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# Genre Theory and The Shining

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# Toward a Post-structural Influence in Film Genre Study: Intertextuality and *The Shining*

by Walter Metz

## I. Introduction

In a 1977 essay, Thomas Schatz identifies what he considers to be "the structural influence" in film genre studies. Applying the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, Schatz details the "mythic function" of American film genres (95). Schatz argues, "This conception of the genre film as a unique functional structure is closely akin to the work of Claude Levi-Strauss in his structural analysis of myth" (96). In my present essay, I suggest that we ought to consider what possibilities an as yet unidentified post-structural influence might have had, or could have, on film genre studies.

In her essay in this issue, Janet Staiger identifies one such post-structural influence, that of literary scholar Thomas O. Beebee. Staiger sees Beebee's identification of the "structuring absences" of a text as a post-structural move: "A poststructuralist thesis would argue that every text inherently displays what it is not." I cover a different terrain of post-structural theory with the intention of identifying an influence on film genre studies beyond Beebee's attention to textual lacunae. The significance of my version of post-structural genre theory will lie in the way it illuminates the competing political identity issues such as class, gender, and race within the genre film.

After defining what I mean by post-structuralism and identifying some genre critics who engage in post-structuralist reading strategies, I will detail the potential of this approach through an analysis of *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980). *The Shining*

is a timely text to choose: as I write, an ABC miniseries of the Stephen King novel is about to air. Horror fans have long waited for this new version of "The Shining," as they believe Kubrick ruined the horror elements in King's novel.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the academic film studies community tends to revere the film as a political critique of the American nuclear family.<sup>2</sup> This split in reader response occurs due to the differing framework of genre expectations. The King fans enter the film fully expecting a generically stable horror film, while the academic critics interpret *The Shining* as a melodrama detailing the disintegration of a middle-class American family.

In this analysis, I am less interested in the actual generic status of *The Shining* and more interested in how the film's generic status opens up two stable choices for readers' interpretations of the film's goals. Thus, my choice of *The Shining* does not merely forward the often made claim that the "New" Hollywood hybridizes genres, in this case the horror film and the melodrama.<sup>3</sup> I fully agree with Janet Staiger's claim in this issue that the distinction between the genre hybridity of the "New" Hollywood and the genre stability of "Classical" Hollywood is merely a convenient critical fiction. I suggest that instead of arguing over the generic make-up of particular films, we ought to be examining how the presumed generic status of a film demarcates strategies for interpretation.

James Naremore has suggested a similar approach to film noir in his recent essay "American Film Noir: The History of an Idea." Naremore claims that "the Name of the Genre. . . functions in much the same way as the Name of the Author" (14). Drawing from Michel Foucault's post-structuralist critique of authorship, Naremore suggests a similar critique of the stability of genre, coining the concept of "the genre function." The genre function replaces concern with the actual generic make-up of a text and instead concentrates on the effect the perception of the genre has on the interpretation of the text. In the case of my analysis of *The Shining*, I am concerned with the way the genre functions of horror and melodrama serve as unifying fictions for two sets of interpretive communities to make sense of a politically polysemous and perhaps contradictory text.

## II. An Intertextual Approach to *The Shining*

In his 1977 essay, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," Robin Wood calls for a re-conceptualization of genre theory. He argues that American film genres should be grouped into "families," wherein genres are related to each other by their similar focus on ideological

problems within American culture. Wood states,

One of the greatest obstacles to any fruitful theory of genre has been the tendency to treat the genres as discrete. An ideological approach might suggest why they can't be, however hard they might appear to try: at best, they represent different strategies for dealing with the same ideological tensions (62).

Such a conception of families of genres allows a more precise understanding of the generic contradictions produced by readings of *The Shining*. The film presents both a ghost story and a horror film, a tale of the uncanny and a family melodrama. In a post-structural sense, *The Shining* offers a liminal narrational system caught between the horror film and the family melodrama which offers the possibility of critique unavailable to either of the genres in their "pure" state.<sup>4</sup> I argue that the "hesitation" between the two genres is what allows for the critical contestation over the film's meaning.

Interestingly, Wood's essay—what I am suggesting is the first volley in a potential post-structural genre criticism—was published in 1977, the same year as Schatz's examination of the importance of structuralism for genre studies. The continuing importance of structuralism on genre studies is indicated by the fact that the new edition of *Film Genre Reader* (titled *Film Genre Reader II*) still contains Schatz's essay on structuralism, but no complementary essay identifying post-structuralism's potential for the field.

However, Schatz makes many of the same claims that Wood makes in "Ideology, Genre, Auteur." Schatz notes the interconnectedness of Hollywood genres: "When we assume this view of the genre film functions as a form of contemporary mythic ritual, we establish a basis for examining genres not only as individual, isolated forms, but also as related systems that exhibit fundamentally similar characteristics" (97). This observation, like Wood's about the genre-as-family, opens up genre studies to what is fundamentally a post-structural position: that intertextuality, a search for the interdependent relations among texts, overrides genre, the attempt to establish the differences among them.

Schatz also makes a suggestion which leads toward the present paper's methodology of treating genre as significant only in relation to the viewer's interpretive position: "By assuming this mythic perspective when analyzing the genre film, we must necessarily consider the collective audience's participation in the studio system of production, which further substantiates the role of that production system in the contemporary mythmaking process" (97). Whereas Schatz emphasizes the audience's relation to the text via its

institutional circumstances, my post-structural approach focuses on the viewer's activation of the film as a stable generic structure in order to render it coherent.

