

Bowdoin College

Bowdoin Digital Commons

English Faculty Publications

Faculty Scholarship and Creative Work

1-1-2009

What some ghosts don't know: Spectral incognizance and the horror film

Aviva Briefel
Bowdoin College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/english-faculty-publications>

Recommended Citation

Briefel, Aviva, "What some ghosts don't know: Spectral incognizance and the horror film" (2009). *English Faculty Publications*. 2.

<https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/english-faculty-publications/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship and Creative Work at Bowdoin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Bowdoin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact mdoyle@bowdoin.edu, a.sauer@bowdoin.edu.



PROJECT MUSE®

What Some Ghosts Don't Know: Spectral Incognizance and the
Horror Film

Aviva Briefel

Narrative, Volume 17, Number 1, January 2009, pp. 95-108 (Article)

Published by The Ohio State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.0.0011>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/256473>



What Some Ghosts Don't Know: Spectral Incognizance and the Horror Film

In many ways, horror films appeal to our desire for life rather than to our death drive. We subject ourselves to the terrors of the genre in order to affirm the stability of our own existence in contrast to the expendable lives on screen. As Morris Dickstein argues, horror films offer us the opportunity of “neutralizing anxiety by putting an aesthetic bracket around it” (54). The grueling experiences we encounter in the dark world of the theater may deeply influence our relationship to our own world: “What we take with us from these films is a deeper perceptual awareness of life and of our involvement in its complexities” (Telotte 31). The tagline of the 1979 film *Phantasm*—“If this one doesn’t scare you, you’re already dead!”—plays on the restorative potential of horror by implying that the more terror we experience in the theater, the more we confirm our position as one of the living. The horror film franchise *Saw* (2004) recently thematized this function of the genre by featuring a villain who targets his victims according to their inability to value their existence. Affected by terminal cancer, he envisions elaborate tortures requiring “people who don’t appreciate their blessings” to commit gruesome acts (such as amputating their own legs) in order to save their lives. The moralistic undertone of this popular series foregrounds the horror film’s valorization of life through its rupture.

In this essay, I will address a subgenre of the horror film, which I term “spectral incognizance,” that seems dedicated to reassuring viewers of their safety. The subgenre includes films such as Charles Vidor’s *The Spy* (1929), Robert Enrico’s *La Rivière du Hibou* (1962), Herk Harvey’s *Carnival of Souls* (1962), Adrian Lyne’s *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990), M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* (1999), Alejandro Amenábar’s *The Others* (2001), and Mark Forster’s *Stay* (2005). In contrast to the

Aviva Briefel is Associate Professor of English at Bowdoin College and author of *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century*. She has published articles on Victorian literature and on film and is currently co-editing an anthology of essays on horror cinema after 9/11.

threat of grotesque violence deployed by *Saw*, the genre of spectral incognizance reassuringly represents death as an event that can be overlooked.¹ The protagonist of this genre, with whom the viewer is meant to identify for the entirety of the film, finds out in the final moments of the narrative that he or she has died or has been involved in a prolonged dying process. While a first viewing produces shock in the spectators, and may therefore heighten their anxieties about death, the genre demands multiple viewings that subsequently attenuate these fears. The films try to prolong the metaphorical lives of their spectators by deploying a narrative structure that favors circularity and repetition over linear progress. The compulsion to repeat a potentially uncomfortable experience does not fuel the death drive, but a form of detached reading predicated on viewing death as a formal rather than a metaphysical entity. We gradually detach from identifying with the protagonist and transition to identifying with the constant renewal of the narrative form.

In what follows, I isolate the mechanism of the subgenre of spectral incognizance by examining *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* alongside their literary predecessor, Ambrose Bierce's short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1891). I contend that these texts offer a model of identification that centers on the viewer's relationship with narrative form, a relationship that transcends identification with a particular character. At the same time, however, these texts convey that there is a cost to the prolongation of life through narrative. Their complex representations of gender expose the limits of relying on the horror genre—or any art form, for that matter—for reassurance about the real world. Female characters in particular delineate the vicissitudes of an overdependence on artworks, of the desire to use representations of death as affirmations of life.

I.

Given its popularity at the time of its release, M. Night Shyamalan's 1999 blockbuster, *The Sixth Sense*, is perhaps the most famous cinematic narrative of spectral incognizance. It features the child psychiatrist Dr. Malcolm Crowe (played by a surprisingly soft Bruce Willis), who at the beginning of the film celebrates with his wife, Anna, after receiving an award for his work from the city of Philadelphia. A disgruntled former patient disrupts their festivities by breaking into their home, shooting Malcolm, and committing suicide. The scene fades and intertitles reading "The Next Fall" indicate that time has passed. Malcolm, who seems to have recovered from the incident, has begun treating a nine-year-old boy named Cole, who lives alone with his mother, suffers from mysterious wounds, and speaks to himself in a manner that may designate schizophrenia. During his work with Cole, Malcolm's relationship with his wife seems to falter: she ignores him, is depressed and begins to take Zoloft, and flirts with one of her employees. Cole eventually confides the secret of his trauma to Malcolm in a line that has become a cultural cliché: "I see dead people." As soon as he shares this information with Malcolm—who does not yet believe him—we begin to see ghosts along with Cole and realize that Philadelphia is polluted with disgruntled specters who have met untimely deaths. Among

these is the ghost of a young girl who gives Cole a videotape to play at her funeral: the tape reveals that she has been poisoned by her mother, who suffers from Munchausen syndrome by proxy. Once Cole exposes the mother's crime, thereby preventing her from killing her younger daughter, he advises Malcolm (who now believes in the boy's spectral visions) to repair his relationship with his wife by speaking to her while she sleeps. It is when the psychiatrist does so that he realizes what he has overlooked all along: that he had died from the patient's gunshot, that his wife was mourning—not ignoring—him, and that he is one of the “dead people” whom Cole can see. The film ends with Malcolm's acceptance of his fate, a cognitive act that, presumably, will allow him to rest in peace.

