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THE COLLEGE OF
WOOSTER

THE GHOSTS OF GRIEF:
AN EXPLORATION OF GOTHIC INFLUENCE IN 2010S HORROR CINEMA

by
Halen Gifford

An Independent Study Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Course Requirements for
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Advisor: Dr. Ahmet Atay

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to examine gothic influences in contemporary horror cinema of the 2010s. To fulfill this purpose, the study employs comparative film analysis methods to analyze *The Babadook* (2014), *The Invitation* (2015), and *Crimson Peak* (2015) in order to identify intertextual gothic references in the cinematography, mise en scène, and narratives of the films. Specifically, this project examines the haunted house trope in the horror genre as characterized by the presence of ghosts and the personification of the setting. Through this analysis, four common themes emerged: “Houses with Personality,” “Tragic Losses,” “Memories and Ghosts,” and “Isolation.” The results of this research conclude that these films articulate the importance of confronting grief and emotional vulnerability, which are consistent with societal trends and conversations surrounding destigmatizing mental illness in 2010s popular culture.

Keywords: gothic, horror, film, grief, isolation, haunted house

Digital Component: <http://scalar.woosterdigital.org/ghostsofgrief/index>

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Horror is my favorite genre of film. As a kid, I found scary movies both terrifying and intriguing, I've always loved film, but I was particularly drawn to dark and spooky stories that kept me up with nightmares. Despite being scared of horror movies, I couldn't stay away. I remember the first time I saw Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). The film scared me so badly that for a year I couldn't go into the bathroom unless I had made sure there wasn't a zombie woman in the shower. It also became my favorite movie. What was it I loved so much about a film that left me that frightened? *The Shining* was unlike anything I'd seen before and I wanted to know everything about it. Kubrick opened my mind to the deeper meaning of films; *The Shining* was the first movie I watched with a critical eye. I learned that everything you see on screen, from the elevator of blood to hotel room 237, is intentional. Film is an art form, and it tells a story beyond what happens in the surface plot. I love the horror genre because it provides a space to safely experience your real-life fears. It is the genre of the taboo, almost nothing is off limits. The horror genre is not afraid to confront the dark realities of humanity.

Horror films aim to critique culture by highlighting our fears and anxieties. Additionally, I believe a great horror film does this while also being visually stunning. The macabre beauty that the horror genre possesses is due to its gothic origins. For me, the two aspects of horror cinema that make it my favorite genre are the gothic aesthetics and political messages. This is why, for my senior undergraduate thesis, I will be exploring the recent decade of the horror genre: the 2010s. In this study, I will conduct a comparative film analysis of three 2010s horror films: *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak*, in order to identify the filmmakers' use of gothic influence, iconography, and intertextual reference. I aim to examine the aesthetic, tone, and style of each film. I will use my findings to draw conclusions about the cultural themes that

emerged during the era. This chapter is the introduction to my research and in it, I will outline the purpose and rationale for my study. Furthermore, I will define the necessary terminology for understanding my research and provide a description of my methods.

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to examine the gothic influence on contemporary horror cinema of the 2010s. To fulfill this purpose, I will analyze *The Babadook* (2014), *The Invitation* (2015), and *Crimson Peak* (2015), in order to identify gothic inspiration in the cinematography, mise en scène, and narratives of the films. Specifically, I will look at the theme of isolation and its importance to the gothic horror genre, as well as the relationship between the characters and their settings in the chosen films. In the next section, I will detail my rationales and justification for this research.

Rationales

I justify the significance of analyzing these films in three ways. The first is that this work will be some of the first research to examine 2010s horror cinema since the end of the decade. As we enter a new chapter of film history, it is important to begin scholarly research that reflects on the messages of the recent past. The 2010s are now behind us and can be studied as an era of filmmaking. A great deal of horror film scholarship does not touch on post-2000s film making (Carroll; Clover; Fry; Glasby; Sobchack) and those that do, do not look at the 2010s as a finished decade of cinema (Kerner; Ng; Ryan; Sipos). Doing this research at the beginning of the 2020s gives me a unique opportunity to create new work that looks back on the most recent segment of film history. This research is relevant because I aim to not only connect 2010s gothic horror films with the larger history of the genre but also draw conclusions about social fears from the decade based on themes and commentary identified in the selected movies.

My second justification is that the films I have selected are culturally relevant and should be studied. *The Babadook* (2014), *Crimson Peak* (2015), and *The Invitation* (2015) all received critical praise for their stunning cinematography and unique narratives (Foundas; O'Malley). The review-aggregation website, Rotten Tomatoes, lists all three films on their ranking of "100 Best 2010s Horror Movies" (rottentomatoes.com) and while *Crimson Peak* has been studied for its gothic style (Smith; Weeber), *The Babadook* and *The Invitation* have not. In my analysis, I highlight the ways these films fit into the gothic genre just as well as *Crimson Peak*. My research will add to the existing literature on these films, rationalize their significance in horror film history, and examine their gothic influence and style.

Finally, this study has a social significance, for the theme of isolation is currently painfully relevant. This project will look at how isolation is depicted as an unnatural and scary opposition to the human condition in *The Babadook*, *Crimson Peak*, and *The Invitation* and will look at isolation as a recurring theme in the gothic horror genre. Isolation is currently an especially salient topic, for the COVID-19 global pandemic has resulted in the "implementation of unprecedented 'social distancing' strategies" (Hwang et al.). As a crucial step to ending the pandemic, people have had to remain isolated from one another to an extent most have never experienced. Isolation is currently a popular topic of discussion both casually and academically. Furthermore, the feeling of isolation has been feared for centuries and therefore has been present throughout horror cinema history. My work will add to its cultural dialogues about isolation both past and present.

Definitions

Prior to my literature review and analysis, there are a few key terms that need to be defined. The first is “gothic.” Gothic is a term that has been applied to many cultural products such as art, architecture, music, fashion, and literature (Hubner 43). For the purpose of this study, the term gothic will be used to describe the subgenre of horror films that have been directly influenced by early gothic romanticism in 18th and 19th-century fiction novels. The second term that needs defining is intertextuality. Intertextuality describes the dialogue films and consumers have with previous pieces of media. Films exist among a history of other films that utilize the same tropes, narratives, and themes. Particularly within a genre, movies comment on and are shaped by those that came before them. This occurs because filmmakers are also audience members who interpret and represent the content they consume and produce (Friedman et al. 8-10). I will be using intertextuality to demonstrate how *The Babadook* (2014), *Crimson Peak* (2015), and *The Invitation* are adapted from previous iterations of the gothic horror genre. The last term is iconography, which describes recurring images and symbols within a genre that hold certain meanings or importance. The repetition of visual tropes in a genre is described as iconography (Bordwell et al. 332). I will use iconographic examples to connect my selected films to the gothic horror genre. In the next section, I will describe my methodology for analyzing the films *The Babadook*, *Crimson Peak*, and *The Invitation*.

Description of Methods

This study employs a comparative approach to film analysis methodology. Through my project I will be analyzing, comparing, and reflecting on *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak*. To create an understanding of how the gothic genre influenced 2010s horror cinema, I will analyze “Haunted House” iconography in these three films. Next, I will identify

intertextuality by examining the inspirations and references the filmmakers use. Finally, I will conclude my analysis by highlighting the themes, narratives, and cultural critiques that these films share. My research method is conducted by repeatedly watching my selected films and placing them in a dialogue with each other. My analysis of *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* is influenced by the similarities of the films and others in the genre.

Conclusion

This chapter provided background on my passion for Horror films and my motives for conducting this research. Here, I gave the purpose of my project and justified its practical, cultural, and scholarly relevance with a set of rationales. I suggest that now is an appropriate time to look back on the 2010s horror decade by examining three films that received positive, critical and audience receptions. Moreover, *The Babadook*, *Crimson Peak*, and *The Invitation* utilize classic gothic themes such as isolation. Isolation is a timeless source of fear and especially relevant during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Additionally, in this chapter, I defined the terms gothic, intertextuality, and iconography in order to prepare my audience for my analysis. In total, my thesis will be comprised of five chapters; this being the first. Next, in chapter two, I offer contextual background on the horror genre through a literary review of scholarly film studies research. In chapter three I will provide a detailed explanation of my methodology. Chapter four is the bulk of my work; in that chapter I will explore the results of my comparative film analysis. Finally, my last chapter, chapter five, will conclude my research and detail my major findings.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Horror is a visceral reaction. Much like crying or laughter, fear is often uncontrollable. Noël Carroll describes horror as the presence of impurity and the evocation of disgust (30). She defines the horror genre based on the response of audiences, claiming they react to horror by physically shuddering (Carroll 17-23). Peter Hutchings distinguished horror by stating that it is concerned with “the fear of death and the loss of identity in modern society” (2). Carroll’s definition suggests a physical response to horror while Hutchings suggests an emotional one. Regardless, both are reactionary. Horror cinema has the power to evoke overwhelming effects on audiences and for this reason, it is far easier to define the genre not by style but by how it makes the audience feel. However, while it seems that audiences would want to avoid feeling fear and disgust, horror films have been popular since the early twentieth century (Spratford et al. 5). Horror films act as a form of catharsis for many and a vessel for shock to others. Thomas Sipos wrote that horror “presupposes a threat, building tension with its promise that something hideous will occur, and there is no escape” (5). Suspenseful, shocking films built entirely to arouse fear and curiosity, keep viewers on the edge of their seats.

This chapter will explore the horror film genre while explaining the way audiences can ascribe meaning to films after their release. The chapter will also look at the history of gothic horror in film, the origins of the elements that define today’s horror genre, the evolution as well as popularization of horror cinema, and the characteristics of contemporary gothic horror films.

Understanding Film Genre

Genre is the most common form of categorization for films. The foundations of “genre” as a concept date back to Aristotle, long before the creation of the film (Friedman et al. 2). Films fall into one or more genres to classify their content and communicate their form to audiences,

but genres are more than a classification system. Film genres define the works they represent and tie movies into an intertextual dialog with one another (Bordwell et. al 327). Genre is formed through the interaction of three key sources: the creators (the filmmakers), texts (the content of a film), and readers (audiences). These factors are interdependent and contextualized by cultural and personal understanding. As more films are created within a genre, specific elements and styles become further ingrained in the cultural understanding of the said genre. This process defines a genre and is ever-evolving (Bordwell et. al 331; Friedman et al. 5-7). In my analysis, I will use cultural studies alongside genre theory to influence my reading of the texts. Coupling these perspectives places mediums, such as film, into grand cultural dialogues that reach beyond the silver screen. Cultural studies and genre theory will help create my interpretation of 2010s horror cinema, specifically *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak*, by contextualizing the films' themes with popular conversations from the decade and from the horror genre.

Cultural Studies

Cinema is more than just entertainment. It is a powerful mass media messaging tool that reflects and enforces culture. Sociologist and Marxist, Stuart Hall is well known for his theorization of Cultural Studies and his model of Encoding/Decoding. Hall expanded on the philosophies of Karl Marx to include popular (pop) culture mediums like film as a form of cultural production and to explain the relationship between producers and consumers of media (Procter 18-19). According to Marxist theory, cultural productions “reflect or express the values of the economic base and, therefore, the dominant culture of society” (Procter 17). However, this argument does not account for the creation of popular media that actively critiques economic conditions and the dominant culture of society (Procter 17). If a traditional Marxist reading of culture and ideology was accurate, all forms of media, including film, would be free of cultural

criticism and would be propaganda reinforcing a capitalist agenda. Hall's expansion of Marxist theory accounts for the confound of pop culture. He argues that the base of the dominant culture is not purely economic but rather consists of "constituent factors" that are cultural, social, and political (Hall 32-34; Procter 18-19). This creates a more nuanced definition of the dominant class that accounts for criticism while still acknowledging a hegemonic structure.

Hall's Representation Theory argues that the representations of culture in media are crafted through the lens of the creator, interpreted by the consumer, and influenced by societal factors (Hall, *Representation*). Hall uses this theory to explain how the meaning of a message is formed. An audience's understanding of a film is determined by the filmmaker's construction of images and texts based on their own positionality as well as the consumers' interpretation of a message and is contextualized by the society in which it was made. Hall's theory is relevant to my thesis in two ways; firstly, for its impact on the understanding of social criticism through film and secondly, for its similarity to genre theory and its ability to identify cultural patterns in mass media.

While the film industry exists as an avenue for creating entertainment and profit, films are still messaging tools. Films are stories that are constructed under cultural circumstances by creators with their own ideas and identities. The representation of something scary, like in a horror film, is based on what the filmmaker interprets and chooses to present as scary. Naturally, this understanding of story creation allows filmmakers to present their values in their work and to depict narratives that comment on or mirror society. However, Hall's theory gives the consumer power to apply meaning as well. Meaning is fluid and dependent on culture, for example queer coding in the horror genre. The film industry is dominated by straight, white, cisgender, male directors and producers, and has a history of representing villainous characters

as queer (Data USA; Benschhoff). Dracula, a classic horror character, has been coded as queer throughout film history by being represented as a dangerous “other” with taboo sexual desires (Gelder 146; Opie). The idea of queerness as a negative characteristic though, is entirely based on how the message is interpreted. For some audience members queer identity can be something to fear and for others it can be something to celebrate. The consideration of audience reaction, creator intent, and cultural context all factor into how texts are analyzed for meaning. These intersections between the audience, creators, and culture are also significant in genre theory, and help to situate films in generic conversations. For this reason, I have chosen to incorporate both perspectives into my analysis.

