

# The Horror Within:

## An Analysis of Psychological Horror Films' Representation of Trauma Through Focalisation

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## Introduction

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Horror films have become a paradox. Since the rise of the genre in early cinema it has been continuously subject to polarizing reception. Film critics and film historians can never seem to agree on the perceived value of horror in film. It has been both stamped as inherently “degrading” as well as “uplifting”. In pop culture and within the film world, it has attracted strong opinions over its perceived lowbrow artistic value. This is in part due to its abundance of hyperviolence and supernatural antirealism to achieve entertainment, sometimes accused of being done in favour of relatable and meaningful narratives.

However, as the genre developed with time it slowly began to be picked up as a topic worth of analysis within the larger world of film studies. And consequently, the role of horror in film began to be theorised; retroactively observing and contextualising patterns that had emerged within the genre. Namely horror’s ability to represent the intensity of inner emotional conflict in humans, mainly trauma, through focalisation. A narrative technique wherein the story is presented and through and shaped by the character’s perspective. This is particularly true of the subgenre of ‘psychological horror’ which focuses on horror within the mind as opposed to only external threats. The result is an often more realistic and relatable approach to the fears horror is meant to evoke.

The purpose of this essay is to better understand the characteristic techniques psychological horror films can employ to achieve this goal. This will be done through the study of previously established literature as well as the findings of scene analyses. All knowledge gained from this will then be applied on the production of an essay film as a practical thesis. It will be a psychological horror story about the haunting effect of trauma that will display audiovisual storytelling inspired by the effective examples this essay will delve into. The main research question guiding this essay is therefore:

*How do psychological horror films use focalisation to represent the experiencing of trauma?*

## **Theory**

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To approach the analysis with a comprehensive foundation established, literature by film scholars, and especially authors that specialise(d) in horror studies, was reviewed first. This allows for a better insight of the terms and concepts that will be delved into in this essay. It also serves as inspiration for the framework of the analysis.

### **Evolution of the horror genre**

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Horror as film has evolved significantly. It is considered to have become an official minor genre as of the 20s during the peak of expressionism thanks to German movement hits like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [1920] (Kristin Thompson, 2019, p. 137). Whilst most horrors are overwhelmingly characterized as such over any other genre, since the mid-century boom of contemporary horror it has become deeply saturated, splitting into multiple recognisable categories – subgenres (Hutchings, 2004, pp. 1-7). Each appeal to a wide variety of target audiences through their unique narrative styles. Overall horror tends to adhere to a formula of visual elements and tropes. These include the use of both intentionally disorienting or invasive cinematography, grotesque visuals, suspenseful music and silence interrupted by loud noises, unnatural colour and lighting (such as very cold or dark), etc (Kristin Thompson, 2019, p. 141) (Brown, 2016, p. 262). Concept-wise it also heavily features the supernatural, violence and cruel/evil humans, all which spawn their own subgenres with specific tendencies. For example, serial killer/slashers, monster/supernatural, and comedic, most of which also have their own more specific sub-subgenres (Kawin, 2012, p. 4). However, one particular subgenre, has shown diverging tendencies from its umbrella group's tropes, challenging the potential of the medium: psychological horror.

### **What defines psychological horror?**

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Sometimes overlapping with its terminologically older cousin, the thriller (Huss & Ross, 1972, p. 8) psychological horror has been defined as horror based on characters' emotions and beliefs, but mainly fears (Wendykowska, 2012, p. 1). Although the shift towards it has started as early as the 40s with examples like Lewton films favouring unseen terrors over obvious monsters, a clearer

wave started mid-century (Kristin Thompson, 2019, p. 207). *Psycho* [1960] is often seen as the first to explicitly combine elements of traditional gothic horror with the ever-evolving modern psychological thriller (Grant & Sharrett, 2004, pp. 115-6). A primary example of that is making the villain's mental instability the allusive "monster" (Chibnall & Petley, 2002, p. 72). Generally, films associated with this subgenre tend to display more subtle horror over sensationalism. *The Haunting* [1963], a film retroactively categorised as psychological horror and which spawned the genre-defining TV series *The Haunting of Hill House/Bly Manor* (the latter based on one of the first psychological horror novels *The Turn of the Screw*) represents this argument. It has been described as an example of "sensitivity and vulnerability" commonly tied to the genre (Gelder, 2000, p. 4).