This initial viewing of the film solidifies the audience's relationship to the protagonist and his trauma. A first-time spectator (one who has not figured out the secret of the film) shares in the shock of Malcolm's realization. The commonality of this experience is conveyed through a montage of scenes playing on the trope of one's life flashing before one's eyes prior to death, with the important difference that here it is evidence of death rather than life that flashes before our eyes. These images compel the protagonist and spectators to notice what we have missed all along: moments that seemed to signal Malcolm's presence in conversations, rooms, and relationships actually designated his absence from them. Thinking back to his anniversary dinner with Anna, for example, we come to understand that she is not giving him the cold shoulder, as we had believed, but that she ignores him because he himself is cold—he is a ghost whose presence she fails to notice. Indeed, we realize that he does not interact with anyone except for Cole throughout the film. It becomes clear that the young boy's monologue about his unwanted special powers applies to Malcolm: “I see dead people . . . walking around like regular people. They don't see each other. They only see what they want to see. They don't know they're dead.”

Narratives of spectral incognizance are predicated on the idea that dying is not only a corporeal failure, but also a cognitive act: those who overlook their deaths are not really dead. Instead, they lead a liminal existence scattered with clues signaling their passing; they can only transition into real death once they have interpreted these clues properly.² These narratives are thus focused on unraveling the prolonged cognitive processes through which their protagonists come to understand their demise. They consistently feature characters who take on the role of therapists to teach dead or dying individuals to recognize symptoms of death. By the end of *The Sixth Sense*, Cole has taken over Malcolm's identity as psychiatrist when he realizes that he can attenuate his own trauma if he encourages the ghosts around him to talk about their problems. As Katherine Fowkes puts it, “What the ghosts in this film need is not an exorcism but a good therapist” (“Melodramatic Specters” 195–96).³ In *Jacob's Ladder*, Jacob Singer is dying on a hospital bed in Vietnam (a fact that is only revealed to us at the end of the film), but projects himself into a post-war existence in New York City. The mundane details of his life as a postal worker are interrupted repeatedly by manifestations of the occult, as co-workers, friends, and lovers seem to lead double lives as demons. Jacob fantasizes about an angelic masseur, Louie, who works on him both physically and psychologically to make him realize that he is counterproductively hanging on to his life: “The only thing that burns in hell is the part of you

that won't let you let go of your life. . . . If you've made your peace, then the devils are really angels freeing you from the earth." Similarly, in *Carnival of Souls*, Mary Henry—who unknowingly died in a car crash in the first moments of the film—uses a medical doctor as a psychotherapist to whom she admits her absolute loss of desire.

These films repress the notion that if death entails the annihilation of one's being, then there is little thinking involved in the act of dying. It takes us by surprise without allowing us to register surprise—when it hits, we are already gone. While the representation of dying as an intellectual experience may reassure us in its implication that life continues after death, it also jeopardizes the protection the horror film allegedly offers its spectators. If the protagonists' cognitive interpretations of death allow them to die, there is a risk that by deciphering their predicament we will come closer to experiencing our own deaths as well. This situation is reminiscent of Freud's explanation in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) that, "If there is no mention in the dream of the fact that the dead man is dead, the dreamer is equating himself with him: he is dreaming of his own death. If, in the course of the dream, the dreamer suddenly says to himself in astonishment, 'why, he died ever so long ago,' he is repudiating this equation and is denying that the dream signifies his own death" (467). According to this account, film spectators would have to acknowledge that the figure on screen does not attenuate thoughts of dying, but may exacerbate these thoughts.

Films of spectral incognizance initially heighten our anxiety by reminding us of the similarities between ourselves and the diegetic characters. Our perceptive apparatus unexpectedly mirrors the incognizant ghosts'. In order for them to believe their delusion, they have to experience life in fragments, privileging those events that confirm their existence over those that signal their deaths. Malcolm, for example, only performs activities that sustain his fantasy; we do not see him trying to get a waiter's attention and failing to do so, entering a movie theater without giving his ticket to an usher, trying to speak on the phone and not being heard by the person on the other end, and so on. This fragmentary experience calls to mind the spectators' own view of life when mediated by the film screen. As Fowkes argues, "While the intermittent depiction of time is motivated by Malcolm's ghostly state, it also handily mimics the type of selective editing that all films use when they show us only relevant scenes in the life of a character" ("Melodramatic Specters" 201).⁴ This similarity suggests not only our proximity to Malcolm, but his proximity to us. Inasmuch as we share his realization of his death, he shares our spectatorial view of the world. This reciprocity threatens to trap us within the narrative and to eradicate the safe distance afforded by horror spectatorship.

