsteps, the feeling of another presence, which automatically grows into oppression, the second stage" (*Conjuring* 2013). Ed further points out that "[d]uring the infestation stage, the strategy is to create fear—thus generating negative psychic energy—that starts breaking down the human will" (Brittle 2002, 99).

The Conjuring introduces this stage through environmental disruptions, such as Andrea Perron's observation that "there was a funky smell in my room last night. Like something died" (*Conjuring* 2013). This seemingly innocuous sensory detail signals the incipient intrusion of malevolent forces, echoing Warren's assertion that "rancid smells could indicate some type of demonic activity" (*Conjuring* 2013). This stage does not yet fully break the boundaries between the periphery and the centre, but it establishes a creeping dissolution of the home's protective function, marking the first breach in what was once a structured, self-regulating space. With time the traces of the demonic presence are becoming more and more disturbing. Carolyn finds numerous bruises on her body and she notices that the "clock stopped at 3:07, and so did the one in the hallway" (*Conjuring* 2013). Moreover, at night, Christine, another daughter, has a paranormal encounter with a being that "wants [her] family dead" (*Conjuring* 2013).

In *The Amityville Horror*, George Lutz's progressive detachment from reality corresponds with the house's intensifying supernatural presence, manifesting most notably through dramatic temperature shifts, inexplicable noises, and disturbances that align with classic indicators of infestation. Warrens' theory that "during the infestation stage, the strategy is to create fear—thus generating negative psychic energy—that starts breaking down the human will" (Brittle 2002: 99) is clearly illustrated in both films, as psychological vulnerability becomes the primary target of supernatural manipulation. Kathy Lutz sees a disturbing inscription on the fridge saying "Katch'em and kill'em" (*Amityville Horror* 2005), even though nobody comes to the kitchen. Her daughter, Chelsea, on the other hand, finds a friend, invisible to others, who turns out to be the ghost of the murdered girl, Jodie:

> KATHY: Chelsea?
> CHELSEA: Hey, Mommy.
> KATHY: Hi, hon. Who are you talking to?
> CHELSEA: The girl who lives in my closet.
> KATHY: And what's her name?
> CHELSEA: Jodie.
>
> (*Amityville Horror* 2005)

Soon, Perrons' daughter is found in dangerous places, such as the roof of the mansion or the edge of the boat, which she explains as Jodie's influence. Key domestic spaces thus, once considered safe, become zones of instability, with peripheral serving as loci of supernatural intrusion. Consequently, "imposed norms fade" (Lotman 1990: 134) in peripheral spaces, reinforcing the erosion of domestic order.

The transition from infestation to oppression marks a pivotal shift where the haunting moves from passive disturbances to direct assaults on the inhabitants. During this stage, "the entrenched spirit tends to either launch a bombardment of incredible phenomena, or embark on a surreptitious psychological attack, dedicated to the complete domination of the victim's will (Brittle 2002: 108), and is characterized by a breakdown in familial unity, as each member is manipulated and isolated through escalating supernatural aggression. Haunted houses "infect their inhabitants, exploiting the weaknesses of each family member and splintering their loyalties to one another" (Bailey 1990: 61), which is mirrored in *The Amityville Horror* through George's increasing volatility and paranoia, echoing the psychological decline of Ronald DeFeo Jr. The house does not merely haunt George; it actively possesses him, compelling him toward violent outbursts, detachment from his family, and obsession with the basement. His transformation into an agent of the house's malevolence demonstrates how supernatural peripherisation destabilizes the very notion of domesticity.

A parallel transformation occurs in *The Conjuring*, where Carolyn Perron emerges as the primary target of supernatural oppression. While initially experiencing unexplained bruises and growing fatigue, she progressively succumbs to psychological manipulation. As Ed Warren states, "the victim, and it's usually the one who's the most psychologically vulnerable, is targeted specifically by an external force" (*Conjuring* 2013), underscoring the selective nature of supernatural attacks. The home, rather than existing as a collective familial space, becomes compartmentalized, with Carolyn increasingly isolated within its walls, falling under Bathsheba's influence. The significance of peripheral zones, particularly the basement, cannot be overstated, as it represents the demonic threshold where Carolyn's oppression evolves into possession.