Genre Theory

Genre Study, as an approach to analyzing and understanding film, is a theory that looks at particular conventions and recurring elements present in a movie. Specifically, when analyzing a film using Genre Study, we look at the conventions filmmakers are working with. Conventions shape an audience’s “expectations about what [they]’re likely to see and hear” (Bordwell et. al 331). Story and style conventions usually center on narrative plots and themes. These plots and their elements become staples that are adapted and retold within the genre. Additionally, genres can be defined through iconography. Rather than focus on the story, iconography is the recurrence of visual symbols and images in a genre (Bordwell et. al 331-333). Scholars commonly look at genres using three main approaches: Genre as Cultural Myth, Genre as Cultural Memories, and Genre as Rituals (Friedman et al. 8-16). Genre as Cultural Myth and Genre as Cultural Memories use cultural context as the basis for their approach. As the names imply, Cultural Myth is concerned with the social narrative that has been constructed in a film to depict a fictional reality of the past while Cultural Memories transform historical moments,

stories, and events into staple plots of the given genre. Friedman and his colleagues differentiate the approaches by stating “though the two are intimately entwined, films that function as memories usually style themselves as realistic though often wrapped in fictional disguises, while myths partake of broader archetypes and narratives less overtly tied to everyday events” (14). Genres as Rituals is an approach concerned with the repetition of narratives and iconography. As stories are told over and over again, they begin to shape the genre. Intertextuality plays a major role in this form of analysis as films comment on one another by repeating elements from their predecessors (Friedman et al. 16-17). These three approaches are not mutually exclusive and can be applied to any genre. For the purpose of my research, I will be using Genre Study to look at the conventions of story, style and genre iconography in the gothic-horror film subgenre. I will apply the three approaches of Genre: Cultural Myth, Genre as Cultural Memories, and Genre as Rituals, in order to analyze the gothic-horror films: *The Babadook* (2014), *Crimson Peak* (2015), and *The Invitation* (2015).

Representation Theory and Genre Study

Hall’s Representation Theory is similar to Genre Study in that it describes a relationship between consumers and creators in addition to explaining how patterns are formed in mass media. Hall’s theory discusses the notion that if the majority of texts are created by one demographic, from the same ideological standpoint, those ideas will be the most prominent in the media and will therefore shape the masses’ perception of culture (Hall, *Representation*). Hall uses this phenomenon as a basis for his argument on the importance of diverse representation. I argue that Representation Theory can be used alongside Genre Study to understand the prominences of specific tropes, narratives, iconographies, and characters in film genres. Filmmakers are also film watchers. Directors, screenwriters, producers, and other artists in the

film industry all apply meaning to the films they have seen. Their understanding of these movies is then carried over into their own creations. Filmmakers predominantly engage in intertextual dialogues with past and present films of their genre. Hall's definition of meaning is not static. The relationship between the culture, the consumer, and the creator is constantly redefining what is important to a genre as all parties continually develop new interpretations. While the staples and symbols of the genre may stay the same, what they represent is ever-changing.

History of the Horror Film Genre

Every culture has tales of terror and the unknown, which are as old as storytelling itself. In the late eighteenth century, the horror genre was established through the popularization of gothic novels eventually leading to the cinematic horror genre we know today (Friedman et al. 369). *Castle of Otranto* (1765) by Horace Walpole is considered the first gothic novel (Spratford et al. 2). The popularity of the novel's style took off, thus sparking the recurrence of narratives that David Punter characterizes as having an "emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense" (1). It could be argued that Punter's statement describes horror films as well. Gothic novels were a part of popular culture in the same way that horror movies are today. Horror films took the themes and characters from gothic novels and adapted them into what we now understand as the horror film genre.

Gothic Cinema

Horror films as we know them today emerged in the early 1920s. Director Lon Chaney made silent horror films such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *Phantom of the Opera* (1925), both based on classic gothic fiction (Spratford et al. 5). While many horror films

are not direct adaptations of gothic literature, the themes, styles, plots, and characters in those novels have built and defined the horror genre as a whole. Characters that audiences already loved and feared, such as Dracula, Frankenstein, and Quasimodo, were brought to the silver screen in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Quickly, horror became the genre of adaptation, but more than just the plotlines of gothic novels carried over into film. With the adaptation of plots, came the adaptation of tropes, themes, and iconography (Friedman et al.). Richard Hand and Jay McRoy write that the term gothic is used to describe a “stylized approach to depicting location, desire, and action” (1). The gothic style invokes macabre images and melancholic aesthetics. The genre uses dark colors to create a sense of unease and the decaying scenery conveys dread (Hand and McRoy 2; Neibaur 14). Hubner describes gothic thinking as shedding light on “the wild sensations that drive us and the pull between rational and irrational forces, asking us to reconsider the securities of home, our sense of self and our beliefs” (2).

The most defining aspect of the gothic genre, both in film and literature, is the uncanny. The uncanny is a sense of anxiety and disturbance via the unusual and different. Ernst Jentsch, German psychiatrist, wrote in his 1906 essay “On the Psychology of the Uncanny” that the uncanny makes viewers feel “not quite ‘at home’ or ‘at ease’” (217). Interestingly, being at home is part of the iconography of the genre. Setting is especially important to the gothic genre because it helps establish the mood of the film. Many stories take place in remote, dark, and decaying domestic settings, where things have gone awry. The normality of common life and safety is at risk and it triggers a fearful emotional response in the audience (Sobchack 173). Hubner also describes the genre by saying “[t]he ‘homely’ becomes terrifying, as a familiar domain for the repressed, hidden and dangerous, stimulating the haunting return of something that should have remained private” (6).

Yang and Healey write about the importance of landscape in the gothic horror genre. Through the use of the landscape, an ambiance of uncertainty, delusion, isolation, and instability elicits a frightened response to domestic settings from audiences (Yang and Healey 5). In gothic narratives, the landscape is personified, viewed not just as a setting but as a character to fear and overcome. Yang and Healey argue that the gothic landscape is used as a vehicle for social commentary. They write,

Disordered landscapes in the Gothic represent the chaos of a culture in transition or the violence of passions seething beneath the veneer of civilized society. Gothic landscapes are a lens by which cultures reflect their darkness hidden from the light of consciousness...Gothic unearths the 'moral darkness' that the cultural elite seeks to hide, whether that darkness is of a political, historical, cultural, or social nature. (Yang and Healey 5)

Haunting landscapes and uncanny homes are important aspects of the gothic genre that are continuously repeated and recreated throughout horror film history. While these settings always have meaning, the meaning they convey changes over time as filmmakers, audiences, and cultural context evolve. This is the case for all motifs of the gothic horror film genre. Changing trends and opinions reevaluate the meaning of gothic iconography and thematic devices. New cultural critiques emerge each decade, but the iconic characteristics of the horror genre remain present throughout film history.

Limited by the technologies of silent films, early horror filmmakers created representations of iconic gothic elements visually. This put a great deal of emphasis on the physical appearance of the monsters and the settings they were in, as they needed to be over the top and eye-catching to be fully seen (Friedman et al.). More artistic liberties came with the

invention of full-length narrative cinema, and thus German expressionism took off in the 1920s. Expressionism developed as a gothic cinematic art form based on extreme shapes and intense colors, particularly black and other dark shades. The film style challenges what is normal and aims to be antirealist and uncanny, just like its gothic origins (Neibaur; Friedman et al.). Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) are two of the most famous expressionist horror films. These films feature uncanny humanoid figures that do not fit into the audience's understanding of real life. They exist somewhere outside of normalcy and therefore disrupt it, just like gothic narratives (Kerr; Neibaur). Expressionism adapted 19th-century gothic literature by visualizing the uncanny. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922) are examples of transnational horror films because they were wildly popular outside of Germany (Neibaur). Darren Kerr argues that gothic-horror films, like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922), have an inherent ability to become understood and enjoyed transnationally because of the relationship between the uncanny and the genre. He states that fear and recognition of the uncanny is a universal experience, therefore, gothic-horror films have great potential to become transnational texts (156). Today, contemporary Western horror cinema as well as contemporary Southeast Asian horror cinema is in constant intertextual dialogue with gothic expressionism (Ng). The transnational success and legacy of early German expressionist horror films launched the establishment of the horror genre that we know today.

The Evolution of Popular Gothic Horror Cinema

Horror films gained real mainstream and financial success in the 1930s as both the development and consumption of cinema became more widely accessible. In 1931 both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* were released by Universal Studios, which pioneered the production of popular horror cinema in the US and dominated the genre for a decade. Paramount, Metro-Goldwyn-

Mayer, RKO, and Warner Brothers also produced many successful horror films, but Universal claimed stock gothic characters such as Dracula, Frankenstein, the Mummy, and the Wolfman in their portfolio, all of which are still being adapted to this day (Everson; Friedman et al.). However, while Universal's characters are classics, by the 1940s, they had produced several sequels to and remakes of *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Mummy* (1932), and *Werewolf of London* (1935). Eventually these characters lost their appeal, and audiences became more interested in real-life horrors like the ones depicted in films by RKO Pictures. RKO offered a fresh and potentially scarier subgenre of horror that focused on fear rather than action and told stories about superstition (Everson). RKO producer, Val Lewton, had nine of the highest-ranking horror films of the 1940s including *Cat People* (1942), *The Seventh Victim* (1943), and *The Body Snatcher* (1945). Lewton's films emphasized "sources of horror and terror as might be found in the real world - satanic cults, voodoo, serial murderers, insanity, sadism, and pestilence- and stylistically foreground suggestion, atmosphere, and the ambiguities of perception" (Friedman et al. 375). His work established that sometimes what goes unseen is far scarier than what is shown. Lewton's productions reinforced the importance of the unknown in the genre and targeted fear from a psychological angle (Friedman et al.).

Although "golden age" horror films declined after World War II, the late 1940s and the 1950s saw a rise in "B movies," science fiction films, and Teenpics. These subgenres often overlapped but were distinctly different from what the horror genre had been established thus far (Doherty; Everson; Friedman et al.). B Movies refer to a low budget film created by an alternative production company. RKO's popularization of "fearing what you can't see" opened the doors for B production companies, as it is far less expensive to produce a horror film where you do not see the monster. Similarly, B movies are mass-produced and made for general

audiences and as such are going to be adaptations of what is popular at the time. Due to the cultural impact of the cold war, societal fears relating to foreign invaders, the atomic bomb, and largely unknown new advances in science and technology, the rise of science fiction films began (Friedman et al; Leeder 31). *The Thing* (1951), *The War of the Worlds* (1953), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) are three highly successful science fiction films that dip into elements of horror and fear and can therefore be categorized in both genres (Friedman et al.).

In the late 1950s, the horror genre began to gear towards teenagers and young adults with racier, more sexual horror flicks designed to be watched in groups at drive-in theaters. Horror Teenpics often depicted teenage characters engaging in taboo behavior, and teens were drawn to the films for their graphic, gory, and sexual content. Due to the immoral nature of these movies, many of them were low budget productions done by small studios, making the films also examples of B horror (Doherty). Teenpic horror films targeted the fears of young people and mirrored real-life situations that teens were in. Similarly, to the gothic genre's use of an unhomely home, teenpics took place in the houses and schools of the American teen. Suddenly the suburbs, a place of normalcy and security, could itself be the setting of cruel and horrific stories. These films were in response to the conservative values and lifestyle of the 1950s and were early examples of the sexual revolution that came in the 1960s (Doherty).

Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho* marked the onset of the horror genre's "modern period" (Friedman et al. 376). *Psycho* dove deeper into the psychology of the horror villain. His antagonist, Norman Bates, showed that one did not have to look like a monster to be a monster (Durgnat 44; Friedman et al. 377). This concept rocked the genre and reinvented what it means to be a villain. "The 'monster' is the charming, boyish Norman Bates, a serial killer who preys on victims in the motel that he manages" (Friedman et al. 377). Much like the successful

characters of Universal Studios, Norman Bates became a key figure in the horror genre (Everson; Friedman et al.). Hitchcock combined the previous lessons from teenpics and RKO to craft a suspenseful and bloody narrative that triggered a visceral emotional response from audiences. Although *Psycho* revolutionized the horror genre, Hitchcock's film still borrows heavily from gothic inspiration. The isolated Victorian home in which Bates resides is full of death and decay, with dark secrets lurking around every corner waiting to be discovered, and the film's themes of madness and insanity can be directly tied to gothic thinking (Batters). Hitchcock used gothic iconography and motifs to create his message and through his own interpretation of these elements, give them new meaning. Outside of Hitchcock, the 1960s was an era that attracted attention to other iconic horror film directors such as Roman Polansky, Terence Fisher, and Roger Corman (Friedman et al. 377).