To protect us from this untenable position, films of spectral incognizance force us to reconsider our role as spectators at the very moment in which they link the protagonist's cognition to his or her death. Our realization of Malcolm's death coincides with an awareness that our work in this cinematic world is not done; we need to see the film again, this time with knowledge of its outcome. The final scene is rife with clues that ask us to circle back and revisit the film from the perspective of a second-time viewer. The flashbacks provide tantalizing events from earlier moments that

need to be reviewed and scrutinized. By returning us to the psychiatrist's death, the film compels us to revisit the origins of his delusion—but this time, there is a discrepancy between our knowledge and his lack thereof. The camera signals repetition by focusing on the video of Malcolm and Anna's wedding, which Anna has been watching throughout the film. While at first her fixation on these images seems to convey regret about her failed marriage, it actually signals her mourning of her husband. Like us, she is aware that Malcolm has died, a knowledge that drives her to perform a repeated act of spectatorship; however, whereas her spectatorship of the video conveys her desire to revive the deceased, our repeated viewings of *The Sixth Sense* consist of an intellectual detachment in which we compulsively search for clues of his death. This search confirms our stable position as spectators of death—but not its victims. It recalls Diana Fuss's claim that film spectatorship "guarantees that at least in fantasy we will continue to occupy a space in a world that has gone on without us" (38).⁵

From a close identification with the dead protagonist, we shift to identifying with the endless potential for renewal of the narrative structure. Unlike the incognizant ghost, who must eventually come to terms with his death, narratives can defer the finality of closure indefinitely. Once we overcome the shock of the first viewing—which necessarily foregrounds the magnitude of death—we repress the possibility of our own deaths by relying on a narrative form that can continue *ad infinitum*. Just before Cole confesses to seeing dead people, Malcolm tells him a bedtime story that acknowledges the persistence of narratives: "Once upon a time there was this young prince, and he decided that he wanted to go for a drive, and he got his driver and they started driving—driving, driving, driving a lot and, uh, they drove so much that he fell asleep, and—then he woke up, and he realized they were still driving. This was a very long trip." This bedtime story betrays the fantasy of a linear narrative that will extend indefinitely; fittingly, it is told by a man who has the impulse to go on living forever. The image of driving as a metaphor for a life that has exceeded its limits is a recurrent trope in films of spectral incognizance, including *Carnival of Souls* and the *Twilight Zone* television episode "The Hitch-Hiker" (1960), each of whose protagonists embarks on the fantasy of a prolonged road trip after she has (unknowingly) died in a car crash.

The Sixth Sense favors a circular extension of narratives over a linear one. After hearing his story, Cole gently instructs Malcolm, "You haven't told bedtime stories before. . . . Well, you have to add some twists and stuff." The contortions he advocates recall Peter Brooks's description of the patterns of "detour," "squiggle," and "arabesque" taken by the middle of a text to avoid reaching the end too precipitously (104).⁶ Brooks famously compares narratives to the expanse of human lives; the plot is fueled by a textual "desire" that compels the reader toward the end, but also allows her to delay the fatality that the end entails. An overly linear plot would fuse the introduction with the resolution, leading to an anti-narrative "collapse of one into the other, of life into immediate death" (104). To forestall their deaths, narratives may also use their ends as new beginnings, as is the case with the subgenre of spectral incognizance: "It is the role of fictional plots to impose an end which yet suggests a return, a new beginning; a rereading. Any narrative, that is, wants at its end to refer

us back to its middle, to the web of the text” (Brooks 109–110). Shyamalan signals the importance of this circular structure by deploying a number of visual puns throughout the narrative: Malcolm’s wedding band, which at the end of the film drops from Anna’s hand and spins on the floor; the use of elliptical camera movements, as in the anniversary dinner scene, in which the camera slowly rotates around the room; the unusually large round glasses (belonging to his father) that Cole wears in the first part of the film, and so on. The impulse toward circularity is also echoed in Malcolm’s peculiar speech patterns. In drunkenly celebrating his award at the beginning of the film, he inverts his phrases: “That is one fine frame; one fine frame that is”; “I am serious; serious I am” (his wife tells him that he sounds like Dr. Seuss when he is drunk). Likewise, the little girl in Amenábar’s *The Others*, who is unaware of her death at the hands of her mother, uses chiasmic inversions to reassure herself and her younger brother as they walk through the creepy grounds of their mansion: “My name is Anne and I am walking; I am walking and my name is Anne.” In contrast to the “straight corridor” that David Bordwell attributes to the structure of classical Hollywood films (18), narratives of spectral incognizance encourage us to return to the beginnings of sentences, plots, and human lives.

Our repeated viewings of these films allow us to achieve what the on-screen characters cannot: we repress the fact of death through our adherence to narrative form. These viewings demystify the power that death initially holds in the narrative by compelling us to consider it a formal rather than a metaphysical entity. Our recurrent encounters with the text add up to a detached expertise that allows us to detect various signs of death. For instance, in subsequent viewings of *The Sixth Sense*, we notice evidence of Malcolm’s death in the facts that he never interacts with anyone except for Cole, the child is afraid of him when they first meet, Malcolm never moves the furniture or other parts of his surroundings, etc.⁷ Similarly, we conclude that the strange psychic episodes that Mary Henry endures in *Carnival of Souls*, during which she can no longer communicate with those around her, are evidence of her spectral state. Such films are laden with clues—both intentional or not, as anything can become a sign of death once the final secret has been uncovered—that confirm the viewers’ cognitive experience to the detriment of the dead characters. We develop an obsession with narrative detail that differs from the compulsive repetitions of the death drive by confirming our role as active spectators. The more we can prove that the on-screen figures are deceased, and the more we read their annihilation in the world around them, the more we confirm our own survival through our attachment to the intricacies of the narrative form.