Possession signifies the final stage of peripherisation, marking the complete subjugation of the domestic space by supernatural forces. As Ed Warren explains, "the inhuman spirit no longer attacks you, it becomes you […]. Seizing the body of the person and imposing its will over that of the human spirit is the ultimate goal of the demonic spirit" (Brittle 2002: 157), illustrating how this stage represents the total annihilation of selfhood and agency. At this point, the house ceases to function as a protective centre and instead fully transitions into what Lotman terms "anti-home" — a space that is "alien, satanic, and life-threatening" (Markovitz 2004: 183). In *The Conjuring*, this manifests through Carolyn Perron's full submission to Bathsheba's will, as she is no longer merely tormented but physically controlled, attempting to re-enact Bathsheba's infanticidal past. Similarly, in *The Amityville Horror*, George Lutz's gradual descent into violent psychosis mirrors the infamous murders of Ronald DeFeo Jr., reinforcing the haunted house's cyclical nature, where past horrors refuse to remain buried, transforming the home into a site of inevitable re-enactment.

When the absolute peripheralisation occurs, as familiar spaces are completely redefined by supernatural dominance, the house no longer exists for its inhabitants but actively works against them, solidifying its anti-home status. In *The Amityville Horror*, this transformation is particularly insidious, as the possession process erodes personal autonomy, gradually severing George Lutz from his own identity. Unlike Carolyn's possession in *The Conjuring*, which manifests in sudden violent outbursts and loss of control, George's descent is a slow psychological unravelling, marked by increasing detachment

from reality and diminishing emotional connection to his family. His transformation is not an abrupt supernatural takeover but rather a progressive infiltration, wherein the house's influence becomes indistinguishable from his own thoughts and impulses. The home, rather than being a site of domestic stability, becomes a consuming force, pushing him toward acts of aggression, paranoia, and eventually, attempted murder. While "home means an internal, closed space, the source of security, harmony and creativity; anti-home belongs to the devil, destruction and death" (Raškauskienė 2009: 31).

By contrast, *The Conjuring* introduces the possibility of reclaiming the home through exorcism, suggesting that while peripherisation can reach its peak, it is not always irreversible. However, the lingering traces of trauma imply that such homes may never fully return to their original domestic function, existing instead in a liminal state. In *The Amityville Horror*, the only resolution is escape, affirming Lotman's claim that "people do not live in [anti-homes] but they disappear from them" (1990: 187). George's only means of salvation is to physically flee, highlighting the irreversibility of supernatural peripherisation — once the centre has been compromised, it can no longer be reclaimed. Ultimately, this contrast between the two films underscores different models of haunting: one in which the house remains permanently corrupted and must be abandoned, and another in which ritualistic intervention offers the possibility, however fragile, of restoration.

Halina Kubicka's analysis of haunted houses as predators, "an equal partner to the protagonists: a dangerous adversary with whom they must struggle" (2010: 77) is particularly relevant in understanding the mechanisms of supernatural entrapment in both films. Traditionally, haunted houses in Gothic literature serve as passive settings, merely housing supernatural forces, but in these films, the houses themselves emerge as sentient entities, shaping and directing the terror, as "[t]he house and the ghosts that haunt it are partners in the supernatural assault upon humans who invade their domain" (Grider 2010: 144). The relatives experience what Lorraine Warren calls personality disintegration as "they've begun fighting with a viciousness that would have seen impossible only a few weeks earlier" (Chase & Warren 2014: unpgd.). *The Amityville Horror* exemplifies this through its manipulation of George, whom the house does not simply haunt — it absorbs him, reshaping his identity in its own image, aligning with Kubicka's claim that "as a perfect predator, [the haunted house] sets numerous traps for its victims—it 'conquers,' is able to possess those trapped within it" (2010: 78). The distinction between human will and supernatural coercion becomes increasingly blurred, reinforcing Lotman's notion that peripheries do not merely exist outside the structured centre, but actively invade it, destabilizing its core.