The 1970s ushered in a unique type of horror that had only been previewed before that point: violence-based horror. Violence-based horror was depicted primarily through two subgenres: demonic films and slasher films, or Slashers (Clover 66; Friedman et al.). Abundantly violent and graphic horror films were not new per se but were far less common before the 1970s. Second-wave feminism sparked social conversations about women's rights and place in society, creating a horror atmosphere that both liberated women and punished them. This put conversations about family structures and stability at the forefront of the US socio-political realm, and in both the 1970s and 1980s, horror films about families were wildly successful. A major trope and theme from horror films of this era is the uncanny child; tales often center around female characters as well as center the female identity around motherhood. *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Omen* (1976), *The Shining* (1980), and *Poltergeist* (1982) are all examples of horror cinema focused on the unusual behavior and presentation of a child (Balanzategui 32). *The Exorcist*

(1973) and *The Omen* (1976) both also tell tales of traditional family units plagued by the supernatural interference of demonic beings. The films use graphic imagery to scare audiences and rely heavily on references to Catholicism and traditional family values. While gothic thinking is not abundantly violent, religious symbolism is an iconographic reference within the horror genre, and themes of endurance and oppression have been present since early gothic fiction.

Slashers use graphic imagery to scare and shock viewers while drawing inspiration from horror Teenpics by incorporating sexual themes and visuals into the narratives and setting the torment of the characters in a common domestic location, like a suburban home (Doherty; Clover 68; Friedman et al.). Slashers are aimed at younger audiences as opposed to demonic stories that typically target family units. Early slasher films of the 1970s include *Black Christmas* (1974), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *Halloween* (1978). The films are grounded in reality, meaning they do not have supernatural characters. This makes the stories realistic enough to be frightening while still taboo enough to attract views (Clover 66; Friedman et al.). The victims in slasher films were often primarily women, in direct response to second wave feminist thinking, some slasher films punished women for their freedom. The remainder of the 1970s through the 1980s mirrored the early days of horror cinema by reinventing the hallmarks of the genre and introducing new stock horror characters. A major part of the success seen by films such as *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) can be attributed to cultural affection toward the films' antagonists as characters like Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees, and Freddy Krueger became nearly as iconic as Dracula. Numerous popular horror films from the 1970s to the 1980s have been remade and/or turned into spin-offs multiple times since their release (Friedman et al.).

Slasher films dominated the horror genre for years, leading eventually to the rejection of the subgenre. Well-known slasher filmmaker, Wes Craven, directed *Scream* in 1996. *Scream* revised the slasher genre and reimagined its previously overdone form. Instead of punishing young people, particularly women, for their lifestyles, the film critiqued the punisher and poked fun at the slasher genre. *Scream* is both frightening and comedic as it participates in a critical intertextual dialogue with the slashers of the 1970s and 1980s. The 1990s and early 2000s saw a resurgence of gothic narratives and intense psychological ghost stories such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), and *The Others* (2001), which gained popularity and scared audiences like never before. These films used characteristics from previous gothic horror films such as dark moods, uncanny imagery, claustrophobic settings, and psychological thrills to freak out audiences instead of blood and guts (Friedman et al. 279).

While the late 1990s and emerging 2000s seemed to shift away from the ultra-violence of the slasher genre, after 9/11 a rise in conversations surrounding war and torture galvanized interest in violence-based horror and the torture porn genre awoke (Kerner). The 2004 film *Saw* and its sequels are iconic examples of torture porn. This horror subgenre, like traditional slasher films, is characterized by extreme violence but on a new level. Extraordinarily gory, the torture porn subgenre aimed to shock and disturb audiences by creating what Aaron Kerner called “spectacle horror” (22). Films such as *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003), *Hostel* (2005), *Martyrs* (2008), and *The Human Centipede* (2009) utilized disturbing imagery previously considered too taboo for film. Classic horror films from the 1970s and 1980s, like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), *The Amityville Horror* (2005), *Black Christmas* (2006), *Halloween* (2007), *Friday the 13th* (2009), *The Last House on the Left* (2009), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010) were all remade in the 2000s-2010s to be more explicit and

graphic than the originals. For years thereafter the horror genre became near exclusively a place for the most depraved content, which polarized and isolated consumers.

Today, the mass specialization of media content has audiences more fragmented than ever. Despite this, some overarching trends can still be observed throughout popular horror films of the 2010s-2020s. Slashers, films aimed at young people, science fiction, remakes, and even adaptations of Dracula are still popular, but contemporary horror cinema has seen an emergence of films that make social commentary, such as *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), and *Parasite* (2019). Additionally, the production studios Blumhouse and A24 have risen as central producers of decade-defining horror films (Stone). Blumhouse, the producers of *Paranormal Activity* (2009), *Insidious* (2010), *The Purge* (2013), and *Get Out* (2017), distributes films that make overt commentaries on society and pop culture. The studio uses a variety of styles and horror subgenres such as horror-comedies, slashers, hauntings/possession, and films about technology (Blumhouse). On the other hand, A24 is an independent film studio that produces films with a highly intentional aesthetic style. A24 has released horror films such as *The Witch* (2016), *Hereditary* (2018), *Midsommar* (2019), and *The Lighthouse* (2019) (A24 Films). A24 horror films brought attention to the art house horror style and have introduced an accessible form of artistic and ostensibly alternative horror mise-en-scene to the masses. Two of the most popular contemporary horror directors, Robert Eggers and Ari Aster, both have their films produced by A24. These directors use unique and innovative stylistic approaches in their filmmaking while still operating within a genre influenced heavily by the gothic.

Gothic characteristics are still present in contemporary horror films of today. Films produced by Blumhouse, A24, and countless other studios rely on gothic elements just as much as horror films from the 1920s. Regarding setting as an element of gothic storytelling, gothic

horror films are set in gloomy, decaying places that are often secluded. Horror films such as *The Woman in Black* (2012), *The Conjuring* (2013), *Gerald's Game* (2017), and *The Lighthouse* (2019) particularly emphasize this aspect. Supernatural beings are another characteristic that has held the test of time with the theme of the supernatural persisting in gothic horror since the genre's origin. Most horror films still include some element of the supernatural, if not a supernatural villain. The films *Insidious* (2010), *The Innkeepers* (2012), *Lights Out* (2016), and *Winchester* (2018) feature ghosts while the films *Sinister* (2012), *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (2014), *Veronica* (2017), and *Hereditary* (2018) feature demons and the films *Let Me In* (2010), *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), and *The Transfiguration* (2016) all feature vampires. All three are supernatural creatures that are synonymous with the gothic horror genre.

Conclusion

Gothic elements appear consistently throughout horror film history. The influence of gothic novels is still apparent while some films operate internally in the gothic horror genre, and other subgenres of horror simply reference motifs established by previous gothic narratives. Regardless, these films are engaged in an intertextual dialogue that has spanned generations of filming. Representative Theory and Genre Study help to understand the process of forming this dialogue and how it leads to the creation of a genre. Horror is a reactionary genre that acquires meaning through the cultural understanding of the filmmaker's message and response from audience members. Theories for studying genre and the operation of gothic horror specifically, are crucial for analyzing *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak*. I will be considering these theories in the methodology described in the following chapter, chapter three.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

To fulfill the purpose of my research, I will analyze, compare, and reflect on *The Babadook* (2014), *The Invitation* (2015), and *Crimson Peak* (2015). Specifically, I will utilize the methodology of comparative film analysis to complete my study. First, I will analyze the concept of “The Haunted House” as a trope and setting in the three movies listed along with the horror genre as a whole. I will then establish the use of intertextuality through examining the inspirations and references present in the selected films. Additionally, I will compare four themes shared between the chosen texts: personification of the house, tragic loss, memories of the past, and isolation. Finally, I will reflect on the overall similarities uniting the films by highlighting their common narrative and cultural commentary. This chapter explains the process of conducting my comparative film analysis as I also provide a contextual and plot overview of *The Babadook* (2014), *The Invitation* (2015), and *Crimson Peak* (2015).

Comparative Film Analysis

In my analysis, I aim to examine the influence of gothic horror cinema on each film by comparing their settings, themes, messages, and styles. I will also be highlighting how the films comment on previous entries in the genre by illustrating the use of intertextuality. I will start with gothic horror and haunted houses as my initial focal points, and through the method of film analysis, I will identify the films’ shared themes. To do so, I will explore several key dimensions of filmmaking; narrative, characters, point of view, setting, and mise-en-scene. Narrative is divided into two components: the story, and the plot. The story describes the events taking place in a film and the plot is the deliberate order in which these events are arranged. A film’s narrative dictates the confines in which everything takes place (Corrigan 38-39). The characters live out the narrative and create conflict throughout the plot. Characters can be analyzed for their

individual roles in a film or their positionality in society and the genre. Point of view describes the perspective through which the film is told and determines how information is revealed to the audience (Corrigan 40-45). Setting refers to where a film takes place or is set, including physical location and time period. In addition to point of view the setting creates a framework for when and where the movie occurs, which then impacts the narrative and the characters. Lastly, mise-en-scene refers to the various properties of a cinematic image. These include lighting, editing, acting, cinematography, sets, shapes, costumes, and props and together exemplify a film's theme (Corrigan 46). These properties provide examples of how the films engage intertextually with the genre, promote their messages, and build an emotional response. I will use evidence from the narratives, characters, points of view, settings, and mise-en-scenes of the films in order to describe and identify the tone, style, and themes. Additionally, I will be looking at theme as a recurring convention of the horror genre, and as the main idea that guides the messages of the films I have chosen to focus on. In doing so I will create a full understanding of the content for my comparison.

Chapter Four of this thesis is my analysis, which will be presented as a comparison of three films. Prior to completing my comparative analysis and reaching my final conclusions, I will carry out individual film analyses for each film. This process consists of the examination of film dimensions as previously described. Viewing *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* individually will allow me to put them in conversation with one another. Through this, I will be able to identify common themes among all three films in order to draw conclusions about 2010s horror cinema. I will compare the shared conventions and recurring elements used in the films, as well as the similar ways in which they all connect to the gothic horror genre. Furthermore, I will juxtapose how these films establish the tone and explore common themes

through their use of narrative, characters, point of view, setting, and mise-en-scene. The final step in my analysis will involve contrasting the unique ways that the directors build fear, engage the audience, and distinguish themselves visually.

My analysis will conclude with an interpretation of the information gleaned through my comparison. This section will focus on one shared message illustrated by all three films. Finally, I will reflect on how *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* utilize similar themes derived from cultural criticism in film. I will connect the films' themes with the greater societal anxieties present through the last decade and in doing so fulfil the purpose of my research.

Film Overviews and Summaries

This section offers contextual background for each film that I will be analyzing. The following pages provide an overview and plot summary of *The Babadook* (2014), *The Invitation* (2015), and *Crimson Peak* (2015).

The Babadook

Written and directed by Jennifer Kent, *The Babadook* (2014) is an independent Australian psychological horror film. The movie was Kent's debut feature, and she has since directed the 2018 gothic drama *The Nightingale*. *The Babadook* premiered at Sundance Film Festival on January 17th, 2014 and was picked up by the production company and distributor, IFC Films. *The Babadook* had a budget of \$2 million and made \$10.3 million in its box office release (TheNumbers.com). It received a positive critical as well as audience response. In his review of the work, *Variety Magazine* critic Scott Foundas said,

Like the elaborate children's pop-up book that conjures its eponymous bogeyman, [*The Babadook*] offers a wonderfully hand-crafted spin on a tale oft-told, of parent and child in an old, dark house where things go bump (and scratch and growl and hover in the

shadows) in the night. Steeped in references to early cinema, magic, and classic fairy tales ... this meticulously designed and directed debut feature from writer-director Jennifer Kent... manages to deliver real, seat-grabbing jolts while also touching on more serious themes of loss, grief, and other demons that cannot be so easily vanquished.

Authors Jayesh Busgeet (212) and Matt Glasby (149) also characterize the film as a dark fairytale for its narrative structure and macabre style. Busgeet describes Kent's film, writing [*The Babadook*] paints a horror story where the source of the fear has a particular familiarity. *The Babadook* portrays itself as a dark children's story but in true Grimm's fairy tale fashion with a Jungian twist that creates more terror than the brothers Grimm could ever imagine... *The Babadook* is a dark gem that not only has you biting your nails but draws you into its emotional engagement with its characters.

Critics agreed that Kent's independent horror movie was a surprise to many fans. It offered a new and artistic take on the genre that Glenn Kenny of RogerEbert.com called "the finest and most genuinely provocative horror movie to emerge in this still very-new century."