Dying in these narratives takes the shape of repetitions, patterns, and circles that signal our interpretive relationship to the text. This cinematic trend finds its clearest origin in Ambrose Bierce’s fin-de-siècle short story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” which tricks the first-time reader into thinking that a Confederate who is being hanged by Union soldiers has escaped his fate. In actuality, the story consists of the prolonged fantasy of liberation and familial reunion that the protagonist experiences during his dying moments. The last line of the story—“Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the

timbers of the Owl Creek bridge” (49)—jolts readers into realizing that what they took to be signs of life (swimming, running, sharp physical sensations) were actually symptoms of death. While, unlike in *The Sixth Sense*, Farquhar is not actually dead but dying, he embodies what John Kenny Crane has described as a “post-mortem consciousness . . . a very definite attempt made by the dying self in the last second *before* death consumes it, but also in the first second *after* death can possibly be averted, to impose its own rule upon the universal order in place of the inevitable fate (death) that is coming to pass” (76–77; original emphasis). The inevitability of death, combined with unconscious efforts to forestall it, links this story to later narratives of spectral incognizance, such as *Jacob’s Ladder*, in which the protagonist is swept up in an irreversible process of dying rather than already being deceased.

Anticipating Shyamalan’s narrative, Bierce’s story is filled with clues pointing to circularity and repetition that signal Farquhar’s transition into death while compelling us to rediscover the story. For example, as he imagines himself swimming to freedom, we read, “Suddenly he felt himself whirled round and round—spinning like a top. The water, the banks, the forest, the now distant bridge, fort and men—all were commingled and blurred. Objects were represented by their colors only; circular horizontal streaks of color—that was all he saw. He had been caught in a vortex and was being whirled on with a velocity of advance and gyration that made him giddy and sick” (47). For second-time readers who anticipate the outcome of the story, Farquhar’s fatal sensations are an aesthetic combination of swirls and circles that delineates the path we should navigate through this narrative. His death has become our reading practice. Indeed, at the beginning of the story, Bierce accompanies his description of the Union soldiers’ elaborate costume and intricate choreography with the phrase, “Death is a dignitary who when he comes announced is to be received with formal manifestations of respect” (41). These “formal manifestations” signal the aestheticization of death that allows readers to distance themselves from the protagonist’s final throes.

The interpretive power granted to us by narratives of spectral incognizance may explain why there are so many of them: they are on their way to becoming as clichéd as the phrase, “I see dead people.” The reassurance proffered by these stories migrates beyond the parameters of horror and the gothic to infiltrate genres that explore the lighter side of death. Popular visual texts such as the Showtime series *Dead Like Me* (2003–2004) and the romantic comedy *Just Like Heaven* (2005) play on the viewer’s familiarity with a genre predicated on repetition—both in terms of the repeated consumption of a single product and the proliferation of similar narratives. In *Just Like Heaven*, a young woman is hit by a car and falls into a coma, where she hangs precariously between life and death, and haunts the man who rents her apartment while she is in the hospital. The man proves to be an expert in the genre of spectral incognizance when he cynically asks her, “Has anything dramatic happened to you recently . . . like dying, maybe?” To make her aware of her condition, he poses a question that Malcolm never considers: “And when you’re not here, what do you do with the rest of your day?” Similarly, the pilot episode of *Dead Like Me* features a young girl who dies unexpectedly, and who experiences the shock of her death in a

hallucination of a game show aptly titled “Hangman.” A Vanna White-esque figure stands in front of a *Wheel of Fortune*-like board bearing the phrase: “Yo-’re De-d.” It is as easy for us to fill in the blanks as it is to understand what has happened to the girl. The prevalence of narratives of spectral incognizance has made us blasé; we are second-time viewers even if we have not seen a particular film before. Our growing familiarity with the genre may soon prevent us from experiencing the first-time viewer’s shock; when death is no longer a surprise, these narratives will fall into the category of what Barthes would term the “already seen.” Death is reduced to a recognizable narrative form.

II.

And yet, the genre of spectral incognizance does not let us escape the reality of death unscathed. By inviting us to experience “death by proxy” (Bronfen *x*), it simultaneously draws our attention to the cost of living—or dying—vicariously through fictional narratives. In *Over Her Dead Body*, Elisabeth Bronfen argues that using representation to suppress the reality of death leads to unwanted by-products: “Given . . . that representations of death both articulate an anxiety about and a desire for death, they function like a symptom, which psychoanalytic discourse defines as a repression that fails” (*x*). Significantly, these symptoms are most evident in representations of female identity. Bronfen posits that while images of dead women have traditionally been used to aestheticize death, this displacement never fully succeeds. It does not lead to a “recuperation of order, a return to stability,” but demonstrates the impossibility of such regulation: “The recuperation is imperfect, the regained stability not safe, the urge for order inhabited by a fascination with disruption and split, and certainly emerging over and out of uncertainty” (*xii*). Narratives of spectral incognizance dramatize this failure by presenting female characters who aggravate fears of death. The horror of these texts comes from the fact that the very image that is supposed to offer reassurance against dying—the beautiful woman—transforms into a sign of its inevitability.

Criticized by some viewers at the time of its release for its similarity to *The Sixth Sense*, Amenábar’s *The Others* substantially alters the earlier film by placing a woman at the center of the story. Right after World War II, Grace (played by an especially icy Nicole Kidman) lives in a mansion on the British island of Jersey with her son, Nicholas, and her daughter, Anne. Her husband has not come back from the war. She tells her newly arrived servants that her children are photosensitive and must be protected from daylight at all costs. As the film progresses, it appears that there are supernatural forces at play in the house. Doors slam, voices mumble, footsteps resound, and Anne seems to have befriended a young ghost named Victor. One day, Grace sets off for the village to find a priest to help her deal with these strange occurrences. Instead, she runs into her husband who, apparently shell-shocked, stumbles home from the war. He wants to know whether what he has heard is “true”; the film contains multiple references to a horrible event that no one can or will discuss. Her husband abruptly disappears, after which the narrative catapults us toward

the various truths of the story. Grace and her children are ghosts; shortly before the beginning of the film, she had suffocated them in a fit of hysteria and then shot herself. The family members collectively repressed the event and continued to live their lives (or rather, their deaths). The servants are also deceased—they had fallen victim to tuberculosis in the nineteenth century and returned to the house as spectral therapists to help Grace and her children cope with the discovery of their deaths. The entities whom Grace and her children had assumed were ghosts—the “others”—are actually a living family (with a young son named Victor) who had moved into the mansion, noticed a supernatural presence (Grace and her household), and thus ended up fleeing. At the end of the film, Grace and the children declare their ownership of the house and vow to stay there as ghosts despite the eventuality of other living intruders.