The location of the post-structuralist method of genre studies within the theoretical tradition of structuralism is best illuminated with respect to *The Shining* via the exploration of Tzvetan Todorov's work on the genre of the fantastic. In his book *The Fantastic*, Todorov explores this liminal genre which he sees as bridging the gap between the uncanny and the marvelous. He defines the uncanny as occurring when "[the reader] decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described," while the marvelous occurs when "[the reader] decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena" (41). But these two genres represent for Todorov the two extremes around his true area of interest, the story which fits into the genre he coins the fantastic. He argues that in certain fictions,

There occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. (25)

The uncertainty of the reader is thus the prime factor for a work to be representative of the fantastic. The fantastic, postulates Todorov, "occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous" (25). Todorov concludes by defining the fantastic as, "that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (25).

Of course, Todorov uses structuralist methods to define the marvelous and the uncanny as binary oppositions. However, my critical approach suggests that Todorov's hesitation, the fantastic, represents a state that better fits the post-structural concept of liminality. Thus, I argue that Todorov, like critics such as Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Robin Wood, whose methods seem to be grounded in structural binary oppositions, produce criticism useful for the post-structural dismantling of such binaries.

As articulated in American film history, the distinctions between the melodrama and the horror film replay this binary between the

uncanny and the marvelous. The melodrama offers a generic tradition securely located in the uncanny. Critical explorations of the genre frequently return to Freud's "The Uncanny" to argue this position. For example, in "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address," Mary Ann Doane uses Freud's uncanny reading of "The Sandman" in order to explain the gothic woman's film cycle, a set of films such as *Dragonwyck* and *Rebecca* which represent the punishment of an investigating woman. Doane argues, "Within the cinema, it is hardly surprising that the uncanny should be activated by means of dramas of seeing, of concealing and revealing" (289). Even though Doane analyzes the gothic subgenre of the melodrama, the uncanny is also applicable to the genre as a whole. Doane continues:

Freud's rather long tracing of the linguistic deviations of the word serve finally to demonstrate that *heimlich* (belonging or pertaining to the home; familiar) is eventually equated with its opposite *unheimlich* (strange, unfamiliar, uncanny)—'Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*.' This sliding of signification is possible only because the word for 'home' is semantically overdetermined and can be situated in relation to the gaze. For the home or house connotes not only the familiar but also what is secret, concealed, hidden from sight (289).

Such a formulation explains the workings of many American melodramas. For example, in *Bigger Than Life*, the familiar domestic problems of a suburban middle-class family (a conflict between father and son, the father's frustrations with his job) are carried beyond the banal to reveal the hidden tensions which underlie these problems. Ed Avery cannot possibly make enough money at his elementary school teaching job to "keep up with the Joneses." So instead, he must secretly work two jobs, which causes him to develop a painful arthritic condition, which in turn causes him to hide his drug habit from his family. The drugs cause Ed to become a psychotic maniac intent on annihilating the very family he had intended to support. This plot formulation precisely charts out the uncanny: the familiar domestic problems of the *heim* conceal the *unheim*, the darker desires of familial annihilation and horrific behavior.

In contrast, the major contemporary American horror films, while opening up the possibility of the uncanny, resolve themselves according to the logic of the marvelous. For example, in *Psycho*,

the psychiatrist's explanation of Norman's psychosis at the end of the film suggests the uncanny: Norman's torment is the result of familial trauma. However, the uncanny is immediately undermined by the film's penultimate image: Mrs. Bates' skeleton is superimposed over Norman's face while he sits in his padded cell. The film's unequivocal representation of Norman's possession by his mother's ghost demonstrates that the psychiatrist's rationalizations are unable to contain the supernatural. The resolution of *Psycho* is firmly located in the marvelous. Such is the case with most other New Hollywood horror films. *Halloween*, for example, posits via its opening flashback an uncanny explanation for Michael Myers' murderous tendencies: the sexual activity of his sister. However, the end of the film produces the marvelous. After Michael Myers has fallen out of a window to his death, a cut reveals that his body has mysteriously vanished. The film posits that Michael Myers is a supernatural manifestation of evil, not just a boy driven insane by family romances.

The critical reception of *The Shining* exhibits exactly the hesitations between the marvelous and the uncanny described by Todorov. Most critics attempt to lump the film into either the tradition of horror or the melodrama. Only one critic, Michel Ciment, sees the film as an example of the fantastic. For the critics favoring the marvelous, the scene that clinched the interpretation invariably was the one in which the ghost of Grady, the former caretaker of the hotel, apparently lets Jack out of the food locker in which his wife Wendy had imprisoned him. Stephen Snyder develops an unequivocal reading of the film as marvelous when he states, "Jack is released from the storage room by the spirit of Grady, or by the spirits of the dead to whom he is indentured" (9). Larry Caldwell and Samuel J. Umland argue that the film offers a playful game for its viewers, a game whose rules allow the supernatural: "Wendy... clobber[s] Jack over the head with a ball bat and lock[s] him in the storeroom. But the Hotel's Players remain undaunted. To guarantee Jack's continued participation in the game, they fully exploit Jack's hostility towards women and children and insult his masculinity before releasing him from the storeroom" (109).

However, most Stephen King fans found the marvelous components of the film to be utterly lacking. In "Understanding Kubrick: *The Shining*," F. Anthony Macklin describes the discontent of the novel's fans with the film: "[*The Shining*] failed with most viewers for two basic reasons. It was not the same as Stephen King's novel, and it was not terrifying in the conventional way a horror film is supposed to be. So lacking the model of the novel or the conventional horror genre, viewers became disconcerted" (93).