Similarly, *The Conjuring* depicts the house as an entity that feeds on psychological vulnerabilities, singling out Carolyn as its primary target. The supernatural oppression she experiences is not random — it is strategic as haunted houses identify and weaken their victims before fully subjugating them. The escalation from environmental disturbances to direct possession reflects the increasing peripherisation of the domestic space, where once-secure rooms transform into dangerous sites of demonic control. Carolyn's eventual submission to Bathsheba's will is not a mere act of supernatural aggression; it is a deliberate dismantling of her autonomy, positioning her as both a victim and an unwilling agent of the house's malevolent power. As such, haunted houses' ultimate

function is a liminal space where personal agency dissolves, leaving only the pervasive will of the supernatural force that inhabits it.

The fundamental difference between the Amityville and Conjuring hauntings lies in the resolution of each narrative. *The Amityville Horror* presents an irreversible peripherisation of the home, where the house itself is beyond redemption, and the only form of survival is escape. Kathy's frantic plea, "We have to get him away from the house!" (*Amityville Horror* 2005), reflects the complete failure of the domestic space to function as a centre of security, since peripherised spaces can reach a point of no return, becoming permanently uninhabitable. The demonic presence is not exorcised; it is merely abandoned, reinforcing the idea that certain spaces are too deeply inscribed with violence and trauma to ever be restored. Conversely, *The Conjuring* offers a different resolution, one that suggests the possibility of reclaiming the home through spiritual intervention. The Perron house, while deeply haunted, is not beyond redemption, as Ed and Lorraine Warren's exorcism succeeds in severing Bathsheba's influence, symbolically restructuring the house as a restored semiospheric centre. This distinction between abandonment versus exorcism highlights two contrasting models of haunted house horror — one in which the home is irredeemable and must be forsaken, and another in which the supernatural contamination can be purged, allowing the family to reclaim their space. Lotman's claim that semiotic spaces exist "in dynamic, not static, correlations whose terms are constantly changing" (1990: 127) is particularly relevant here, as *The Conjuring* presents a dynamic reversal of peripherisation, where exorcism functions as a means of spatial restoration.

Conclusion

The Amityville Horror and *The Conjuring* exemplify how the haunted house functions as a site of conflict between the structured centre and the destabilizing periphery, reinforcing the idea that "tensions between the opposed forces of the centre and the periphery result in a dynamics threatening the stability of the semiosphere" (Nöth 2015: 18). In both films, the home initially adheres to the normative expectations of domestic security, but as supernatural forces infiltrate its spaces, its role as the dominant centre is eroded. This shift aligns with Edna Andrews' claim that the domestic sphere is "necessarily dominant in a given semiosphere" (2003: 47), yet in haunted house narratives, this dominance proves vulnerable to peripherisation, illustrating how even the most stable environments can be inverted into realms of fear and disorder.

At the core of this transformation lies the fundamental threat "to societal order [that] comes from something preternatural or anomalous: a haunted house" (Meehan 2011: 4), emphasizing that these spaces disrupt more than just individual households — they challenge broader cultural assumptions about safety and control. This notion is further supported by Bailey's observation that "the contemporary haunted house rarely serves merely to contain the unquiet spirits of past human inhabitants" (1999: 57). Instead, it becomes an active force that destabilizes the very foundation of domesticity, rendering once-familiar spaces into liminal zones where history, trauma, and malevolence persist.

Moreover, these films highlight the psychological vulnerability of their inhabitants, demonstrating how the breakdown of familial unity exacerbates supernatural periph-

erisation. The Warrens' belief that "a happy family, a happy home is the best protection against evil. Negative emotions usually trigger spirit activity, so along with everything else, create an emotional atmosphere in the home where no problems can occur" (Brittle 2002: 227) underscores the idea that external hauntings are often reflections of internal fractures. The supernatural threat exploits pre-existing tensions, reinforcing the idea that the centre is not just attacked by external forces but also weakened from within.

The haunted house in these films thus serves as both a literal and symbolic battleground where peripherisation reaches its peak. The struggle between reclaiming domestic order and succumbing to the forces of entropy reflects the fragility of the semiosphere's structure. Whether through exorcism, as seen in *The Conjuring*, or through physical escape, as in *The Amityville Horror*, these narratives suggest that while stability can sometimes be restored, the haunted house remains a liminal space — one where past trauma never fully dissipates and the spectre of peripherisation lingers, waiting to resurface.