Grace disrupts the death-defying circularity of narratives of spectral incognizance; she is a dangerous mother who gives life only to take it away. She illustrates Bronfen’s description of the Freudian mother who “assumes the status of trope for death because she recalls the position anterior to life so immediately connected with her body” (32). Her function is also manifest in the woman from *The Sixth Sense* who killed her daughter and who was on her way to murdering her second child when Cole intervened. This subplot appears incidental to the main narrative until we consider its role as foil to Malcolm’s story: whereas he is intent on extending his life beyond its natural limits, the bad mother disrupts a young life to prevent its maturation. The fact that Cole unmasks this crime and saves the second child, which enables his peaceful cohabitation with the ghosts around him, further distances this mother from the life-extending impulse of the film. Cole deploys narrative circularity against her by replaying the videotape that shows her gradually poisoning her daughter.⁸ *The Others* brings this secondary narrative to the foreground to recount the story of a murderous mother who kills her children and herself before the plot has had a chance to begin. Grace’s premature/pre-diegetic infanticide recalls the gendered “crime” of abortion, which, like narratives of spectral incognizance, tests the line between life and death.⁹

Grace threatens not only human lives (potential or actualized), but the narrative structure itself. A film whose principal characters die before the opening credits—when its narrative is still *in utero*—is in danger of never beginning; it evokes Brooks’s description of a failed plot whose origin and conclusion collapse into each other, “life into immediate death” (104). The narrative opens with Grace’s scream as she awakens from a nightmare, a traumatic sound that is not explained until the final moments of the film but that echoes an event that has taken place before its opening: her act of murder/suicide. The beginning and conclusion of *The Others* collude to recount the same story of life ending. Grace’s threat to narratives is also apparent in her lack of desire, whereas Brooks situates desire as the force that moves plots forward: a “desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative” (Brooks 104). Grace’s frigidity, which the film emphasizes through her religious devotion, exaggerated decorum, and confining wardrobe, signals the narrative difficulties of a stagnant plot. The one sex scene in the film—which she shares with her dead

husband after telling him that she knows he left because she “wasn’t enough” for him—is abruptly curtailed, indicating its narrative impotence. The absence of female desire as a metonymy for dangerously low narrative energies is also emphasized in *Carnival of Souls*, which hints at the fact that Mary is dead through constant references to her frigidity. She repeatedly confesses to lacking desire altogether, resists the advances of men, and is told by her sleazy suitor that she needs to “thaw out” (an unfair request to make of a ghost). Likewise, the female driver in “The Hitch-Hiker” develops sexual hysteria as one of the symptoms of her death and refers to herself as a “cold shell.” The lack of female desire parallels the prematurity of death in these stories of spectral incognizance.

The link between femininity and narrative collapse is also at the heart of Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” Farquhar’s wife at once propels her husband’s escape fantasy and precipitates its rupture. While the motive of seeing his wife catalyzes the Confederate’s hallucination, it is the sight of her during his prolonged fantasy that hastens the disclosure of his hanging. Just before we discover his fate, we read the following description:

As he pushes open the gate and passes up the wide white walk, he sees a flutter of female garments; his wife, looking fresh and cool and sweet, steps down from the veranda to meet him. At the bottom of the steps she stands waiting, with a smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity. Ah, how beautiful she is! He springs forward with extended arms. As he is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon—then all is darkness and silence! Peyton Farquhar was dead. . . . (Bierce 49)

The woman’s body breaches the gap between Farquhar’s fantasy and the reality of his predicament, as it is in trying to reach this angelic figure (with her “flutter of female garments”) who guards the heavenly gates of his house, that he jerks into unconsciousness. Despite its ethereal imagery, the excerpt depicts the passage into death not as a smooth transition but as an abortive “shock.” The goal of his journey, Farquhar’s wife represents the end to narratives (their resolution), the impossibility of sexual fulfillment, as well as the reality of biological death. This *unheimlich* figure is identified with a troubling closure from early on: She “was only too happy to serve . . . with her own white hands” (43) the Union soldier who tricks Farquhar and is responsible for his hanging.¹⁰ Even though she may not know who this soldier is, there is something deadly, with her pallid hands, about the female figure.

The story further positions femininity as a collapse of origins and endings through its use of birth imagery to describe Farquhar’s death. He fantasizes about his emersion from the water in the following terms: He “felt his head emerge; his eyes were blinded by the sunlight; his chest expanded convulsively, and with a supreme and crowing agony his lungs engulfed a great draught of air, which instantly he expelled in a shriek!” (45). As Peter Stoicheff writes of this passage, “This subtext of birth suppressing the literal fact of death is perhaps the clearest example of the story’s persistent distortion and conflation of time, compressing the poles of human

temporal experience into a paradoxically simultaneous ‘occurrence’” (356). There is no beginning or end, but a fusion of the two. The birth imagery perpetuates the association of the mother with death, corresponding to Freud’s account of the uncanny nature of the female genitals as the “entrance to the former *heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning” (“Uncanny” 398–99). Fittingly, the first cinematic adaptation of Bierce’s story, Charles Vidor’s 1929 *The Spy* (a.k.a. *The Bridge*), heralds Farquhar’s death by showing his recurring hallucination of a mother interacting with her young son.