The post-structural view of genre that I have been developing with respect to *The Shining* leads toward the ultimate rejection of genre as a category for identifying the semantic components of a film. Instead, I am suggesting that the post-structural concept of intertextuality be substituted as a term for organizing an individual film's narrative and aesthetic components. Genre only interests me in the way viewers use the concept as a way of stabilizing the film's meaning. I will pursue the usefulness of a post-structural theory of intertextuality by performing two readings of *The Shining*. First, I want to compare *The Shining* with its dominant horror film intertext, *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). This strategy positions the film with the marvelous, articulated in film as the horror of the supernatural. Then, I will construct a reading of *The Shining* as uncanny, linking the film to its melodramatic roots, specifically as a reworking of the family melodrama, *Bigger Than Life* (Nicholas Ray, 1956).

Such a linkage between *The Shining*, *Psycho*, and *Bigger Than Life*—a trans-historical comparative methodology—can best be termed intertextual criticism. Seeing *The Shining* in dialectical relationship to the genre films which its readers activate exposes a system of similarities and differences which enable a comparative political reading of the film. In *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis review the development of intertextual criticism. The authors emphasize the way semiotics theorizes the function of art, seeing it as a discourse, not as a stable and discrete creative enterprise. As a discourse, semioticians argue, the art work responds, “not to reality but to other discourses” (203).

Intertextuality is a translation of Bakhtin's term dialogism, as presented in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Dialogic intertextuality probes, “the necessary relation of any utterance to other utterances” (qtd. in Stam 203). In intertextual criticism, the relationship between a text and other texts and discourses takes precedence over the relationship between a text and its author, or between a text and some stable reality which it merely serves to reinforce. I employ intertextual criticism as a way of interrogating the political differences between seeing *The Shining* as a horror film and seeing it as a melodrama.

One of *The Shining*'s, and all of contemporary horror films', antecedents is *Psycho*. Robin Wood states, “Since *Psycho*, the Hollywood cinema has implicitly recognized Horror as both American and familial” (“Introduction” 210). Carol Clover argues similarly that, “The spiritual debt of all the post-1974 slasher films to *Psycho* is clear, and it is a rare example that does not pay a

visual tribute, however brief, to the ancestor—if not in a shower stabbing, then in a purling drain or the shadow of a knife-wielding hand” (194).

Perhaps the most forthright homage *The Shining* makes is via its invocation of the “Terrible House.” Critic P.L. Titterton develops the relationship between the Overlook Hotel and the Bates family house most forcefully when he states, “One begins to feel that if the haunted hotel is an image of America, it is at the same time an image of Hollywood. Behind the Overlook Hotel stands the Old Dark House of American horror films, including Hitchcock's *Psycho*” (120). The similarities are quite stunning, given that the horror of both films occurs in a hotel/motel by killers who are feminized: Norman Bates by his failure to resolve his Oedipal tensions, Jack by his status as the hotel's housekeeper.

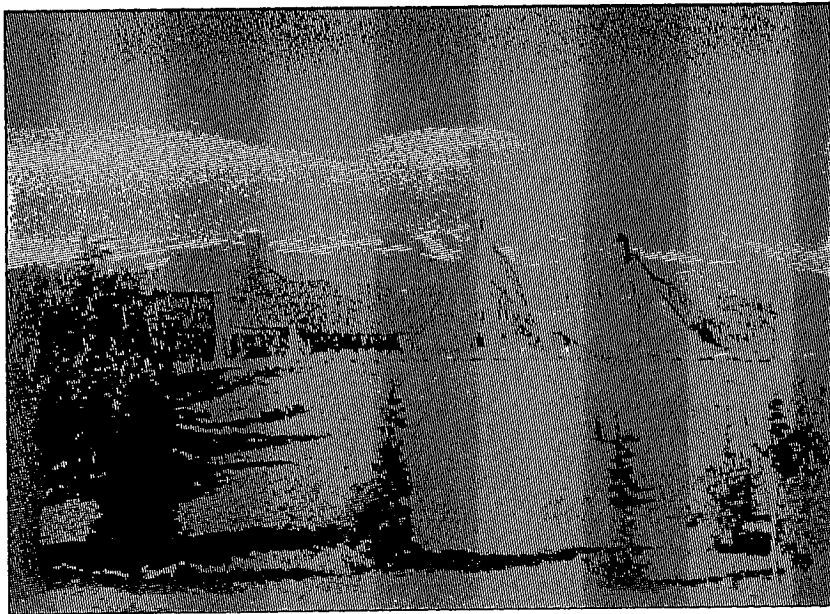
In addition to the relationship between Jack and Norman, *The Shining* also develops a relationship between Danny and Norman in that both characters repress their Oedipal conflict into alter egos. Norman does so with his mother's personality, while Danny creates Tony (Perkins?) after his father dislocates his shoulder.

The critics most frequently point to *The Shining*'s shower scene as a quotation from *Psycho*. Paul Mayersberg describes this scene as a “rewrite of the shower scene in *Psycho*. In *Psycho* it is the lady in the shower who is threatened by the monster outside. . . . Jack is the ‘monster,’ scared by what might emerge from the shower behind the curtain” (57). Both films figure the scene as the site of failed sexuality. In Jack's case, he starts to kiss the beautiful woman who emerges from the shower. However, she soon turns into a rotting hag, and Jack runs petrified out of the room and locks the door. Norman Bates, on the other hand, because of his Oedipal affiliations with another rotting hag (the dead Mrs. Bates in his cellar), cannot bear a sexual relationship with Marion Crane and instead resorts to killing her.