### **Representation of trauma in film**

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With the increased significance of psychology studies in a post-World War II world people found in it the ability to help one process reality. This included taboo topics such as trauma: a violation of psychic boundaries due to an intensely stressful cause and that not is not only persistent, but its own symptoms can cause further trauma to the victim (Hurley, 2021, p. 1). It was also around this time that audiences' preference shifted to more realistic psychological genres such as thrillers over horror, especially due to the recent war trauma (Benshoff, 2017, p. 252). However, as time passed and horror had its highs and lows, the attitude towards trauma also changed. Some scholars argue this is due to the rise of a "trauma culture" wherein explorations of traumatic events or trends in media is believed to help establish a shared identity within the group it relates to. This is the explanation behind the quick inclination to represent human suffering in history through films and TV shows, whether or not it's dramatised (Meek, 2010, pp. 16-17).

This is where horror comes back in. Its narrative discourses can provide ways of defining evil of a socio-political system (Gelder, 2000, p. 1). It can thus create a rhetoric for commentary on the reality of a culture and act as representation of the oppressed (Grant & Sharrett, 2004, pp. 134-5). Additionally, most film theorists also agree that recreating unpleasant experiences through the safety of the fictional format allows for a more pleasurable consumption of heavy themes and thus a way to combat said repression (Hutchings, 2004, pp. 6-7). The act of photographing or filming something has the power to magnify life as one perceives it (McKee, 2010, p. 6). The

product of the use of filmic languages to represent trauma can therefore be synergetic (Elm, Kabalek, & Köhne, 2014, p. 8).

### **What defines focalisation?**

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In literature studies lies the narrative theory, a framework used to analyse the way narratives are constructed, structured, and developed within a story. It can be equally applied here to storytelling in film, however, the medium being audiovisual provides extra layers of effect and thus for analysis. And in the case of psychological horror films and trauma in film, a relevant extension of narrative theory is focalisation. A concept that defines narrative told through a focused point of view of short narrative distance. This refers to stories that are (whether partly or entirely) told through the view of the focaliser agent, most often the protagonist (Anastasova, 2018, p. 27). This focaliser may be a reflector – wherein that which they perceive is directly reflected through audiovisual storytelling – or a narrator – whose non-diegetic narration provides input on their stream of consciousness or interpretation of facts. The 3 main types of filmic focalisation in ascending levels of narrative distance are: outside view (an outsider's view into the story), proximate inside view (use of over-the-shoulder, reaction or eye-line shots to show the reflector's perspective) and direct inside view (direct POV shots of what the reflector sees) (Jahn, 2021, pp. 9-12). A focalised narrative will therefore be limited to that which the focaliser experiences through the senses that the storytelling medium can provide (Anastasova, 2018, p. 31). In film that is mainly audiovisual with other senses described either verbally or through body language. The main intent of focalisation is to internalise the story the way the focaliser experiences it, limiting the audience to interpreting this information based solely on their own subjective thought process with a varying amount of external context the story may provide through non-focalisation. It can also create a higher chance of character engagement, i.e., relatability with the character in question as the audience no longer observes from a long distance but can get as figuratively close to the focaliser as the storytelling medium and its creator(s) allows it (Reinhard & Olson, 2016, p. 203).