Amenábar’s film revises Bierce’s story so that its protagonist, Grace (perhaps an allusion to the story’s description of Mrs. Farquhar’s “matchless grace” [49]), reconfigures its fantasy of prolonged life. She takes over the male story of expanded existence and transforms it into a female plot of aborted narratives. This process is particularly apparent in a scene that self-consciously references the following passage from Bierce’s text, which appears shortly before Farquhar imagines encountering his wife:

By nightfall he was fatigued, footsore, famishing. The thought of his wife and children urged him on. At last he found a road which led him in what he knew to be the right direction. It was as wide and straight as a city street, yet it seemed untraveled. No fields bordered it, no dwelling anywhere. Not so much as the barking of a dog suggested human habitation. The black bodies of the trees formed a straight wall on both sides, terminating on the horizon in a point, like a diagram in a lesson in perspective. (48)

For second-time readers, the passage is replete with clues of death: the desolation and eeriness of the place, the tunnel-like space typical of representations of dying, the absence of “human habitation.” What is more, the persistent alliteration, beginning with the description of Farquhar as “fatigued, footsore, famishing,” calls to mind the close relationship between death and aesthetic form established at the beginning of the story. Robert Enrico faithfully adapts this scene in *La Rivière du Hibou*, which shows Farquhar stumbling through an uncannily symmetrical landscape in search of his wife. In Amenábar’s recreation of this scene, Grace assumes Farquhar’s position as she wanders between dense rows of trees, at the end of which she encounters her (unbeknownst to her) dead husband. While we see the soldier from Grace’s perspective, an abrupt shock cut to her back suddenly alienates us from her. This uncanny vision evokes Farquhar’s equally shocking view of his wife, which leads the reader to share in the trauma of his death. Our distance from Grace is only temporary, however, and the camera slowly pans until it aligns itself with her perspective: her husband is now the object of her gaze. This scene dramatizes the seizure of a male story by a female character who will curtail its prolongation.

Grace not only takes over the male plot, but the film itself. At the end of *The Others*, in contrast to such incognizant ghosts as Malcolm, Farquhar, and Jacob Singer, she does not pass on to another world once she discovers that she has died, but asserts her resilience in that of the living. She tells her children—who are equally shocked by the discovery—to join her in repeating the mantra, “This house is ours,

this house is ours, this house is ours.” Given the parallels between her mansion and the cinematic narrative, she may as well be repeating, “This film is ours, this film is ours, this film is ours.” The perpetual darkness of the house recalls the obscure world of a movie theater, while its inhabitants are the images that populate that world. As Pamela Thurschwell puts it, the photosensitive children “are more two-dimensional than three, already the disembodied spirits that photography promises to capture” (29; see also Bruce 28). The link between the mansion and the cinema is further cemented by the confinement of the film’s action to the house and its grounds, the boundaries of which are marked by heavy fog. The parameters of the mansion are isomorphically related to the walls of a movie theater, beyond which the fiction and its characters do not exist. By announcing her authority over her house, Grace thus proclaims her dominance over the narrative as well. When we return to the beginning, we cannot escape her perspective. The film opens with a voiceover from Grace, who says, “Now, children, are you sitting comfortably? Then I’ll begin,” a line that references the 1950s BBC children’s program *Listen with Mother*. The allusion is ironic, of course, since Grace does not represent the image of the good mother advocated by the program—after all, she has murdered her children. But her omniscient voice grants her the narrative agency missing from other deadly mothers; it suggests that the entire film is told from her perspective, even though her voiceover ceases after the first few moments and we seem to be watching a film about her incognizance. Her voice is accompanied by storybook illustrations that anticipate various scenes from the film, thereby indicating her knowledge of the narrative before it unravels. We have the sense that this story has already been told, even if we are watching it for the first time. Unlike Malcolm, who is doomed to remain ignorant every time we watch the film, Grace as narrator seems to have full knowledge of her fate as she leads us through the various repetitions of her story. In *The Others*, Grace is the tale she tells.

Her takeover of the narrative has serious implications for the viewers; it prevents us from using the narrative structure to distance ourselves from the protagonist’s death. In this case, to repeat the narrative is not to escape the fates of the characters but to identify with them further. The fact that the film is framed as a children’s story (“Now, children, are you sitting comfortably?”) forces us to identify with Anna and Nicholas as victims of infanticide; the spectator and the dead child are caught in a circular pattern that repeatedly confirms their demise. This infantile position reconfigures narrative repetition from an active and independent stance to one that affirms our passivity. With *The Others*, repetition becomes a childish activity, reminiscent of the “again, again” that a child requests after hearing a favorite story. Freud writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, “If a child has been told a nice story, he will insist on hearing it over and over again rather than a new one; and he will remorselessly stipulate that the repetition shall be an identical one” (42). While Freud posits that these repetitions satisfy the child’s “pleasure principle,” as “the re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly in itself a source of pleasure” (42), this does not hold in our spectatorship of *The Others*. Our repeated viewings of the film emulate the children’s compulsive repetitions (and denials) of the traumatic events that led to their deaths. Anna especially expresses her repressed knowledge of

the event, repeatedly referring to a past in which “Mummy went mad” and hurt both children, warning that Grace “won’t stop until she kills us!” and somatizing the trauma of her suffocation by hyperventilating, to which her mother meaningfully responds, “Stop breathing!” To watch the film again is not to gain mastery of this trauma, as in *The Sixth Sense*, but to confirm our shared victimization with the children.