Mayersberg also sees the scene between Wendy and Jack on the stairs as a reference to *Psycho*. In the scene, Wendy backs up the stairs, fearful that Jack will hurt her. She strikes Jack first on the hand, then on the skull with a baseball bat, and knocks him down the stairs. The scene recalls the scene in which Arbogast is murdered at the top of the stairs by a knife-wielding Norman dressed as Mrs. Bates. The reversal of figures is quite specific: in *The Shining*, the real mother actually commits the offense against the male protagonist; in *Psycho*, it is Norman as Mrs. Bates who kills the interrogating detective.



*Psycho's* "Terrible House" (Courtesy MOMA)



*The Shining's* "Terrible Hotel"

Whereas most Stephen King fans examine *The Shining* in reference to its failure at replicating the horror conventions of a film like *Psycho*, academic critics emphasize its ability as a domestic melodrama to critique the structures of the American family. I intend to illuminate this reading strategy by linking *The Shining* to *Bigger Than Life* by way of melodrama criticism. In "Madness, Authority, and Ideology," David N. Rodowick offers a way of linking the 1950s family melodramas to *The Shining*. Rodowick argues that the melodrama, by using a self-consciously Oedipal structure, brings the text to the verge of collapse in realizing the failures of the system, and yet still retains rational explanations. This trajectory describes the narrative dynamic of *The Shining*, using the horror elements (the supernatural) as the "point of collapse" of the text. The question of whether or not there are supernatural experiences occurring keeps the narrative going, but there is always what Rodowick calls "a hermeneutic system" (the Oedipal trajectory) which draws us back away from the supernatural. This is, of course, "that hesitation" referred to by Todorov in his discussion of the tension between the uncanny and the marvelous that defines the fantastic.

Rodowick continues by arguing that once the family melodrama adopts the self-conscious Oedipal structure, two options are available. Either the film "establishes a predetermined symbolic path in which the resolution to the conflict [is] measured against a successful identification with authority" (273) or "The structure could resolve itself. . . on the hermeneutic level (which accepted madness and usually self-destruction). . . but not both" (274). Rodowick concludes by defining the subversive melodrama: "Split between madness and authority, [the melodrama] could either adopt an arbitrary and purely formal resolution, or else it could let its crises of identification follow their self-destructive course (in which case the power of authority came into question)" (279). *The Shining* follows the latter course, in which Jack accepts madness, thereby calling into question his status as authority figure. This analysis of *The Shining* replicates Rodowick's argument about the 1950s melodrama: "As a film like *Bigger Than Life* demonstrates so well, the relationship between madness and authority was in a sense two expressions of the same term" (278).

In *Bigger Than Life*, a middle-class American school teacher, Ed Avery, is stricken ill by a severe form of arthritis, for which his doctor prescribes the then experimental drug cortisone. As a result of his inability to control the use of the drug, Ed begins to act irrationally and abuse his family. The disintegration of the family becomes the theme of the film. The drug is merely the means

through which Ed's delusions of grandeur surface, revealing the inherent inadequacies of the patriarchal family structure. Ed terrorizes his wife Lou, as well as his son Ritchie, primarily within the confines of their own home. At the end of the film, a friend of the family, Wally, saves Ritchie and Lou from Ed's knife attack .



Maddening "Petty Domesticity" in *Bigger Than Life*  
(Courtesy MOMA)

The film emphasizes the bond Wally forms with Ritchie. Wally and Ritchie relate to each other, since they are both marginalized in terms of the patriarchal family, and because they are both interested in sports and physical activity such as football and camping. As a bachelor, Wally represents resistance to the patriarchy that Ed embodies. By virtue of his being outside the confines of the nuclear family structure, Wally is able to intervene and save Ed's family from his destructive behavior.

*The Shining* is a 1980s reworking of *Bigger Than Life*. In Kubrick's film, Jack Torrance, a former schoolteacher from Vermont, moves his family from Denver, where they are currently living, to the Overlook Hotel, a remote resort in the Rocky Mountains. It is to be Jack's job to take care of the hotel, as it is closed during the winter due to extreme weather. On closing day, October 31 (Halloween), the Torrances move into the hotel. They are given a tour around the hotel by the manager, Stuart Ullman, and by the African-American chef, Dick Hallorann. While the rest

of the family and hotel staff are examining the boiler room, Dick and Jack's son Danny sit and talk to one another. During this scene, it becomes clear that both Dick and Danny share an extrasensory perceptive gift, which Dick's grandmother called "the shining." He describes it as an ability to see past, present, and/or future events. Later that day, the rest of the hotel staff leave: only Jack, his wife Wendy, and Danny remain at the hotel.

The rest of the film represents an intense study of the disintegration of this nuclear family, coincident with the plummet of Jack into the throes of madness. Whereas the disintegration of the family portrayed in *Bigger Than Life* required the narrative device of the cortisone, *The Shining* needs no other gimmickry than the sheer isolation of the family unit within the confines of the remote location. Danny, sensing the danger his father presents, shines to Dick to get help, who receives the message and makes the long trip from Miami to the Overlook. Dick represents the external resistance to patriarchy, the role that Wally played in the Ray film. Dick becomes the force capable of saving the wife and son from the evil father.