The Babadook is the haunting tale of a mother and son plagued by loss. Set in southern Australia the story follows widow Amelia Vanek as she struggles to care for her hyperactive six-year-old son, Samuel. Seven years prior to the events in the film, Amelia's husband, Oskar, died in a violent car accident while driving her to the hospital to give birth to Samuel. The film opens with Amelia's memory of the car crash and transitions to the present with Samuel waking her up in the morning. Oskar's death and Samuel's birth occurred almost simultaneously, and it is important for the context of the film that audiences understand that. Amelia lost her husband and became a mother at the same time, making Samuel a constant reminder of her husband's death. Having been thrust into motherhood, Amelia was never able to truly grieve or come to terms

with her trauma and as a result, her relationship with Samuel is tumultuous. She keeps Oskar's belongings tucked away in the basement and says little about him to Samuel. *The Babadook* takes place almost seven years after Oskar's death and depicts a relational boiling point between Amelia and Samuel. Kent discussed her motivation for the film in an interview with *The Guardian*, saying "[w]e're all, as women, educated and conditioned to think that motherhood is an easy thing that just happens. But it's not always the case. I wanted to show a real woman who was drowning in that environment" (MacInnes). Kent does this by creating an exhausting and terrifying environment through dead space, a sense of dread, and Amelia's lack of sleep. Early on in the film she shows that Amelia is overwhelmed by Samuel and her role as a mother. Samuel's hyperactivity and disruptive behavior force Amelia to pull him out of school. Between his fits, nightmares, and mentions of Oskar, it all becomes too much for Amelia to handle.

The supernatural horrors begin when Samuel asks Amelia to read him a mysterious pop-up book. The story is called "The Babadook" and Amelia does not know where he got it. Despite this, she begins to read to Samuel but soon realizes that what seems like a harmless children's story is actually something much darker. "The Babadook" is about a sinister monster of the same name in a long black coat and a top hat. Samuel becomes terrified of the story and Amelia destroys the book. However, it soon reappears on the family's doorstep. That night, Amelia is possessed by the Babadook. She starts to see the monster everywhere and slowly loses control of her actions, leaving it up to Samuel to free his mother from the monster's hold. At the climax of the film, Samuel forces the Babadook out of his mother and the two stand up to him together. They confront the monster and banish him to the basement. *The Babadook* ends with Amelia and Samuel celebrating his 7th birthday, and the last scene of the film shows the monster still in the basement but now under Amelia's control.

The Invitation

The 2015 film, *The Invitation* is an American horror thriller directed by Karyn Kusama and written and produced by Phil Hay and Matt Manfredi. Kusama is known for her films *Girlfight* (2000) and *Jennifer's Body* (2009) as well as *Æon Flux* (2005) and *Destroyer* (2018) which were also written by Manfredi and Hay. *The Invitation* premiered March 13th, 2015 at the South by Southwest (SXSW) Film Festival and was called “one of the biggest genres hits” of that year (LaBrie). The independent movie had a limited theatrical release in April 2016 but was distributed to video on demand and streaming services by Drafthouse Films (Collis). At one million dollars, the film had an even smaller budget than *The Babadook* and only made \$354,000 in the box office (IMDbPro). Kusama’s thriller received mixed reviews from audiences, however it has been generally well received by critics. In *The Guardian*, Jordan Hoffman argues that “Kusama’s ability to keep the action all very realistic is to be commended,” noting how “It’s only in the final 15 minutes that we start to get our genre-picture payoff. While some viewers may complain that the action is too heavily weighted toward the ending, I’d argue that this is a strong example of destination-not-the-journey film-making.” Calvin Wilson of the St. Louis Post said the film “creates a tension-filled atmosphere that brings to mind the early, pre-Hollywood films of Roman Polanski.” Additionally, *The Invitation* won the Sitges International Film Festival’s award for Best Movie (Lopez-Abitang).

The Invitation is also a tale of grief and trauma. The story follows Will, who after two years of not hearing from his ex-wife Eden, is invited to a dinner party hosted by her and her new husband, David. In the meantime, Eden and David had been in Mexico, but little is known about their years there. Will is accompanied by his new girlfriend Kira as he journeys to the Hollywood Hills where he once lived with Eden and their son, Ty. Years earlier, Ty had died in

an accident during his birthday party in the same house. His death was witnessed not only by Will and Eden, but also by their friends, who have been invited to the dinner party as well. As an ensemble film, *The Invitation* devotes a lot of time to introducing the characters and carries out the plot primarily through conversations. While the other characters casually socialize, Will is suspicious of Eden and David. He spends the first half of the film investigating the couple's motives and questioning their authenticity. It is revealed that Eden and David, along with their new friends Sadie and Pruitt, are all in a cult called "The Invitation." The cult members purport that their organization is peaceful and simply supports individuals living with grief, but when one of their guests, Gina, is poisoned, the truth comes out. The dinner party is a ruse disguising a murder/suicide plot, and when the curtain is lifted the cult members attempt to kill all of the guests. The group is forced to fight for their lives, and in the end only Will, Kira, and their friend Tommy survive the massacre. Once outside the house, they hear sirens and helicopters. The friends look out over the Hollywood Hills to see that every yard has a red lantern and realize that similar events have taken place all over Los Angeles as part of "The Invitation" cult.

Crimson Peak

Crimson Peak, written, directed, and produced by Guillermo del Toro, is a 2015 gothic horror romance. Del Toro is a Mexican filmmaker known for his fantastical horror and science fiction films, such as *Mimic* (1997), *Hellboy* (2004), *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), *Pacific Rim* (2013), and *The Shape of Water* (2017). In September 2015 *Crimson Peak* premiered at Fantastic Fest and went on to have a full theatrical release on October 16th. The film was distributed by Universal Pictures and had a \$55 million budget, significantly more than even *The Babadook* and *The Invitation* combined. *Crimson Peak* made \$74.7 million at the box office but still received mixed reviews (IMDbPro). Writers from *The New Yorker* and *The Independent* criticized the

film for having too many elements and an underdeveloped plot, however most critics praised the film for its artful contrast between horror and beauty (Brody; Macnab). Opposing Brody's review, Peter Travers wrote for *Rolling Stone* about the film's extravagance, saying "Guillermo del Toro doesn't merely direct movies. He paints them, dreams them, shapes them into private fantasies. Too much? Of course. But that's part of the fun." Stephen King described the film as electrifying as well as "[g]orgeous and just fucking terrifying" (Collis). Similarly, *The Telegraph's* Robbie Collin called the style and tone of *Crimson Peak* "voluptuously horrible" (Collin). Sheila O'Malley of RogerEbert.com compared Del Toro's work to other gothic tales such as Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*, and Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (O'Malley). While perhaps not as iconic as Hitchcock, Del Toro is still a well-known and respected horror director. After releasing *Crimson Peak*, Del Toro went on to win the Academy Award for Best Picture for his 2018 film *The Shape of Water*. *Crimson Peak* was not nominated for any Academy Awards but did win two Saturn Awards for Best Supporting Actress and Best Production Design (IMDb).

Guillermo Del Toro's ghost story takes place in 1901. *Crimson Peak* is the story of Edith Cushing, an aspiring American author who finds herself in trouble when she marries Sir Thomas Sharpe, an English baronet. As a child, Edith was cautioned by the ghost of her mother to "beware crimson peak," a warning she could not interpret at the time. Years later she meets the Sharpe siblings and becomes taken with Thomas, but her father Carter is suspicious and after finding damning information about the duo, is mysteriously killed. Following her father's death, Edith marries Thomas and moves to Cumberland, England to live at Allerdale Hall with him and his older sister Lucille. Allerdale Hall is a decaying mansion of horror and mystery. The estate sits upon a red clay mine and has been sinking slowly over the years. Red clay oozes from the

walls of Allerdale and a massive hole in the ceiling lets in falling leaves and snow. Edith begins to see dripping red ghosts in the manor, but when she tells Thomas and Lucille, they dismiss her frightened claims. Despite their denial, Edith starts to uncover the dark secrets of the house when, Thomas tells her how the red clay seeps through the snow in the winter there, earning it the name “Crimson Peak.” Edith finally understands her mother’s warning and realizes that she is in real danger. She begins to communicate with the ghosts she sees, and through their aid discovers that Thomas has married multiple wealthy women over the years and allowed Lucille to kill each one of them. It is clear that the pair intend to do the same to Edith, and she attempts to avoid the poisoned tea mentioned by the ghosts. Meanwhile, in America, Dr. Alan McMichael, a friend of the Cushings, continues to investigate Carter’s suspicious death. He too learns of Thomas’ previous marriages before uncovering that Lucille killed the pair’s mother, and rushes to Cumberland to save Edith. In a horrifying turn of events, Edith finds out that on top of the murders, Thomas and Lucille have been in an incestuous relationship since childhood. Scared for her life and betrayed by her husband, Edith attempts to escape the haunted Allerdale Hall with a wounded Dr. McMichael in tow.

In the end, Thomas tells Lucille that he is really in love with Edith and attempts to end their relationship. This news crushes Lucille and in response she stabs her brother, killing him. Driven mad by her actions and almost unnaturally determined, she sets out to kill Edith once and for all. In a bloody battle atop the red-stained snow, the women fight to the death. Aided by Thomas' ghost, Edith is able to distract Lucille and kill her with a shovel. Edith and Alan finally flee the mansion, leaving Thomas and Lucille’s ghosts to haunt the property together for eternity.

These summaries are important for understanding the films and preparing readers for chapter four. In the following chapter, I will present my full comparative analysis of *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak*.

CHAPTER IV: COMPARATIVE FILM ANALYSIS

This chapter contains my analysis of three horror films. I compare the dimensions of Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), Karyn Kusama's *The Invitation* (2015), and Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak* (2015) in order to find similar and recurring themes. Through a comparison of the three films, I argue that the texts use the concept of isolation to create both fear and empathy. Isolation is a theme that is prominent in the horror genre, specifically in haunted house films. My analysis looks at haunted house iconography of the horror genre as presented in these three films. Based on my close readings of the films, it is apparent that they use the "haunted house" as not only a setting and narrative device but also as a metaphor for tragedy and trauma. Furthermore, I identify a connection between the lack of emotional openness and physical isolation of the characters in the films.

The Haunted House

Georges Méliès' 1896 film, *Le Manoir du Diable* (*The Devil's Castle*, *The Haunted Castle*, or *House of the Devil*) is considered to be the first "horror" film (Glasby 7; Leeder 6-7). The three-minute silent film shows a bat turning into the devil and creating terror in the castle through his seemingly supernatural haunting. Horror coming from inside the home is a theme consistent throughout horror history. The lavish yet decaying haunted castle, mansion, or house is rooted in gothic iconography (Friedman et al. 391) for it has acted as a backdrop to many gothic novels such as *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), and *Dracula* (1897). In horror cinema, dark old houses are used as a setting for supernatural story telling. Early prominent haunted house films include *The Old Dark House* (1932) and *The Uninvited* (1944). Since then, there have been many haunted house movies throughout the decades, including *The Haunting* (1963), *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *Poltergeist* (1982), *The*

Others (2001), *Paranormal Activity* (2007). Each of these films feature a domestic location as the primary setting. They contrast the assumed comfort and security of home with a supernatural twist. In most cases, this twist is a ghost haunting the grounds seeking to harm the protagonist.

The 2010s saw numerous films that followed the aforementioned haunted house formula: *Insidious* (2010), *The Woman in Black* (2012), *Sinister* (2012), *The Conjuring* (2013), *Poltergeist* (2015), and *Winchester* (2018) (Stone). However, horror films that take place in domestic settings more generally are just as widespread. Setting a horror film in a domestic space presents a threat to normalcy, safety, and more specifically the nuclear heterosexual family unit. Creating anxieties around familiarity is a common way for filmmakers to build fear. It symbolically dismantles the family unit by illustrating how a threat can come from within the house. These threats take one of three forms: 1) a threat caused when someone invades the space, a threat created in the space, and a threat that has always existed in the space. *The Purge* (2013), *Don't Breathe* (2016), and *Get Out* (2017) are examples of 2010s horror films that take place in domestic settings and present the primary threat in one of those three ways. Every 2010s film listed thus far is an example of a horror movie that is set in a house, but they are differentiated by the fact that not all of them are truly “haunted house” films. A key aspect of the haunted house trope/setting in horror cinema is the personification of the house. It is not enough for the film to be set in a house; the house must act as a character. Therefore, what distinguishes a haunted house movie from a movie merely set inside a house, is the presence of a haunting. Nonetheless, as I will argue, the “haunting” does not have to be a ghost in the literal sense. The haunting can be something left lingering, something that is tethered to the location in which the film is set. Thus, while a haunting is oftentimes a ghost, in some cases it could be a person, monster, or a memory.

For my analysis, I will be defining a haunted house using those two components: personification and haunting. I will provide examples of how *The Babadook* (2014), *The Invitation* (2015), and *Crimson Peak* (2015) use their domestic settings to build fear and establish tone while also creating personalities for the respective homes. Furthermore, I argue that the relationship between physical and emotional space is a strikingly prominent theme in 2010s horror films. As I will later explore in my conclusion, this era of horror initiated an unprecedented exploration of emotional fear and trauma. These discussions of mental health, grief, and trauma were consistent with cultural conversations at the time, in line with the growing mental health de-stigmatization movement. With this in mind, I found that overarching themes of madness, grief, and tragedy are used in all three films to critique the social norm of repressing one's trauma. By studying the film dimensions of *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak*, I aim to illustrate how these themes are exemplified on screen and how they connect to the gothic horror haunted house trope.