Another reason for our lack of protection rests in the film’s conflation of the categories of living and dead. The family whom we initially took to be alive is actually deceased, while the mysterious “others” inhabiting the house are a fully operational, flesh and blood family. If death in *The Sixth Sense* looks a lot like life, life in *The Others* bears an uncanny resemblance to death. According to Susan Bruce, “The film haunts by its persuasive insistence that its audience reconsider the relation between selves and ‘others.’” (24). In contrast, Shyamalan’s film initially hints at a collapse between the death/life opposition, only to reinstate the binary in the end. Counseled by Cole, the dead accept their fates and return to their proper place; Malcolm tells his sleeping wife in the final moments of the film, “I think I can go now. I just needed to do a couple of things.” Presumably, he will leave her to the house and life that he realizes are no longer his. Grace, on the other hand, refuses to go by claiming full control of her architectural and narrative real estate. The “For Sale” sign placed by the living family who flees her haunted house counterintuitively signals that her ownership is not endangered by the various visitors who may temporarily inhabit her space. The “others” who invade her house take on the position of ghosts, given the marginal and intangible role they occupy in the dead family’s lives. Similarly, our repeated return to the site of another person’s trauma transforms us into specters who haunt the same locations without being noticed or drawn into everyday events. This implies that aesthetic detachment does not involve detachment at all, but a desperate and ultimately failed attempt to use narratives as life-support systems. While we may convince ourselves that we are the living few in a cinematic world occupied by the dead, this is an illusive realization. Our dual identification with Grace’s children as well as with the “living” members of Grace’s home means that every time we watch the film, we must leave our breaths at the door to become ghosts ourselves.

By disrupting our access to the visual pleasure of reassurance, *The Others* tests the viability of the subgenre of spectral incognizance. The film is frustrating both for its potential predictability—if we have seen enough films of this sort, we might guess that Grace and her family are dead—and for its refusal to allow us to feel empowered by this predictability. No matter how much we anticipate the final events, Grace remains in control of the narrative and we are no more substantial than ghosts drifting through her space. Within this context, I find it interesting that the film was released in the midst of a shift in home-viewing technology, marked by the DVD’s surpassing of the videocassette. The DVD offers the perfect medium for watching narratives of spectral incognizance: it allows viewers to return to specific scenes to search for clues of death, to listen to commentary that might illuminate the film’s “tricks,” and to assert repeated control over the narrative. As *New York Times* film critic Elvis Mitchell described the impact of DVDs in a 2003 article, “The esoterica of film culture, formerly consumed by a moneyed geek elite, is now aimed directly

at—and snapped up by—the broader public.” Even the familiar roundness of the disk evokes the reassuring circularity of a genre that asks us to turn back to identify what we had previously overlooked.¹¹ This (no longer) new medium heralds the inception of more films of spectral incognizance, even if their profusion has turned them into clichés. The repetition of DVD technology steadily transforms us into second-time viewers and continues to reassure us of our ability to reverse narratives, including the all-too linear one that leads from our births to our deaths. Even though the film did ultimately appear in a two-DVD “special edition” replete with all sorts of information, *The Others* refuses us the life-extending effects of visual technologies. Its frustrating structure and fiercely resistant specter deride our compulsion to repeat the search for cinematic expertise and remind us that this search may be motivated by the death drive after all.

ENDNOTES

1. Ruffles is one of very few critics to identify this subgenre, which he terms “continuation without awareness of death” (103). Focusing on more recent manifestations of the genre, Badley terms it the “millennial/new age virtual afterlife thriller.”
2. As Ruffles puts it, the message of these films is “that the Afterlife is a state of mind, either good or bad, as thinking makes it so” (191).
3. Fowkes makes the incisive argument that whereas in most horror films therapists exist to invalidate supernatural theories, “the movie actually uses the psychological motif to *support* the supernatural explanation” (“Melodramatic Specters” 196; original emphasis).
4. See also Richter 16.
5. Here, Fuss expands Freud’s argument in “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915) that “it is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators” (cited in Fuss 38).
6. Fowkes also draws a connection between Brooks and Shyamalan’s film (*Giving up the Ghost* 20).
7. In the special features of the DVD version of the film, the director and his crew explain that they crafted the film so that it would hold up to multiple viewings.
8. Something should be said about Cole’s mother, who holds an at once central and peculiarly marginal role in the story. As one reviewer for the *Washington Post* explains, “She seems strangely synthetic, unaffiliated with a class or a profession, unrooted in society, like some kind of robot. Her job is never seen, her life is left blank” (Hunter). While the film focuses on her growing understanding of her son as she comes to trust in his visions, it invests its primary focus in Cole’s relationship with his substitute father, Malcolm. Indeed, until the psychiatrist emerges on the scene, there is a suggestion that the mother poses a threat to Cole in her inability to diagnose his problem.
9. As Bronfen and Goodwin write, “That boundary’s very indeterminacy has led to one of the most heated political debates of recent times: the argument over the ethics of abortion. Similarly, medical technology has made it more difficult, rather than easier, to determine when a human life ends” (6). If *The Others* alludes to abortion, the romantic comedy *Just Like Heaven* takes up euthanasia debates. It seems significant that the film was released shortly after the Terry Schiavo controversy of 2004–05, over whether a woman who had spent fifteen years in a persistent vegetative state should be removed from her life-support system. The subsequent debates centered on the definition of life and death, which was mostly played out in the media as a conflict between medical ethics and religious morality. *Just Like Heaven* situates itself on the “pro-life” side of this debate by depicting the danger in

which its comatose (but completely alert when she appears as a ghost) heroine finds herself when the doctors locate a statement she had signed beforehand authorizing them to euthanize her if the need should arise. The last part of the film depicts a frantic race against the clock in which the heroine's new love interest tries to save her from the doctors' overly eager impulse to disconnect her life-support system. In the end, the heroine is saved and returns to what the film presents as a better existence than before: she gains the romantic relationship and emotional life from which her demanding career had kept her.