References

Aguirre Manuel (2008), *Geometries of Terror: Numinous Spaces in Gothic, Horror and Science Fiction*, "Gothic Studies" vol. 10, no. 2.

[*The*] *Amityville Horror* (2005), dir. Andrew Douglas, Metro-Goldwyn Mayer and Dimension Movies, USA [DVD].

Andrews Edna (2003), *Conversations with Lotman: Cultural Semiotics in Language, Literature, and Cognition*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Bailey Dale (1999), *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin.

Brittle Gerald (2002), *The Demonologist: The Extraordinary Career of Ed and Lorraine Warren*, iUniverse Inc., Lincoln.

Chase Robert David, Ed Warren, Lorraine Warren (2014), *Ghost Hunters: True Stories From the World's Most Famous Demonologists*, Graymalkin Media. GoogleBooks edition.

[*The*] *Conjuring* (2013), dir. James Wan, Warner Bros. Pictures and New Line Cinema, USA [DVD].

Curtis Barry (2008), *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film*, Reaktion Books, London.

Grider Sylvia Ann (2007), *Haunted Houses* [in:] *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore*, ed. D. Goldstein et al. Utah State University Press, Utah.

Hogle Jerrold E. (2002), *Introduction: the gothic in western culture* [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. J.E. Hogle, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Kawin Bruce F. (2012), *Horror and the Horror Movie*, Anthem Press, London.

Kaye Heidi (2015), *Gothic Movie* [in:] *A New Companion to The Gothic*, ed. D. Punter, John Wiley & Sons, West Sussex.

Kubicka Halina (2010), *Tam, gdzie czai się zło. Przestrzeń w horrorze jako mechanizm budzenia strachu*, "Literatura i Kultura Popularna" no. 16.

Liardon Roberts (1998), *Haunted Houses, Ghosts & Demons. What You Can Do About Them*, Albury Publishing, Oklahoma.

Lotman Yuri (1990), *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. A. Shukman, I.B. Tauris, London/New York.

Lotman Yuri (2005), *On the Semiosphere*, trans. W. Clark, "Sign Systems Studies" vol. 33, no. 1.

Markovitz Fran (2004), *Leaving Babylon to Come Home to Israel: Closing the Circle of a Black Diaspora* [in:] *Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return*, eds. F. Markowitz, A.H. Stefansson, Lexington Books, Lanham.

McAndrew Francis (2020), *The Psychology, Geography, and Architecture of Horror: How Places Creep Us Out*, "Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture" vol. 4, no. 2.

Meehan Paul (2011), *Horror Noir: Where Cinema's Dark Sisters Meet*, McFarland, North Carolina.

Nöth Winfried (2015), *The Topography of Yuri Lotman's Semiosphere*, "International Journal of Cultural Studies" vol. 18, no. 1.

Odell Colin, Le Blanc Michelle (2007), *Horror Films*, Kamera Books, Harpenden.

Pascuzzi Francesco, Waters Sandra (2019), *Introduction* [in:] *The Spaces and Places of Horror*, eds. F. Pascuzzi, S. Waters, Vernon Press, Wilmington.

Punter David, Byron Glennis (2004), *The Gothic*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., Oxford.

Raškauskienė Audronė (2009), *Gothic Fiction: The Beginnings*, Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Kaunas.

Rata Irina (2014), *An Overview of Gothic Fiction*, "Translation Studies: Retrospective and Prospective Views" vol. 17.

Reyes Xavier Aldana, (2014), *Gothic Horror Film, 1960–Present* [in:] *The Gothic World*, ed. G. Byron, D. Townshend, Routledge, London–New York.

Smith Andrew (2007), *Gothic Fiction*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Spooner Catherine (2006), *Contemporary Gothic*, Reaktion Books Ltd., London.

Wolfreys Julian, Robbins Ruth, Womack Kenneth (2006), *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*, 2nd ed., Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.