Intertextuality

To create a full picture of each film it is essential to understand the intertextual influences in *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak*. Although they are all horror films, each movie falls into a slightly different horror sub-genre, and contain various references to prior aesthetic choices, settings, plot lines, actors, characters, and themes. *The Babadook*'s central obstacle is the Babadook, a character who for all intents and purposes, serves the role of a monster. Therefore, *The Babadook* is classified as a monster movie, much like films about vampires, werewolves, and aliens. *The Invitation* is a slow burn that hinges on details in a way similar to both home invasion films and murder mystery ensembles. These facets help the film present as a psychological thriller with a slasher-like flourish. As a horror romance, *Crimson*

Peak is just as much a love story as it is terrifying. It borrows not only from horror narratives, but from romance tropes and narratives as well. Each film can and does exist as a gothic horror haunted house film, but this section acknowledges the various subgenres and inspirations presented in the movies.

The Babadook pulls visual inspiration from black and white silent films, and the monster is an example of this. Mister Babadook is a tall figure, dressed all in black with long spindly fingers. His skin is pale white, and his features are exaggerated and overdrawn. He has black circles around his eyes and his wide mouth is an inky grin. Mister Babadook lurks in the darkness but moves in fast, choppy, segments. He clicks and rustles as he crawls across the ceiling and floors as if he were an insect. In many ways, the Babadook is unhuman, but his familiar shape mimics what we should recognize as a person. Kent cites Lon Chaney's character, "The Man in the Beaver Hat" from the lost film *London After Midnight*, as an inspiration for the creature's design (Glasby 150; Kent). In an interview with Ken Hanke, she describes how Chaney's distorted face appears "human, but almost not." In the movie Kent incorporates a montage of silent films, including another Chaney film, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) and Segundo de Chomón's *The House of Ghosts (La Maison ensorcelée)* (1908). She inserts the Babadook into the films' frames, and the character looks as if he belongs there. His overdrawn face, dark shadows, and sharp stature resemble the characteristics of classic silent horror figures such as Nosferatu, Mr. Hyde, and The Phantom of the Opera. The set design has a theatrical style that makes scenes feel like a stage play, or a classic silent film. While the objects and furniture look real, the walls of the house are painted to feel eerie and artificial. Mister Babadook's campy appearance makes him appear almost silly, but the sinister way he creeps through the movie without being fully seen creates suspense in the narrative and characterizes the monster as

something to fear.

The Babadook also borrows stylistically from the early silent films that built the horror genre. Many gothic horror tropes, originally established by gothic novels, have been around for centuries. For example, the 1908 horror short, *The House of Ghosts*, which is referenced in *The Babadook*, depicts an unsettling home terrorized by an even more unsettling supernatural creature. Kent draws a clear intertextual relationship to classic gothic iconography and narrative by directly using clips from earlier films. Beyond this, she pays homage to these films through her use of angler framing, cool toned gritty textures, and uncanny characters. These factors give *The Babadook* a classic horror feeling for a modern audience.

Like *The Babadook*, Kusama's *The Invitation* meshes several recurring horror narratives to create a new entry in the genre. *The Invitation* has elements of slasher, home invasion, cult, and murder mystery films. Like a slasher or murder mystery, a group of individuals are invited to a singular location to be killed off one by one, and while most of the murder in *The Invitation* takes place concurrently, each character is singularly killed as others attempt to escape. *The Invitation* borrows mostly from a murder mystery in setting; Eden's mid-century modern home is large and lavish. She invites the ensemble of characters under false pretenses, and through subtle hints the truth is revealed. Kusama pays close attention to detail in creating the house, presenting it as polished and expensive.

Home invasion films, popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as *Funny Games* (1997/2007), *Panic Room* (2002), and *The Strangers* (2008) have similar realist aesthetics as *The Invitation* and demand emphasis on the house. The houses resemble locations audience members would either live, or feel comfortable living in. They appear clean, traditional, and ordinary. The films turn the character's home, a space that is familiar and inviting, into the confines of their

own suffering. *The Invitation* traps Will in the house where he once raised his family, and ultimately lost his son. For him, the place was already haunted, but for others, it was an impressive home full of fine things. Much like an invasion film, Will's familiarity with the home becomes his advantage as he attempts to escape his death.

More overt in many ways than *The Babadook* and *The Invitation*, *Crimson Peak* is rich with gothic references. *Crimson Peak* is a period piece directly inspired by early gothic novels, which focused on the dichotomy of beauty and horror. The story pulls from gothic narratives by juxtaposing Edith and Thomas' love with a nightmarish mystery. Following a classic gothic horror trope, Edith is a young, virginal woman who gets caught up in a dangerous romance with a charismatic stranger. It also takes place in a traditional gothic setting, an isolated British manor decorated with decaying Victorian furniture that alludes to the home's former beauty. Furthermore, Del Toro's film has a haunting yet beautiful tone which contrasts horror and romance by constructing ominous people and bewitching locations. Both Thomas and Lucille are attractive, charming, and well-dressed, but something dark lies beneath the surface. The Sharpes are an example of a wealthy and elite family trapped by their dark secrets, another trope seen often in gothic novels. Audiences are drawn to them while knowing they are no good, provoking feelings of both love and fear: themes I've explained are also popular in gothic narratives. Gothic romance built the foundation of the horror genre and *Crimson Peak* proves that even in 2015 it remains captivating and terrifying. Del Toro also incorporates gothic aesthetics from golden age horror films like *Dracula* (1931), *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1960), and *The Haunting* (1963) through implementing long dark hallways, 18th century furniture, flowing nightgowns, and candelabras. The beauty of this iconography is not lost on the viewer and resembles some of the first haunted house films.

Themes

Themes categorize ideas that recur in a text in order to convey the intended message. They are a series of examples and ideas that help audiences understand the events in the film (Corrigan 36). Comparing the themes of multiple films in the same genre, from the same decade, is a way to glean an understanding of what themes were prominent in cultural conversations at the time of the films' production. I am comparing *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak*: three horror films from the mid-2010s that are relevant in pop culture, have visible gothic influence, take place in a house, and as I explain, use common themes to create horror and illustrate their messages.

Houses with Personality

A film's setting defines the construction of space in which the plot will occur. The setting is presented through cinematography, production design, and location. Along with the physical and visual representation of where the film takes place, a setting can have specific connotations associated with it, especially within a genre. As previously described, the haunted house has a long horror history. Setting a horror film in a house is an intertextual reference that audiences understand because of its recurrence throughout the genre. They are cued by the setting to know that something sinister will happen, which is a frightening contrast to "home" as a safe and loving space. Houses in horror are a trope often used to situate individuals in the same secluded location. In horror cinema, haunted houses are generally isolated, old, dark, vast, and dangerous. They achieve an uneasy feeling by showing the house as an uncomfortable and uncanny threat rather than a welcoming retreat. The setting, more broadly, is one dimension of film that helps establish tone, and within the gothic genre there is no better example than the haunted house. The tone is important as it tells audiences how they should feel in response to a scene or the whole

film.

The Babadook is a truly terrifying feature film that does not rely on blood or gore. Rather, fear is created through the film's unique style and tone, and the effectiveness of never fully showing the monster. Exemplified in Kent's settings, cool, melancholy colors like blues and greys underscore a dreary and hollow existence for the Vaneks. Even before the nightmare starts, the character's home is dark and depressing. The house is small, old, and grimy, objects do not match, and spaces remain in a constant state of disarray to show audiences that Amelia is never able to catch up on housework. Areas of the house that should be comfortable and relaxing, like a bedroom, are shown as blue and lifeless. Additionally, the home is poorly lit with only some natural light leaking through the windows shown by the floating dust in the air, or by the peaking sun through the always drawn curtains, but there is little beyond those and the occasional lamp at night. The lack of light not only adds to a sense of mystery and fear but also depressing gloom surrounding the house. Places other than the Vanek's home are also gloomy, but instead of being characterized as neglected and decaying, they are uncomfortably sterile. Amelia works in a dull, repressive nursing home where everything is a shade of teal, blue, or grey, and the other places in the film (Samuel's school, Amelia's sister's house, the doctor's office, and the police station) look the same. These spaces are lifeless and uncomfortably boring, yet they are also clean, orderly, and seemingly safe. After Amelia reads Samuel the book, the threat of the Babadook is ever-growing, as are the shadows in the corners of the house, creating ample space for the monster to hide.

Crimson Peak's Allerdale Hall is a rotating labyrinth of ghosts, gothic architecture, and bold shades of green that make the mansion oddly enchanting. Allerdale Hall elicits a captivated response from audiences, while Vanek's home is much more off-putting. What the houses do

have in common is their intentional disorganization, which mirrors the inner turmoil of the characters who live within. Allerdale Hall is centuries old and sits upon a defunct clay mine. The crimson red clay leaks through cracks in the floors and walls as the house sinks further into the pit. A hole in the ceiling keeps the mansion “colder than the outdoors” and fills the foyer with snow. Allerdale Hall has been in the Sharpe family for hundreds of years, and the antique house carries history in paintings, scaffoldings, wallpaper, and furniture. Regardless of the fact that they can never seem to repair it, Thomas and Lucille are determined to keep the house standing. Allerdale Hall does not change throughout *Crimson Peak*, and this is because by the time Edith arrives it has already reached its breaking point. There is no saving Allerdale, much like there is no saving Thomas or Lucille.

Allerdale Hall moves and breathes like a character. It seems to always be listening and changing, and Thomas and Lucille must kill to keep it alive. The house is unusually beautiful given its state of ruin. Remnants of lavish wallpaper remain, deep teals and reds decorate the halls, and belongings that fill the rooms, while old, are demonstrably expensive. Allerdale is whimsical and extravagant but also cold, empty, and dying. This aesthetic contrast hints at the possibility of comfort but presents a dark reality. No matter how beautiful parts of the house may be, a little digging reveals the horrific truth. Allerdale is Thomas and Lucille; they attract people by presenting as cultured, beautiful, and elegant, however they are supported by heinous acts. They are murdering women for money to maintain their incestuous relationship and Allerdale Hall. Particularly for Lucille, holding on to Allerdale and maintaining her relationship with Thomas become the same thing. Allerdale Hall is both motivation for the Sharpes and a personification of them and a reflection of their emotions. The sense that Allerdale could collapse at any time mirrors the instability Thomas and Lucille’s grisly affair.

In *The Babadook*, Kent uses color and production design to set the tone of Amelia's life, and then increases the discomfort and disorganization of the setting to reflect Amelia's pain. Much like *Crimson Peak*, the house reflects the emotional state of the characters. In this way, both Kent and del Toro personify the respective houses to indicate not only the film's tone, but the character's state of being. At the end of *The Babadook* Amelia and Samuel overcome the monster and the film's tone changes entirely. Kent remains consistent with cool colors and dusty textures, but the life and light of the scenes improve when Amelia is happy. The last scenes of *The Babadook* show an outdoor birthday party for Samuel full of color and natural light. This reflects the positive relationship Amelia and Samuel have formed and its impact on their moods. Conversely, the film is at its darkest and messiest when Amelia is fully overcome by the Babadook. By reflecting Amelia's mental state through the film's lighting and style, the audience feels as if they are going mad along with her.

The Invitation takes place in the main character Will's former home. Secluded in Hollywood Hills, Los Angeles, the house is contemporary and expensive. There is an artistic flair to the style, but it also appears untouched instead of lived in. The mid-century modern home is in direct dichotomy with a traditional horror house setting like Allerdale Hall or the Vaneks' home. Rather than being frightening on its own, it is the sinister attitudes of the characters that make the location scary. The house seems both inviting and ominous, leaving audiences unsure if they should be worried about the safety of the characters. This reflects Will's feelings while in the house as well. Will is wary of the dinner party and actively seeks evidence that something suspicious is occurring. Eden has remodeled since Will lived in the house and Will sees the changes as odd and out of character. He knows what the house was like before, but it now seems unfamiliar. Similarly, Will sees that Eden has changed since they were married, and he struggles

to trust or understand this new version of her. She has become manicured and artificial, appearing to be faking her smiles. Will is as uncomfortable with Eden as he is within the house. While the house does not change throughout *The Invitation*, flashbacks reveal what it, and Eden, used to be. There was once light, laughter, and warmth to both the house and Eden, but both were lost after Ty's death. Despite this, Will's friends laugh and drink in the distance of every shot.