10. The reference to the woman's "white hands" points to another unsettling identity marker in Bierce's story: race, which is only mentioned tangentially, even though this is first and foremost a story about the Civil War. The oblique reference to race in this passage, and in others, such as trees described as "black bodies" (48), suggests that gender is not the sole destabilizing force of this narrative. In addition, much can be said about the importance of class in *The Others*, as the servants take on the responsibility of reminding their masters of their deaths. I have chosen to focus on gender in this essay as it consistently emerges as the prime disruptor of spectral incognizance.
11. I am grateful to Mark Phillipson for drawing my attention to the meaningful geometry of the DVD. The repetition it encourages goes against Barthes's claim in *S/Z* that rereading is "an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society," one that is usually only performed by "children, old people, and professors" (15, 16).

WORKS CITED

- Amenábar, Alejandro**, director and screenwriter. *The Others*. Cruise/Wagner Productions, 2001.
- Badley, Linda**. "Cine-Limbo: The Millennial/New Age Virtual Afterlife Thriller." *Studies in Popular Culture* 28.1 (2005): 1–14.
- Barthes, Roland**. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.
- Bierce, Ambrose**. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1891). In *From Fiction to Film: Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,"* edited by Gerald R. Barrett and Thomas L. Erskine, 40–49. Encino: Dickenson Publishing, 1973.
- Bordwell, David**. "Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures." In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, edited by Philip Rosen, 17–34. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth**. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- and Sarah Webster Goodwin. "Introduction." In *Death and Representation*, edited by Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen, 3–25. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993.
- Brooks, Peter**. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984.
- Bruce, Susan**. "Sympathy for the Dead: (G)hosts, Hostilities and Mediums in Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* and Postmortem Photography." *Discourse* 27.2 and 27.3 (Spring and Fall 2005): 21–40.
- Coscarelli, Don**, director and screenwriter. *Phantasm*. New Breed Productions, 1979.
- Crane, John Kenny**. "Crossing the Bar Twice: Post Mortem Consciousness in Bierce, Hemingway, and Golding." In *From Fiction to Film: Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,"* edited by Gerald R. Barrett and Thomas L. Erskine, 76–80. Encino: Dickenson Publishing, 1973.
- Dickstein, Morris**. "The Aesthetics of Fright." *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, 50–62. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004.

- Enrico, Robert**, director and screenwriter. *La Rivière du Hibou*. Filmartinc, 1962.
- Forster, Mark**, director. *Stay*. Screenplay by David Benioff. New Regency Pictures, 2005.
- Fowkes, Katherine A.** *Giving Up the Ghost: Spirits, Ghosts, and Angels in Mainstream Comedy Films*. Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1998.
- . “Melodramatic Specters: Cinema and *The Sixth Sense*.” In *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 185–206. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2004.
- Freud, Sigmund**. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. 1920. Translated by James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961.
- . *The Interpretation of Dreams*. 1900. New York: Avon Books, 1965.
- . “The Uncanny.” 1919. In *Collected Papers*, Vol. 4, translated by Joan Riviere, 368–407. New York: Basic Books, 1959.
- Fuss, Diana**. “The Phantom Spectator.” *Assemblage* 20 (April 1993): 38–39.
- Ganzer, Alvin**, director. “The Hitch-Hiker.” *The Twilight Zone*. Teleplay by Lucille Fletcher and Rod Serling. CBS, January 22, 1960.
- Harvey, Herk**, director. *Carnival of Souls*. Screenplay by John Clifford. Harcourt Productions, 1962.
- Hunter, Stephen**. “‘The Sixth Sense’: Shocker Therapy.” *Washington Post* (August 6, 1999): C01.
- Lyne, Adrian**, director. *Jacob’s Ladder*. Screenplay by Bruce Joel Rubin. Carolco Pictures, 1990.
- Mitchell, Elvis**. “Everyone’s a Film Geek Now.” *New York Times* (August 17, 2003): 1.
- Richter, David H.** “Your Cheatin’ Art: Double Dealing in Cinematic Narrative.” *Narrative* 13.1 (2005): 11–28.
- Ruffles, Tom**. *Ghost Images: Cinema of the Afterlife*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2004.
- Shyamalan, M. Night**, director and screenwriter. *The Sixth Sense*. Barry Mendel Productions, 1999.
- Stoicheff, Peter**. “‘Something Uncanny’: The Dream Structure in Ambrose Bierce’s ‘An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.’” *Studies in Short Fiction* 30.3 (1993): 349–58.
- Telotte, J.P.** “Faith and Idolatry in the Horror Film.” In *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, 20–35. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004.
- Thurschwell, Pamela**. “Refusing to Give up the Ghost: Some Thoughts on the Afterlife from Spirit Photography to Phantom Films.” In *The Disembodied Spirit*, curated by Alison Ferris, 20–30. Brunswick: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2003.
- Vidor, Charles**, director and screenwriter. *The Spy*. 1929.
- Wan, James**, director. *Saw*. Screenplay by James Wan and Leigh Whannell. Evolution Entertainment, 2004.
- Waters, Mark**, director. *Just Like Heaven*. Screenplay by Peter Tolan and Leslie Dixon. Dreamworks SKG, 2005.
- Winant, Scott**, director. “Pilot.” *Dead Like Me*. Teleplay by Bryan Fuller. Showtime, June 27, 2003.