In both films, the father is a teacher. In *Bigger Than Life*, Ed's function as teacher eventually leads to his abusive treatment of his son. As Ed begins to abuse the cortisone treatments, he develops the delusion that he has solutions to the nation's crisis in education. Ed tells his wife that he wants to get away from the family to develop and write about his pedagogical ideas. Soon, Ed fails to teach even his own son to do math properly. After a terrifying scene where he gives his son word problems and then menacingly hovers over the boy until he can come up with the correct answer, Ed decides to kill the boy and himself. In *The Shining*, Jack's status as a teacher equally leads to his abuse of the family. Because Jack regards himself as a writer, his failure as a teacher in Vermont is even more acutely felt. Once at the Overlook, when Jack cannot produce any more writing than the obsessively repeated phrase, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," we get the sense that Jack's frustrations as a teacher and writer play a large part in his slippage into insanity.

The way these two films resolve is the most fruitful point of thematic difference. Whereas Wally is strong enough to overpower Ed Avery, Dick is not prepared to do battle with the now completely insane Jack. As Dick drives up to the front door of the hotel, Jack is about to murder his wife with an ax. Hearing the Sno-Cat, Jack stops this activity in order to go kill Dick, who falls as easy prey to Jack's ax. Danny, who has been hiding in a storage cabinet in the kitchen, screams in pain as Jack kills his "shining" partner. Next,



Danny runs out into the hedge maze outside the hotel in an effort to escape from Jack. As Danny is familiar with the maze and is cunning once therein, he escapes from Jack into Hallorann's Sno-Cat where Wendy is waiting for him. Jack, lost within the maze, freezes to death in the snowstorm. As one critic puts it, "it is his [Dick's] snowmobile that becomes the hope for mother and son after Hallorann himself has been murdered" (Titterton 119).

Whereas Wally was able to be both the family's savior and live on after the incident, Dick must sacrifice his life in order that the wife and son may escape the father. Like Wally in *Bigger Than Life*, though, Dick does eventually save the wife and child from the patriarchal beast. But unlike Wally, Dick is not the image of the perfect desirable bachelor for the wife: he is a middle-aged black man. Since Dick unknowingly forfeits his life at the hands of the patriarch, it falls on the son Danny to rid himself and his mother of Jack's threat to his family by luring him into the hedge maze to die.

The potential of the post-structural approach to film genre that I have been delineating in this paper lies in an awareness that polysemous intertextual connections within the text produce contradictions in its meaning. I will pursue this claim by analyzing the ways in which accentuating *The Shining* as a horror film or a melodrama produces different approaches to the film's stance on such political identity issues as class, gender, and race.

In "A Case of Mistaken Legitimacy," Richard DeCordova uses a reading of Freud's "Family Romances" to understand 1950s family melodramas as critiques of the American class structure. DeCordova regards class as a structural element neglected in both melodrama criticism and in Freud's reading of his patients' symptoms. DeCordova argues, "The opposition between generations in the family romance proceeds quite explicitly through class" (256). In the scenario of the family romance, Freud argues that a child, recognizing his Oedipal tension within this unit, replaces his parents with others from a higher class. In *The Shining*, the family romance is played out, not by Danny, but by Jack himself. It is Jack who fancies he belongs to another class: as he becomes more intimate with the hotel, he imagines that he is part of the 1920s aristocracy. DeCordova concludes his reading of three 1950s family melodramas by arguing:

The bourgeois family is finally separated from this conflict and presented as a private alternative to the more public spectacle of class difference. This work of privatization as a form of resolution is astonishingly clear in the last shots of all of these

films. In all, the heroes walk or drive away from the public scenes of the spectacle and disappear from the fiction into their own little worlds, as if escaping from the worst of dreams (267).

This quite literally describes the last shots of *The Shining*, in which Danny and Wendy dispose of the overly class conscious Jack and in the sno-cat head for their newly found independence from the oppressive patriarch. This is of course a very different resolution from those of the melodramas that DeCordova analyzes. For example, at the end of *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956), Rock Hudson and Lauren Bacall form a heterosexual couple who escape into their own private world. In *The Shining*, it is mother and child, the two victims of the family romance, who leave behind Jack the patriarch.

However, the family romance structure is not just confined to the melodramatic tradition, but also to the horror genre. In "The Terror of Pleasure," Tania Modleski comments on the slasher film's dismantling of the family romance: "Just as the individual and the family are dis-membered in the most gruesomely literal way in many of these films, so the novelistic as family romance is also in the process of being dismantled" (160). This observation serves as an example of how conflicting generic elements in *The Shining* provide a framework for a critique of the workings of the American class system, particularly in the way this class system is embedded into the patriarchal family structure.

The reading of *The Shining* as working in the melodramatic mode centers around the way the film develops a critique of the American class structure. In *The Shining* and *Bigger Than Life*, both male protagonists are driven mad by the financial necessities of supporting their nuclear families' middle-class lifestyles. The oppressiveness of the class structure on the Torrances is revealed when Stuart Ullman shows them the caretaker's apartment. Thomas Allen Nelson describes the scene thus:

Jack and Wendy stand together in the white bathroom of the apartment, where [later in the film] she will be cornered by his madness, and both express disapproval—Jack through sardonic humor ("homey," he calls it), and Wendy, with a look of wifely disappointment—yet neither realize that, more than likely, they now inhabit an enclosed space that once gave birth to a previous caretaker's madness (215).