Diegetic sound describes the sound that comes from the scene itself, auditory information that the characters within the scene also receive. The use of diegetic sound contributes to the film's verisimilitude as well as illustrates the movement and distractions happening around the plot. *The Babadook* and *Crimson Peak* use diegetic sound similarly: noises coming from the scene immerse the audience in realism, while non-diegetic sound cues viewers into the tone and energy of a shot. *The Babadook* and *Crimson Peak* both implement non-diegetic music during scenes without dialogue. More than *The Babadook*, *Crimson Peak* uses the film's score to progress the plot and create suspense. However, there is very little background music in *The Invitation* at all. Instead, Kusama uses long, dialogue heavy scenes to move the narrative forward. The few times the film features non-diegetic sound are when Will dissociates and looks back on when he lived in the house. These scenes use aggressive string music with heavy staccato but do not include full songs. The non-diegetic sound is quick and anxiety inducing in order to reflect Will's discomfort, and how when Will enters specific places in Eden's house, he remembers the painful past. Kusama, like Kent and del Toro, uses the house and the sounds within it as a tool to reflect the emotions and situations of the characters.

In each film, the characters embodied through the houses are the aggressors/antagonists of the story. Amelia, while overcome by the Babadook, tries to kill Samuel; the Sharpes trap and

poison Edith; and Eden invites her friends to a forced group suicide. By reflecting the villainous character's feelings onto the house, the setting becomes just as scary as they are. These characters also prevent others from leaving the house. Their personal and emotional ties to the houses make them unable to escape their setting juxtaposed against the intentional isolation of the protagonists. The houses in which the characters are trapped are more than just a setting, they embody the essence of those that live inside. These houses are personified as their own characters while also resembling the antagonists of the films. The protagonists are in a dark place after being plagued by loss and trauma. The haunted houses hold on to this pain, and transform it into suffering.

Tragic Losses

Tragic and sudden loss emerges as a major theme in all three films. Prior to the events of *The Babadook* and *The Invitation*, the protagonists experience the unexpected loss of a loved one. At its core, *The Babadook* is a story of grief and trauma. In the opening scene, we see Amelia dreaming about the car accident that killed Oskar, where his head was sliced in half with a pane of glass as she watched. Since the moment that Oskar died and Samuel was born, Amelia has been grieving the loss of her husband and haunted by the image of his death. In *The Invitation*, Will and Eden's son Ty also dies in a tragic accident when he is hit in the head with a baseball bat by another child at his birthday party. Like Amelia, Will and Eden both witness the death, and the couple blame themselves for not preventing it. Through these events, *The Babadook* and *The Invitation* both show characters forced to go about normal life even after horrific and graphic accidents.

After Oskar's death, Amelia is thrown into single parenthood. Because of Samuel's birth, Amelia has never been able to mourn and it is heavily implied that she resents Samuel for

Oskar's accident. Their relationship is distant, and Amelia is overwhelmed by the boy. Samuel tells strangers that his father died in a tragic car accident the day he was born, and Amelia shuts him down. She keeps Oskar's belongings locked in the basement, and Samuel sneaks into the room to play with his things. Samuel is bullied for not having a father and acts out. He wakes her with his nightmares, causes trouble at school, and breaks windows. Amelia is unable to date, masturbate, watch television, or sleep because Samuel is always with her. Amelia is exhausted and overworked. She defends her son to school officials, her sister, and even to strangers, but is not shown to be particularly fond of the boy herself. Early in the film when Samuel hugs Amelia for too long she snaps and shoves him off, and one night while reading him to sleep, Samuel tells Amelia that he loves her, and she does not say it back. Amelia's life is consumed by caring for Samuel, but she does not feel compassion for or affection towards him. Instead, Samuel is only a constant reminder of Oskar's death. If it were not for Samuel's birth, Oskar would not have died, and now he regularly brings up Oskar's death, a topic Amelia would rather not discuss. No one in Amelia's life can share her grief, so she holds it inside, creating a barrier between her and her son.

In *The Invitation*, a relationship is also fractured by death: after Ty's accident, Will and Eden get a divorce. The film follows the two seeing each other for the first time after two years with no contact. *The Invitation* compares Will and Eden's struggles dealing with Ty's death. At the dinner party, the audience sees Eden act joyful and free. Will criticizes her for implying that it is that easy to get over Ty's death, and describes how much it hurts him every day. However, during one of Will's flashbacks, we see Eden attempt suicide after Ty's death. Eden escaped with David as her way of dealing with her pain, even though it meant joining a cult. She ran from her feelings and repressed them in order to go about her life. Will, on the other hand, feels like he

cannot move on and that it would be wrong to let Ty go. Instead, he continues to carry the burden of his loss with him every day. Will cannot enjoy the dinner party or feel normal because he is unable to forget Ty's presence or his death.

Amelia, Will, and Eden are each characters suffering from immense grief in the aftermath of the deaths of their loved ones. Sudden deaths caused by accidents can often result in what is called "Traumatic Grief" (American Trauma Society). Traumatic grief makes remembering the deceased immensely difficult or overwhelming, as is the case for all three characters. In *The Babadook* and *The Invitation*, it is not a supernatural threat that initially disrupts their lives, but rather realistic and tragic accidents that could happen to any family. These characters, unable to cope with their grief, then find themselves in life-threatening situations. Traumatic grief and tragic loss are popular themes found in many horror texts, especially gothic films. Some examples include *The Man Who Laughs* (1928), *The Innocents* (1961), *Don't Look Now* (1973), *The Changeling* (1980), *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), and *Lake Mungo* (2008). Much like *The Babadook* and *The Invitation*, these films and many others feature stories of loss and grief that act as inciting incidents for the horrors that then unfold.

In *Crimson Peak*, Edith Cushing suddenly loses her father in what appears to be a tragic accident but is actually a premeditated killing. Lucille murders Edith's father to prevent him from interfering with Thomas' pursuit of his daughter. Carter's death acts as a steppingstone for the rest of the film, but it is not until Edith discovers that Lucille killed her father that his death becomes a motivation for her actions. Edith grieves and remembers her father when she looks at the pen he gave her to write her novel. She ponders the pen two times in the film: first, when she decides not to sign the papers transferring her estate to the Sharpes, and second, right before she uses the pen to stab Lucille. Carter was another one of Lucille's victims, and that is enough to

drive Edith to kill her. Unlike Amelia, Will, and Eden, Edith is not haunted by the death of her father, but instead is guided by her desire to discover the truth and bring about justice. Carter's influence and memory fill Edith with the power she needs to survive while Amelia and Will are tied down by their unprocessed grief and memories of their loved ones. These are vastly different representations of accidental loss, but all three use the concept of memory to explore the pains of the past.

Memories and Ghosts

Traditionally, haunted house films are about ghosts—ghastly creatures clinging to a place and terrorizing the inhabitants. But what is a ghost, really, and how do we define haunted? Neither *The Babadook* nor *The Invitation* feature supernatural ghosts, but the films still tackle the lingering memories and presence of a deceased loved one. These deaths stay with the characters, haunting them as any ghost would. Unlike *The Babadook* and *The Invitation*, *Crimson Peak* is a story with literal ghosts: Edith begins the film by seeing her mother's ghost, and then sees the ghosts of Lucille and Thomas' victims throughout the house (including Lady Sharpe, the siblings' mother). These ghosts were created using a mix of practical and computer-generated effects. They appear as rotting skeletons, stained red and dripping with blood-like clay. Del Toro wastes no time introducing the full-body, vivid apparitions. The ghosts are real, and they are physically there. Because he immediately shows the audience the monster, del Toro must build fear in another way. *Crimson Peak* reveals information to the audience before the characters, utilizing dramatic irony to build unease. We see that Edith is being poisoned before she realizes what is happening, deliberately causing the viewers' anxiety. The film is scored with sharp, suspenseful, orchestral music that cues audiences to the suspense and further reinforces the period setting. Ominous music covers up the squeaks and steps that would be heard throughout

the house, but del Toro leaves the diegetic sounds of the actors panting for air as they flee their doom.

Throughout *Crimson Peak*, Edith references the ghost novel she is writing. In the beginning she makes a point to say that the ghosts she writes are just metaphors, but when the film ends with Edith's narration as she and Dr. McMichael escape Allerdale Hall, she says "Ghosts are real. This much I know. There are things that tie them to a place, very much like they do us. Some remain tethered to a patch of land, a time and date, the spilling of blood, a terrible crime. But there are others- others that hold on to an emotion, a drive, loss, revenge, or love. Those -- they never go away." (1:50:00- 1:51:23). *Crimson Peak* is a ghost film in the traditional sense that it has undead roaming spirits, but also explores ghosts as memory or emotion much like *The Invitation* and *The Babadook*.

The Babadook and *The Invitation* may not depict literal ghosts, but the protagonists are still haunted. In *The Invitation*, Will walks the halls of what was once his home, haunted by the memories of his son. During the film's build-up Will remains on edge, suspicious of David and disconnected from his peers. Rather than being excited to see Eden, as the others seem to be, Will is apprehensive. He looks through cabinets and peers through windows. He remembers his life in the house, and he remembers Ty, whose name even signifies that he is connected or "tied" to the home. The trauma of Ty's death lingers with Will and in the house, and he is confused as to how the others can behave so normally. As Will explores his previous home, viewers see flashbacks of his life with Eden and Ty. Will's reaction to the home is similar to Amelia's reaction to her husband's things in the basement. Will remembers specific locations in the house while Amelia remembers objects. Instead of being haunted by actual ghosts, the characters are haunted by ghostly memories. They both attempt to escape their trauma but in the end,

confronting their grief is the only way to save themselves.

Amelia, Will, and Edith's character arcs all hinge on confronting ghosts. *The Babadook* follows the transformation of Amelia and Samuel's relationship from distant to open. Kent does an excellent job building relatability and empathy between the characters and the audience. The first half of the film shows Amelia struggling as a single mother burdened by trauma. Samuel exhausts her, and she resents him for Oskar's death. We see her overwhelmed by Samuel's presence, and she rejects his affection. By the second half of the film, audiences start to understand Samuel's perspective. Samuel is a small child trying to fit in while grieving a father he never met, and he resents Amelia for keeping Oskar's memory from him. Although they experience the ghost of Oskar differently, Amelia and Samuel are both haunted. Amelia copes by locking away Oskar's things and ignoring his memory. Samuel actively wishes to talk about his father, while he is labeled as an outsider for not having a dad. Ultimately, it is Samuel's love for his mother that saves her. He stands up to the Babadook and teaches Amelia to be open about her feelings and Oscar's death. The mother and son become empathic to each other and together confront their grief. Amelia no longer sees Samuel as the reason for Oskar's death, but rather as a companion in her grief and a reason to live.

Conversely, in *The Invitation*, Will has some insight into how Eden feels, as the couple had grieved together prior to the events of the film. But after two years of no contact, Eden claims she has let her pain go. It is Eden's cheerful attitude and dismissal of Ty's death that Will finds suspicious, prompting him to investigate. He knows her well and can identify that she is acting out of character. The film is charged with Will's anxiety and trauma surrounding the loss of his son, this tone is consistent and helps audiences understand just how bizarre Eden seems in comparison. Will's flashbacks also highlight this. Audiences see Eden, Will, and Ty happy

together, but another flashback shows Will stopping Eden's graphic attempt at suicide following Ty's accident. Chronologically, the audience witnesses Eden's suicide attempt juxtaposed against her happily hosting a dinner party for her friends. Will carries the same pain as Eden, he is haunted by Ty and knows that she is as well. This is confirmed when Will and his girlfriend Kira face Eden while trying to escape the house. Eden shoots Will in the shoulder before shoots herself in the stomach, and with her dying breaths tells Will that she misses Ty. She asks him to carry her outside so that she can die in the same spot Ty did, and he, along with Kira, agrees. Will spends Eden's last moments with her mourning their son and the life they had before his death. *The Invitation* does not have a happy ending. In the end Will and Kira were attacked, watched their friends die, and had to kill for survival. However, the film does end with closure. Will must face the ghosts of his past to survive and empathizes with Eden even after she's tried to kill him. His attitude shifts from resentment towards Eden for running away to an understanding of why she did so.

In *Crimson Peak*, Empathy is a key tool for Edith as well. In Allerdale Hall, the ghosts of people she does not know reveal themselves to her and warn her of the darkness that lies within Allerdale. While initially, she is frightened of the ghosts and assumes they seek to harm her, she soon realizes that the ghosts are trying to help, much like the ghost of her mother did before she met Thomas. The ghosts in Allerdale lead Edith to the information she needs to learn the truth and save herself. With their guidance, she carefully examines the house in which she is trapped, gaining glimpses into the Sharpes' murky past. While Edith may not be witnessing her memories through the ghosts she sees, she does learn about their lives. She opens herself up to their experiences and asks them how she can help. When Edith asks the ghost of Thomas' deceased wife, Enola, to tell her what she wants from her, Enola points in the direction of the attic, where

Edith discovers Lucille and Thomas's incestuous relationship. In the end, Edith is driven as much by her need to right the Sharpes' wrongs as she is by a desire to save herself. Edith's arc shows her using the past to guide her decision-making. Edith fails to understand her mother's warning, but it is when she starts listening to ghosts that she is able to save her own life.