What is implicit here is that the class oppression, as figured by a run-down apartment in the midst of a glamorous hotel, is the



assumed cause of the horrors to come. Jack's inability to keep a job (in the novel, he lost his teaching job in Vermont because he hurt a student who slashed his car tires) has led to his needing to swallow his pride and grovel before the unctuous Ullman.

As the film progresses, Jack's sensitivity to his inability to support his family is compounded by his failure as a writer. This failure translates into Jack's delusory plummet into the association with the hotel. Even though he is never seen doing any actual hotel maintenance (significantly, it is Wendy who is seen doing all the work), Jack begins to fancy himself as always having been the caretaker. He tells Danny at one point, "I wish we could stay here forever and ever and ever." The class issue surfaces in this regard just when Jack's compliance would have saved the family from its forthcoming terrible ordeal. When Wendy comes to tell Jack they should take Danny down to the town to see a doctor just before the baseball bat scene on the stairs, Jack alludes to his class frustrations, "I could really write my own ticket if I went back to Boulder now, couldn't I? Shoveling out driveways, workin' in a car wash. Wouldn't that appeal to you? Wendy, I have let you fuck up my life so far, but I am not going to let you fuck this up." In this way, Jack's refusal to help his family escape its impending doom at his own hands is figured as the way his class position has pigeonholed him into this menial job.

The film also develops a class critique by exposing the American Dream as a cruel myth. This is most forcefully exposed in Jack's failure to write the "Great American Novel," but also in the Torrances' almost absurd position as workers in the abandoned, palatial Overlook Hotel. As Leibowitz and Jeffress argue, "The paradox at the heart of the [American] dream is evoked by the Torrance family ensconced like royalty in the empty Overlook Hotel, enchanted by the illusion of ownership while in fact they are merely employees, living in the shabbiest corner of the hotel" (46).

Finally, *The Shining* develops a class critique by exposing Jack's fantasies about his leisure class heritage. Stephen Snyder even sees this element at work at the moment of Jack's death in the frozen-maze, "Jack dies in an exalted monument of leisure class dreams. As Ullman notes, one needs several hours of free time just to play around in [the maze]" (10-11).

If one turns from an attention to class toward a focus on gender, reading *The Shining* as a melodrama or a horror film produces further contradictions in the film's political stance. Positioned as a melodrama, *The Shining* seems to produce a critique of the patriarchal relations inherent in the American familial structure.

An often analyzed image of the melodrama concerns the woman waiting at the window. Mary Ann Doane argues that, "The window is the interface between inside and outside, the feminine space of the family and reproduction and the masculine space of production" (288). In *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955), for example, the Jane Wyman character is often framed from inside the window of her house, looking out at her yard below. In *The Shining*, it is Jack who is figured watching his family out the window in the scene where Wendy and Danny are playing in the snow. This shot is the first in the film which figures Jack's plummet into insanity. The film critiques patriarchy by linking Jack with the feminine position identified by Doane's analysis of the figure at the window. Jack is in a sense the film's "housekeeper": it is his job to keep up the hotel. And yet, for Jack, since his place of work is also his home, the division of spaces Doane points to between the feminine and masculine world does not hold. Since the window shot also figures Jack's plummet into madness, Jack's insanity can be read as the result of the gender position into which he is inserted. Jack attempts to maintain a patriarchal position of authority but is made to give up his masculine position of privilege by being forced by economic imperatives to work in a feminized sphere.

Yet, taken as a contemporary horror film, the gender political implications of *The Shining* emerge along quite different lines. Victims in the slasher film, the contemporary version of the horror film instigated by *Psycho*, are frequently sexually-active females. *The Shining* works against the conventions of horror in this respect, as its narrative concerns only one murder, that of Dick Hallorann. However, his death is handled in very much the same way that Carol Clover describes of all male's deaths in slasher films, "The death of a male is always swift; even if the victim grasps what is happening to him, he has no time to react or register terror. . . The death of a male is moreover more likely than the death of a female to be viewed from a distance. . . or indeed to happen off screen and not be viewed at all" (200-1). This is a fairly accurate description of Hallorann's death: we see Jack strike one blow to Hallorann's chest in long shot. Then we cut away. The next time we see Hallorann's body, its arms have been chopped off. We never witness this dismemberment.

This shift from gender to race as a focus of victimization in *The Shining* introduces my last investigation of the film's identity politics. The character of Dick Hallorann, the African-American cook who works at the hotel, is crucial here because of the way his racial identity both replays and rewrites the narrative function filled by Wally in *Bigger Than Life*. In what ways is Dick's being a

person of color important to the overall strategies of the film?

I begin with an examination of the film's critique of racism. The scene of primary importance in this discussion is Jack's second visit to the Gold Room, a huge ballroom, complete with a wet bar, at the Overlook Hotel. Here, Jack engages in delusional conversations with Lloyd, a composite projection of the bartenders of Jack's alcoholic past. Jack talks with Lloyd about his problems, including calling Wendy "the old sperm bank," and at one point sighing "white man's burden" while being presented with a bottle of whiskey. At the bar, Jack "remembers how to express his sexist [and racist] prerogatives" (Nelson 225). This implies that these characteristics have been repressed within his psyche by the civilizing effects of society. As Jack breaks free of these restraints, he begins to express his genuine feelings towards both women and other minority groups.

The next step in this progression away from the restraints of civilization occurs during Jack's discussion with "Delbert" Grady about how his family may need a bit of "correcting." Grady, supposedly a waiter in the Gold Room, is also one of Jack's projections. At Jack's job interview, Ullman tells Jack the story about Charles Grady, the former caretaker at the Overlook, who murdered his wife and twin daughters in 1970. Jack has now confused the name, and uses the Grady projection to test within his mind his fantasy of freeing himself from the burden of his cumbersome family, as well as to explore his new predilection toward sexism and racism. As Richard Jameson argues,

[Grady] introduces Jack to the quaint snobbery of his anachronistic, English-accented cultural frame: Danny has tried to bring "an outside party, a nigger, a nigger cook "into the action; and Jack repeats "A 'nigger'?" (a superb reading by Nicholson) in a tone that suggests he is not used to considering negritude an offense, is on the verge of disbelieving laughter, and yet is also fascinated by the new ripple of self-congratulating possibility here (32).

Jack's release from society's control, symbolized by his easy assimilation into the world of the hotel's upper-class and elitist past has let loose the sexism and racism that hides within us all, but which we are usually able to repress, except under extreme conditions. The criticism of the sexism and racism in the film comes from the perception of Jack and his projections as supernaturally evil. Hence, what they say, how they act, and their beliefs are construed as odious.

In her review of *The Shining*, Pauline Kael has compiled

perhaps the most complete list of negative reactions to the film. Kael focuses one of her attacks at the racial implications of Dick's murder. Ultimately, she concludes that the film's gesture is racist: "The awful suspicion pops into the mind that since we don't want to see Wendy or Danny hurt and there's nobody else alive around for Jack to get at, he's given the black man" (136). In order to support this claim, Kael invokes a scene from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to imply that within *The Shining*, the lives of blacks are less important than the lives of whites. However, both *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Shining* are structured such that the racist notions presented are critiqued throughout.

Kael's reading also critiques the way that *The Shining* generically fails as a horror film in presenting Hallorann's murder: "[He] traveled all that way and we were subjected to all that laborious crosscutting (which destroyed any chance for a buildup of suspense back at the hotel) just to provide a sacrificial victim and a Sno-Cat?" (136). Here, the film's melodramatic nature (especially its use of Griffith-like cross-cutting) overrides its horror film components, especially the creation of meaningful suspense. The cross-cutting with Hallorann serves an important melodramatic function: the accentuation of extremes. The representation of extremes is a common way for the melodrama to wring out the "truth" from the "real." Previously, Hallorann is associated with the heat wave in Miami, contrasting starkly with the blizzard in Colorado. Now, in "all that laborious crosscutting," we see Hallorann drive the Sno-Cat through the blizzard and up the Sidewinder (the road connecting the Overlook with the rest of civilization). Hallorann is traveling through the most brutal incarnations of nature, while the Torrances are back within the confines of the Overlook Hotel, amidst the most artificial of human constructions.

Hallorann's function in the narrative is more important than Kael allows. As the only sincere figure outside of Wendy and Danny, Hallorann offers an external resistance to the patriarchal structure, yet due to issues of race, in a vastly different way from Wally's function in *Bigger Than Life*. The film locates Hallorann's murder within a larger critique of colonialism. Jack Torrance, the embodiment of the American patriarch, has failed to achieve the success for which "The American Dream" has coerced him into working. Instead of writing "The Great American Novel" (Leibowitz and Jeffress, 46), Jack writes the same sentence over and over again, constructing a book out of the phrase, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." This becomes symbolically

the anthem of a hotel whose primary purpose is to engage the upper-class in a leisurely diversion from work. In fact, the violence in the hotel's past that Hallorann and Danny "shine" is "associated with the history of American conquest" (Snyder 7). We learn from Stuart Ullman early in the film that the hotel has been built on an Indian burial ground. As David Cook argues, "*The Shining* is less about ghosts and demonic possession than it is about the murderous system of economic exploitation which has sustained this country since, like the Overlook Hotel, it was built upon an Indian burial ground that stretched quite literally 'From sea to shining sea'" (2). Thus, the hotel as a symbol of American success literally covers over the violence and corruption it took to build it. The name of the hotel itself takes on symbolic form in this new light, "... a secret that most Americans choose to overlook; the true horror of *The Shining* is the horror of living in a society which is predicated upon murder and must constantly deny the fact to itself" (3). The Overlook Hotel becomes a symbol for the way white male Americans choose to hide their past demons in a closet while striving for a success at the expense of others—be it Native-Americans, African-Americans, women, or children.

These "Others" are clearly emphasized by the rest of the film as well. The marginalized characters of the American experience, the African-American, the woman, and the child are all present in the personae of Hallorann, Wendy, and Danny. Leibowitz and Jeffress summarize the film as, "Torrance makes his devil's bargain... and women, children, and blacks suffer" (47). The American patriarch inflicts pain on many oppressed groups, not just Dick Hallorann, as Kael argued. Leibowitz and Jeffress ultimately conclude that the power of the shining becomes "a kind of survival skill that helps the oppressed to defend themselves. . . . It should be noted that the relationships between the child, the black, and the woman are the only ones free of the self-serving motives that govern those in which Jack participates" (50). It seems that as a result of the immense pressures of the patriarchal American dream to strive for success, Jack subverts his humanity and transforms himself into a monster. The oppressed groups, in order to resist this behavior, form a community, an alternative family.