Each of these narratives follow characters haunted by the memories of people that are tethered to them or their locations. As in any gothic haunting, the ghosts are overwhelming, all-encompassing problems that cannot be avoided. In each story, the protagonist must confront their ghosts to move on with their lives. In contrast, characters like Eden, Thomas, and Lucille are unable to confront their trauma or the ghosts of their pasts, and therefore all die in their houses. Eden dies in the same spot as Ty. She cannot sever that memory, nor can she confront it, so she recreates it in the end. Thomas attempts to confront his actions but instead of accepting what he and Lucille have done, he proposes they run from it, prompting Lucille to decide for the both of them that they will instead die at Allerdale. They become ghosts that haunt the halls like their victims and the other memories of the past. In *The Babadook*, while Amelia does survive, she is only able to do so once her son convinces her to confront her emotions. The Babadook was always inside of Amelia, slowly taking control of her actions and attempting to kill her son but Samuel yells at the Babadook that he loves his mother. He tells them both that he knows his mother does not love him back because the Babadook will not let her, and that she must get the monster out. Through Samuel's love and belief, Amelia forces the Babadook out through pain and tears before saving herself and her son when she stands up to the monster by accepting her reality. The Babadook is banished to the basement, and Amelia learns to settle the monster and her grief a little bit more each day. Amelia and Samuel start a new chapter of their lives, in which they are open about their trauma. They celebrate Samuel's birthday, and they talk about

Oskar. Amelia is now able to see Samuel's resemblance to his father as a loving reminder instead of a painful burden, which was not possible when she continued to repress her feelings. The emotional openness and recognition she exhibits is something Eden, Thomas, and Lucille cannot do; therefore, like Edith and Will, Amelia lives and they do not. This is a deviation from prior gothic ghost tales because unlike in other haunted house narratives, running from the ghosts is not enough. Instead, the theme of memory is used to convey a message of openness and acceptance of one's grief.

As Edith says at the end of *Crimson Peak*, ghosts can be tethered to a place, a time, etc. For Will, Ty is tethered to Eden's house, where he used to live, and the site of his tragic death. For Amelia, Oskar's "ghost" is tied to the day he died, Samuel's birthday. The characters may not face the tangible ghosts of the deceased the same way as Edith, but they are unable to escape the memories of their dead loved ones. As much as the ghosts of Edith's mother and the Sharpe's victims, Ty and Oskar haunt Will and Amelia. Hauntings, ghostly memories, and literal ghosts are all part of gothic iconography. Utilizing ghostly tropes is another way *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* reference and borrow from gothic horror history.

Isolation

Isolation is a popular theme in the horror genre (Friedman et al. 391). Horror films such *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), *Fright* (1971), *When a Stranger Calls* (1979/2006), *Misery* (1990), and *Saw* (2004) famously trap their protagonists in a confined location where the entire movie takes place. *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* use this theme and associated plot devices as most of the scenes take place within the characters' homes. At first they can travel outside of the home and are shown in secondary locations, but as the conflict arises they are confined to their respective houses. Haunted house movies rely on the characters' interactions

with the house. Isolation is a reliable plot device for stories, as it forces the characters to stay in the haunted home. Eden and David's home in *The Invitation* is already an isolated location. The house is far from the city or any neighbors and has no cell phone reception. Eden mentions that the phone lines are also down, so their party guests have no way of contacting the outside world. Allerdale Hall is also established as an isolated location. It is miles from the nearest town and a four hour walk from civilization on top of being snowed in at the film's climax. In *The Invitation*, David locks all the doors once everyone is inside. There have also been bars placed over the windows, preventing anyone in the house from leaving in any way. Will and Kira are forced to realize that there is no escape unless they confront their attackers. When Edith, poisoned and with a broken leg, is about to escape Allerdale with Dr. Alan McMichael. Lucille demands that Thomas stab Alan and in doing so forces Edith to stay. Edith and Alan, like Will and Kira, learn there that there will be no leaving without a fight. The attacks from the antagonists are made especially deadly through the physical isolation of their victims.

In *The Babadook*, the monster works to isolate Samuel and Amelia. When the Babadook gets inside of Amelia, he starts to drive her mad. She becomes irrational and violent towards Samuel as she drowns in her hatred for the child. Amelia cuts the phone lines in the house to keep Samuel from calling for help along with locking the doors and even killing the dog, leaving them completely alone. Amelia's character is also isolated in life. She feels stuck with Samuel, and her life revolves around caring for him. When Amelia is given an afternoon off of work, she uses that time to be alone and forget about her responsibilities but is then shamed for doing so. She cannot escape her responsibility to Samuel and even as Amelia sleeps, the hours pass by like a flipbook and she wakes up exhausted. She has no outlet or freedom, thus isolating her in her pain and further driving her to madness. Madness is historically a popular horror theme. Gothic

films about mad scientists show characters hungry for power and knowledge slowly lose their minds. Slasher films most often also star an erratic, insane killer who is driven by delusion, and in haunted house movies, a character is corrupted, often by supernatural entities, to hurt people. In *The Babadook* madness is personified through the titular entity and brought on by isolation. Amelia feels like she is going crazy, and is desperate for help, but no one sees her struggle, and she is left alone to lose her mind. Kent paces the film slowly and increases the shock value of each scene. This keeps audiences on their toes and pulls them into Amelia's downward spiral. What becomes so scary about *The Babadook* is not the monster necessarily, but Amelia's descent into insanity.

The connection between madness and isolation is present in *Crimson Peak* and *The Invitation* as well. Both films feature antagonists who are driven by madness to isolate and kill the protagonists rather than let them go. In *Crimson Peak*, Lucille, is so in love with Thomas that it becomes an obsession. She snaps and kills Thomas when he tells her he loves Edith. Lucille then dissolves into complete madness and becomes set on killing Edith as revenge. Up until this point, Edith, had been physically trapped in Allerdale for most of the film. At the end of the movie, she is only able to leave by escaping Lucille. Lucille will stop at nothing so Edith must kill her. Similarly, David and Eden lock their guests into the house for the dinner party. But it is after the first murder that audiences see the true lengths the antagonist will go to keep anyone from escaping. During Kira and Will's attempt to run, Pruitt attacks them. He chokes Will in a head lock and Kira hits him in the head with a blunt object to stop the murder. Pruitt continues to get up, and Kira hits him again. He gets up once more and she does the same. Finally, Pruitt, in a moment of pure insanity, lets out a long and loud scream; Kira hits him until he dies. Much like Lucille, he makes it clear he will never allow the protagonists to leave, and therefore Kira had to

kill him.

Escape is the goal in any isolation narrative. It is presumed by the characters and the audience that when they escape, their problems will be resolved. In all three films, the protagonist successfully escapes. As discussed earlier in this chapter, I argue that escape is only feasible through the characters' confrontation of their feelings, and that the characters who do not accept their reality or become open about their trauma all perish. Interestingly, the characters that die are those in control of the isolation of the protagonists. This prompts the question: if the protagonists had simply left the house, would they still escape the problem? I argue that they would not. A key example of why leaving does not constitute escape is Amelia, who is both the antagonist and the protagonist. Under the possession of the Babadook, she is the one that cuts the phone line and locks the doors. The Babadook traps her inside her own body. So, while the climax of the film occurs in the confines of the Vanek home, the true isolation is taking place within Amelia. She is trying to escape her grief, not her house. Likewise, Will survives in the end of *The Invitation*, but that does not mean he is done grieving Ty. Rather, his narrative relies on the importance of Ty in his life and despite how painful it might be, he does not want to forget the memory of his son. Through her attempt at murdering Will and her suicide, Eden shows that there is no true escape. The nature of grief is profoundly personal and intimate, thus creating an isolating and solitary experience.

In *Crimson Peak*, unlike Edith, Thomas and Lucille have the physical ability to escape Allerdale but are compelled by the inescapable ghosts of their pasts to stay. Not only do Thomas and Lucille's victims haunt the home, they also sustain its survival. Lucille's obsession with Allerdale stems from her inability to forget the past. She holds onto Thomas as the only light in her miserable memory. The two are surrounded by the ghosts of their trauma, but also the ghosts

of their guilt. They are responsible for the deaths that occurred in the home. It is impossible for them to escape the lives they have sacrificed in their quest to stay together and keep Allerdale standing. Thomas and Lucille kill to fund the life they built in Allerdale but, like the mansion, this life is crumbling. Allerdale belonged to their mother and when they killed her, it became theirs. There is no sun and no escape; the mansion is hollow and isolated from the world. Lucille is particularly stuck in the past and refuses to leave the home, doing anything to keep from losing Allerdale or her brother. The siblings grew up isolated in Allerdale's attic, abused by their mother. Lucille explains that the only love either of them ever felt was from each other. Thomas and Lucille are bonded by their shared trauma and incestuous love, which ties them to the house. Lucille's influence keeps the two at Allerdale, constantly reliving their past. It is not until Thomas meets Edith and discovers another form of love that he has a desire to leave but ultimately, he is unable to escape Lucille. Ironically, when Thomas finally attempts to leave Allerdale, Lucille kills him, thus trapping his ghost on the grounds forever. Both Thomas and Lucille die at Allerdale, where their ghosts will linger for eternity.

Conclusion

Escaping a dark house full of life-threatening evil has been seen time and time again. In *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak*, the characters become trapped in sinister homes that seem to have personalities of their own. The theme of isolation is prevalent in these stories, but each protagonist fails to escape until they confront the evils within the homes. In each film, this "evil" can be attributed to the trauma and grief carried by the characters. This narrative mechanism highlights not only the importance of confronting one's feelings but the connection of the emotional and the physical self. Kent, Kusama, and del Toro create associations between being physically trapped by the seclusion of the houses and being emotionally trapped by trauma

and memory. I argue that in the cases of *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak*, the themes of memory and isolation can be combined into the singular theme of being trapped.

Each character is trapped by their situation, relationship, or the state of their mental health. Additionally, the characters are tied to the houses they are isolated in through the trauma that was created in those spaces. By physically trapping the protagonists in their houses, the plot guarantees they will have to address their emotional response to the location and more broadly, their grief. The films show this challenge to be equally difficult as physically escaping the haunted houses. Each house is shown as an all-encompassing burden. The characters face grievous physical injuries and come close to death, but that is only half the battle. Equating physical restriction and harm to mental and emotional damage shows that both are legitimate, sometimes insurmountable, obstacles. This nuanced understanding of isolation in horror films, as more than just a physical confine, is a new direction for the genre. In conclusion, *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* create a new understanding of what it means to be trapped. The films argue that it is not enough to run away from a monster, but rather, the message is to embrace emotional openness and treat mental suffering as equal to physical suffering.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The purpose of my research was to examine the gothic influence on contemporary horror cinema of the 2010s by conducting a comparative analysis of *The Babadook* (2014), *The Invitation* (2015), and *Crimson Peak* (2015). I aimed to look specifically at the theme of isolation and its relationship to gothic horror as well as focus on the significance of setting in the three films. I was interested in finding common themes in the texts and assessing if they reflected the cultural themes of the time. My analysis examined haunted houses as a trope in the horror genre and characterized these settings by the presence of ghosts and the personification of the locations. I explored the intertextual references in *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak*, to highlight the films' gothic inspiration. Through film analysis, I identified four themes these texts share: "Houses with Personality," "Tragic Losses," "Memories and Ghosts," and "Isolation." Finally, I concluded this analysis by combining the four themes into one, "being trapped." I argue that the films utilize the concept of being trapped or stuck, both physically and emotionally, to illustrate the impact of trauma and mental illness. The results of my research conclude that the films articulate the importance of confronting grief and emotional vulnerability, which is consistent with societal trends and conversations surrounding destigmatizing mental illness.

Major Conclusions

In my analysis, I classified *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* as "haunted house films." Haunted houses have been present throughout film history and originated from gothic literature. Identifying the use of this trope was one of the ways I connected the films to the gothic horror genre. As I explained in the previous chapter, haunted houses are a trope that has been seen since the very first horror film. It is a setting that presents as familiar and comforting

as well as dangerous and uncanny. Historically, haunted houses in horror cinema are used to propose a threat to the traditional family unit and domestic life. *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* all disrupt the family unit by featuring chaos and violence in the home. Additionally, they depict this disruption through painful memories that haunt the characters and their settings. A haunted house is a personified location that the plot of these films centers around as if it were a character. The houses reflect the mental state and personalities of their owners while also being the primary setting for most of their trauma. “Hauntings” are depicted as memories that linger in the house and trigger the inhabitants to remember. These factors are why I categorize the films as haunted house narratives.

What I find unique about *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* is that they focus on how being haunted by memories and trauma affects the mental health of the characters. This is a new trend for the genre. The films I analyzed are not only about scaring the characters, rather, the thing to fear is the everyday horror of living after a traumatic event. Furthermore, it is significant that this message occurs in a domestic setting for the texts are communicating that trauma is the threat to the family. In each film, trauma does not just disappear. Instead, only the characters who acknowledge their grief and become open about their mental health are able to survive. It is a point of the films to encourage an open confrontation of trauma in order to begin the healing process.