This interpretation leaves one unanswered question: what do we make of the fact that Hallorann gets killed in the end by Jack? Is he a sacrificial lamb, as Kael argues, or is there something more to this? Why would a film, which has so dramatically critiqued the modes of racism, resort to racism itself to solve a problem of narrative? The answer, I think, lies in the desire to see Dick as victim of Jack's brutality, while still preserving the Oedipal tension

between Danny and Jack. The major difference between *The Shining* and *Bigger Than Life* is the insistence on an Oedipal resolution of the conflict between Danny and Jack. When Jack chases Danny into the maze with ax in hand and states, "I'm right behind you Danny," he is predicting Danny's future as well as attempting to scare the young boy. Jack alludes to the construction of the American Dream which constitutes Danny as well as himself. To have Dick survive and Jack die would mean the replacement of the white patriarchal father figure with the kind father Hallorann. Dick has already been characterized as being mentally complicit with Danny through their mutual ability to "shine." In his discussion of this film as a fairy tale deriving from Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*, Christopher Hoile goes as far as to call Hallorann Danny's "magic guardian" (9).

To have Hallorann survive would produce a closed narrative. The film would be left arguing that all is right with the world: the patriarch has been defeated for all time, and African-Americans, women, and children are no longer oppressed. Instead, Jack kills Danny's "good" father figure. Then, Danny kills Jack, the patriarchal beast, but that beast is present within himself as well. The film leaves open many possibilities for the future. The film's world is not a perfect one in which the evil father is killed and the good father lives. Instead, both are killed, and it is up to Danny to grow up and build a better world, throwing off the demons of his past but always knowing that deep inside of him, the demons that possessed Jack and all Americans are right beneath the surface. Danny has inherited Jack's legacy.

This still does not resolve the problems of the representation of African-American subjectivity raised by *The Shining*'s narrative strategy. In "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," Manthia Diawara argues that American films are dominated by "the image of the punished and disciplined black man" (68). As a horror film, *The Shining* participates in this representational legacy. *The Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968) ends similarly with the absurd killing of Ben, the African-American and the only character with whom we have been encouraged to identify. Diawara continues, "Black male characters in contemporary Hollywood films are made less threatening to whites. . . by stories in which blacks are depicted playing by the rules of white society and losing" (69). On one level, this is exactly what happens in *The Shining*. Hallorann is at first seen to be indoctrinated into the white patriarchal world. When he first meets the Torrances, he stands with Stuart Ullman and says, "how do you like our hotel, so far?" He thus is immediately portrayed as being

part of a hotel built under the auspices of American colonial practices. At the end of the film, he tries to help Danny and Wendy, and is punished for his actions by the white patriarch. He plays by the rules of white society and loses by forfeiting his life, as Kael argues.

Thus, seen in light of the tradition of the horror film, Hallorann is punished for being African-American. From the perspective of the melodramatic tradition, Hallorann serves a crucial function of helping Danny learn to resist patriarchy and racism. Thus, it is the generic complexity of *The Shining* which produces its dialogical political position.

### III. Conclusion

In "Bringing It All Back Home," Vivian Sobchak forwards the argument that the major contemporary American film genres—horror, science fiction, and melodrama—are all fundamentally related by their endorsement of the status quo. Sobchak argues:

The three genres have exchanged and expended their representational energy dynamically and urgently—with the "politically unconscious" aim of seeking re-solution, or at least ab-solution, for a threatened patriarchy and its besieged structure of perpetuation: the bourgeois family. In sum, their mutual project has been (and is) aggressively regressive and conservative (190).

As I have argued in this paper, a post-structural view of genre films forwards an intertextual method to expose the contradictions in a genre film's ideological position. Contrary to Sobchak's treatment of genres as stable and politically interchangeable, an intertextual method looks at the contradictions between generic traditions within one text. Sobchak's survey approach allows her to make broad generalizations about the immanent meaning of genre films but fails to account for the ideological complexities of an individual film like *The Shining*. We need to move beyond structuralism's binary oppositions toward the ways in which liminal, unstable states between generic traditions describe the way all genre films work. In Derrida's sense, merely defining a genre produces its deconstruction. To name the genre produces its dissolution.

However, this is not to claim that an intertextual method renders the concept of genre obsolete. Quite to the contrary, genre seems more than ever to serve as a unifying scheme for viewers to make sense of films. The approach to *The Shining* offered here represents a way of discussing the inadequacies of genre as a critical tool

while at the same time stressing its importance. I suggest that we look at how readers' responses to films are organized by the attribution of genre. Such an approach helps to explain why horror fans cannot wait for the new television version of "The Shining" to arrive in order to "fix" the atrocities Stanley Kubrick inflicted upon Stephen King's novel, while academic critics have positioned that very same Kubrick film as one of the masterworks of the contemporary American cinema's ability to produce cultural critique.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more on this fan response, see Kate Meyers, "Frightening Strikes Twice."

<sup>2</sup> With the exception of Fredric Jameson, who regards the film as a Reaganite exercise in post-modern nostalgia.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of criticism which privileges the "New" Hollywood's special ability to hybridize genres includes John Cawelti's "Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films" and Jim Collins' "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity."

<sup>4</sup> In "The Law of Genre," Jacques Derrida produces a post-structural genre criticism in which he argues that a "pure" genre is an impossibility. For Derrida, the very gesture of labeling a genre immediately produces its instability. Genres are always already impure. However, I find these metaphors of impurity, especially Derrida's choice—"contamination"—overly derogatory, especially given my investigation of the melodrama, the most denigrated genre in film history. In this context, the implication of the metaphor would suggest that the film version of *The Shining* "contaminates" King's horror with its melodrama, a critical position toward the melodrama's status in American culture that I resolutely reject. My thanks to Chris Orr for informing me of Derrida's work on genre.

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