In *The Babadook*, Amelia and Samuel become open about their pain and recognize grief as a normal human reaction. The Babadook may never fully go away, but by standing up to him and enacting change the family is able to take control of their lives and drastically improve their mental health. The film ends on a hopeful note and with a happy family. *The Invitation* ends on a more somber note but similarly explores grief as part of the human condition. The film shows

that everyone experiences a sense of pain and grief and that there are many people hurting badly enough to crave an escape. As part of the suicide pact, David lights a red lantern in his yard. At the very end of the film, Kira and Will look out over the hills to see hundreds of red lights. *The Invitation*'s ending highlights the widespread effects of trauma and the suffering many people experience. Kusama is commenting on a growing and widespread epidemic of miserable people looking for direction, something society was grappling with in the 2010s. *Crimson Peak* displays this suffering through Edith's communication with the ghosts of Allerdale Hall. By seeking out the ghosts of the past, Edith acknowledges the pain and grief that has taken place within the estate. She is able to survive by listening and being empathic. Although the ghosts are not the result of Edith's trauma, they are characters whom she can relate to as they are all victims of the Sharp siblings. Edith connects with the ghosts and makes it out alive because of it.

In the three films, we also see the punishment of characters that do not confront their demons. When Amelia tried to ignore the Babadook he just grew stronger and the characters in *The Invitation* believed that the only way for them to escape their ghosts was to die. Finally, Lucille and Thomas struggle throughout *Crimson Peak* to let go of their house of horrors, a symbol of their trauma bond, which in the end is their downfall. These films, by punishing repression and embracing openness, advocate for the de-stigmatization of mental health. I argue in my thematic analysis that this message is also promoted through the shared themes of the three films, specifically the concept of isolation. I classify isolation into two categories: physical and emotional. In the films, characters are trapped physically within the walls of the houses, but they are also haunted by the memories of traumatic events. For the characters I examined, escaping their setting would not necessarily be their salvation because their "hauntings" are intangible and based on their memories. The films argue that it is not enough to run away from a monster, but

rather, the message is to treat mental suffering with the same sense of urgency as physical suffering. *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* create a new understanding of what it means to be trapped, for they illustrate how isolation is about more than setting.

In conclusion, I argue that 2010s horror cinema, as seen in *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak*, uses the haunted house trope to change and challenge the genre and society. The “haunted house” is an intertextual concept and setting that audiences are familiar with as part of gothic iconography. The films expand upon the haunted house narrative by presenting emotional perils as incredibly dangerous. The “new” threat to the family and society, as depicted in 2010s horror cinema, is a lack of conversation surrounding grief, trauma, and mental health.

The Babadook, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* start their stories in the aftermath of the traumatic events inflicted upon the character. The films usher in a trend that unpacks the implications of tragedy, loss, and unexpected trauma. Beyond this, the films also present a call to action: an argument that we as a society need to acknowledge our trauma as the first step of healing. The subsequent conversations about grief and mental illness are identifiable in the films I analyzed and in society. The 2010s saw a rise in the effort to de-stigmatize mental health (Guttuso). We saw this in popular culture, politics, and our personal lives. Social media helped to foster communities that were supportive of mental health struggles and as a result more individuals became open about their mental illness (Koelliker). Celebrities and prominent figures also started to share their experiences and help normalize mental health disorders. Mental health became a conversation of public health as medical professionals and politicians began to acknowledge stigma as a barrier to emerging within health care (Parcesepe and Cabassa). The era began an understanding of the widespread effects of mental illness on society. It was time to

treat mental illness as seriously as physical illness. The decade continued these conversations to the point where there is much less stigma around mental illness than before. In the last ten years, Americans in particular saw a rise in the accessibility of mental health care due to the increased affordability of care and the expansion of healthcare assistance programs (Guttuso). More than 20 million Americans gained health insurance through the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA) (Nova). The ACA kicked off the decade with millions of Americans now having potential access to mental health care for the first time in their lives, which was a major factor in the national conversation about mental health (Koelliker). *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* are participating in this dialogue. Like many films and television shows from the 2010s (Holmes), they use themes surrounding mental health, de-stigmatization, and the implications of trauma because those topics were trending in popular culture. Mental health is a theme that audiences would have been discussing in their lives as a new and sometimes frightening idea to confront. The films I analyzed use audience fears surrounding conversations about mental health to create impactful narratives that connect to viewers' anxieties.

My major findings highlighted that the overarching theme of all three films is the concept of being trapped, both emotionally and physically. The films show characters who are trapped by their trauma and within the confines of their home. I propose that this theme is a metaphor for the burden that mental illness can put on someone's life if they do not receive the help and support they need. This metaphor is visible in my analysis of the films and in cultural conversation of the 2010s. Moreover, the theme of being trapped has only expanded in our cultural dialogue. We are now seeing, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, frustration with both physical isolation due to necessary safety measures, and the massive inequalities that exist in society which forces individuals into immobility. Through my research I have gained an

understanding of America's political relationship to horror films. Horror films use the real anxieties facing a society to comment on those fears. I predict that in the next decade horror films will tackle systems of oppression as forms of isolation and restriction. The continuation of the theme of isolation is a continuation of gothic influences, but so is commenting on society and class structure. Both themes are carried through each wave of horror and are able to adapt to the times.

Implications

My research is just one piece in understanding the significance of 2010s horror, however, I believe my argument adds to that dialogue. I offer a partial analysis of the era and identify the influences that lead to this point in horror history. My research builds upon the horror film scholarship that already exists in the field, while also presenting new ideas and perspectives. An implication of my project is that this work contributes to horror film studies by illustrating the contemporary use of gothic inspiration in the genre. I show how *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* present original takes on the haunted house trope thus offering an updated examination of a classic horror staple. Similarly, I am adding to the limited pool of writing on 2010s horror. Horror film studies look at decades of horror cinema to draw conclusions about the fears of an era. Providing new research on the recently ended 2010s is another way my thesis has implications for horror film studies.

Additionally, a further implication of my analysis is that it provides an example of how popular cultural texts, such as films, engage in mental health conversations. I describe how the films persuade audiences to fear the repression of mental illness and trauma and instead encourage openness, support, and validation. As discussed earlier in this chapter, de-stigmatization of mental health issues was a popular cultural dialogue of the 2010s. Films such as

The Babadook, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* exemplify the popularity of that conversation by participating in it. Not only are they commenting on the mental health cultural dialogue, they share a role in the de-stigmatization efforts of the decade. This is significant for film studies more broadly, as it shows the relationship between culture and media.

Lastly, my project has implications for audiences. In addition to believing *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* have cultural significance, I think they are good movies. I encourage anyone who reads my research to also watch the films. All three films are genuinely terrifying and beautiful, I highly recommend them to anyone wanting to take a fresh look at gothic horror. If my analysis does anything, I hope that it draws attention to the texts and generates interests in these films.

Limitations

An obvious limitation of my work is I looked at only three films from the 2010s. While I was able to illustrate the cultural and societal connections in texts, a more comprehensive analysis would look at a greater number of films. Hundreds of horror films came out during the decade and it is possible that the trends I am focusing on were only significant in the films I selected. Additionally, I only looked at Western Hollywood cinema. *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* are movies that I, an American audience member, watched and then compared to the cultural context in which I live. When I say 2010s horror cinema, I am referring to the Western motion pictures that I am familiar with based on my positionality. As I highlight in my Literary Review, the meaning of a film is created through the content, context, and audience interpretation of the message. Both the content and context of the movies are shaped by the influences of Hollywood filmmaking. Furthermore, my perception of the films is framed by my experience with the genre but also my position as an American viewer. It is

important to acknowledge this limitation and my bias in order to express to my readers that my analysis is not all-encompassing. Rather, my findings can only be applied to a small portion of society and are not reflective of transnational cinema.

Lastly, I looked at three films that utilize similar tropes, narratives, settings, and influences. Even within American filmmaking, there are numerous other types of horror films that explore vastly different stories. If I were to have compared, for example, a zombie film, a slasher, and a creature feature I most likely would have identified a different set of themes and conclusions. I intentionally chose films that I felt shared meaning, were similarly influenced by gothic horror, and used haunted house iconography and by doing so limited the elements I would be examining. As a consequence of my limitations, my findings should be seen as an example of how some instances of 2010s horror cinema tackle themes of isolation and prompt conversations about mental health.

Recommendations for Future Research

Each limitation I outlined in the previous section acts as an opportunity for future research. While my scope was limited to three films, further research could explore different 2010s horror films in various ways. Researchers could sample three other movies from the decade or even a larger number of films. Additionally, future studies could look at a different sub-genre of horror and perhaps move away from focusing on gothic influence. As I discussed, my research was also limited because of the cultural context I examined. A variation in my study could analyze similar themes and intertextual references but through a non-Western lens. For example, Asian horror cinema from Japan and South Korea is wildly popular even in the United States. It would be significant to analyze 2010s horror films from those cultural contexts to examine the societal themes they were exploring. Mental health is something that is viewed and

discussed differently around the world. Therefore, to better understand where other cultures were at with those conversations during the era, it would be necessary to research the media they were producing. Perhaps mental health would not even emerge as a theme, and researchers studying a different cultural export may find alternative movements and discussions.

The scope of my analysis looked at the gothic elements and haunted house tropes in the three films. I chose to use comparative film analysis as my method for this study in order to explore the visual, rhetorical, and cultural arguments presented in the films. I felt that a film analysis that reflected upon how the filmmakers were achieving their message through intertextual references and film dimensions, was the best way for me to compare the three films and identify their shared themes. However, there are many other elements to the films worthy of examination that I did not explore. A future variation in this research could use a different methodology, such as feminist, queer, or formal criticism, or audience analysis to understand the films from an alternate perspective. For example, *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* each have female leads and multiple female characters. A feminist criticism could highlight how the films subvert traditional horror stereotypes, if at all. Or, a project could use audience analysis to see what themes and ideas multiple viewers see presented in the films.

Lastly, other horror trends emerged in the genre during the latter half of the 2010s and early 2020s. The frustration Americans have with systemic structures is a concept heavily explored in recent horror cinema. Race, class, and gender oppression through the long standing enforcements of social systems has understandably resulted in a dissatisfaction with our culture. This is something I only touch briefly for it is a trend most visible in the years after 2015. To really explore this idea and support its relevance, there needs to be more research on newer

horror films. A study could aim to articulate how horror films from the last five years reflect social discontent with the current structures and acknowledge systems of oppression.

Final Thoughts

I went into this process only knowing that I wanted to write about horror films. In March of 2020 it became clear that my life and the lives of everyone else were about to change forever. Now, a year later, while the end of the COVID-19 pandemic may seem closer in sight, the impact of this global tragedy will linger for years to come. I chose to write about films and a topic that I found both interesting and felt passionate about. However, I was concerned that my research would feel untimely or be irrelevant to the current cultural conversations. Was writing about horror movies and haunted houses a valuable topic considering the state of the world? It wasn't until I began my analysis that I saw the parallels between the three horror films I selected and the life so many of us have been living. Struck with traumatic and sudden loss, the characters in the films fight for survival behind the walls of their homes. They are isolated, trapped, and grieving not only people but the lives they once knew. As of March 2021, in the United States alone, 540,000 people have died from COVID-19 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). Everyone knows someone who has died in this pandemic and the gravity of this national loss weighs on us all. We are expected to wake up each day and live our lives while we watch our communities, our neighbors, and families die. On top of that, there is a sense of helplessness we feel, that there is nothing we can do to escape. Normalcy has been put on hold as a necessary means of survival. To fight the pandemic, we have had to practice social isolation. Many American's have spent the last year trapped inside their homes. There is a profound sense of loneliness and isolation impacting humanity. In addition to grieving the individuals we have lost, we grieve the lives we lead prior to the global pandemic. Although I previously felt as though my

research was irrelevant to our current moment in history, I now feel that the themes of grief and isolation could not be more applicable. In one way or another, we are all living in a haunted house; trapped both physically and emotionally by the impact of the COVID-19.

The 2010s popular culture created a conversation that illuminated mental health struggles as an issue of public concern. There was an emphasis on de-stigmatizing mental illness and likening its severity to physical health. Mental health became a concern for everyone, it was something we realized affected us all. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a reminder that we as a society must take mental health seriously. Individuals are suffering from trauma inflicted by the pandemic; in order to heal we must not ignore the issue. I conclude that the messages and themes of *The Babadook*, *The Invitation*, and *Crimson Peak* are as relevant now as they were in the 2010s.

Grief and isolation surround us all and I predict we will explore this further for years to come. I want to conclude my thesis by arguing the same message as the three films; we need to face the monsters in front of us. You cannot pretend that things are normal, that our problems will just go away, and that people aren't continuing to hurt. To end the pandemic, to fight structural equality and oppression, and to heal from our trauma, we must acknowledge the issues and exorcise our ghosts.

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