Psychological horror films, following the trends of its parent genre has made common use of this narrative style to induce more effective immersion for a stronger scare factor. This is typically through horror filmic language – such as camera angles, framing, editing, sound design – meant

to engage the viewer within the horror scenarios from the perspective of a character directly involved in them (Tomasulo & Branigan, 1988, p. 310). This is also called passive identification and is one of the ways horror films especially can create the excitement people watch it for (Bazin, 2005, p. 113). Additionally, it is also more common to present just as much if not more offline perception – that which is subjective and hypothetical like visions of dreams, memories, or hallucinations – than most other genres which adhere to online perception instead – i.e., hypothetical objective reality. This is done to purposefully confuse the viewer so that they relate to the focaliser’s reactions to their upsetting and reality-bending horror encounters (Jahn, 2021, pp. 9-14). However, psychological horrors tend to focus more on its uses for an in-depth character study and specifically to recreate the emotional state of experiencing trauma first-hand as well as its lasting effects. These films most often engage in a combination of fixed and variable focalisation. I.e., having a single focaliser for a single plot event or several for multiple events, respectively. Whilst the former is the most common for simplicity, the latter is used when the plot device affects more than just one character in a way the creator(s) wishes to delve into (Anastasova, 2018, p. 28). Ultimately the key is how perception of events from a particular character can influence the plot as well as the viewer experience pre- and post-viewing in the way which most effectively presents the story the creator intends to tell.

## **Methodology**

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To answer the research question a qualitative analysis of 3 scenes, each from a selection of 3 feature films will be done following a set framework. This will consist of categorically recognising any focalising storytelling elements or techniques pertaining to the genre which can be argued to serve as representation of trauma explicitly or sub-contextually. Each will then be expanded upon to define their interpretative effect.

All films were checked to be officially labelled as belonging to the psychological horror subgenre. Here, the number sample of 3 was chosen due to simplicity for more in-depth analysis. There was also an element of subjective selection based on this essay's author's personal interpretation and knowledge of trauma allegory and thus analysis content to be found in the example films. These interpretations will be argued in the analysis which will be sorted by release date from oldest to newest film. This is to observe the development of the subgenre and its representation of trauma through history for further insight on filmic intent.

## Analysis

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Upon watching all films through an analytical lens, the most prominent storytelling elements found associated with horror and which applied focalisation were those of surrealistic nature. Amongst these were:

- Apparitions/visions
- Auditory sound effects/hallucinations
- Purposefully discomfoting camera angles from proximate or direct inside views
- Long take lengths and/or disorienting editing
- Suspenseful score music broken by silence and vice versa

Generally, these elements appeared in reactionary scenes with the primary purpose to inspire fear in the audience. However, they also commonly served to define the focaliser as a character as well as affect their behaviour and subsequently their story arc. By framing the narrative style as (mostly) fixed focalisation within an offline perception all chosen scenes exemplified the way these films told the story through the focaliser's subjective interpretation of reality. As an intentional story device, the result was that in every case it made the audience, other characters, and even the focaliser themselves question the latter's mental state in a way that was thematically tied to something they uniquely experienced. In the case of this film selection those experiences were intrinsically linked to a recurringly triggered trauma. These were either established prior to the plot or they happened during the runtime and affected the rest of the film.

Alternatively, there were also instances of variable focalisation wherein more than one character took a role as focaliser throughout the story. This was to have multiple characters interact with the same reality for means of conflict and exploration of their relationship dynamics. Typically, these were characters who shared the same traumatic experience or were both affected by it to any extent. However, the dominant technique was fixed focalisation for not just the chosen scenes but the overall films as they focused on a particular protagonist's journey.

**Example 1: The Haunting [1963]**

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**Contextual background of The Haunting**

Following *Psycho* [1960] came this novel adaptation by Robert Wise. It is notable for its groundbreaking special effects, often subtle for the time, which aided in creating a sense of uninterrupted realism. In this film Wise sought to emphasise his interpretation of the book's supernatural plot as metaphorical for depression and mental breakdown. And as such it is one of the earliest examples that were intentionally striving towards the psychological horror category, and which used the combination of horror and subjective point of view as a device to tell a story of psychological depth, mainly about mental anguish.

**Synopsis of The Haunting**

The Haunting is about a group participating in a paranormal investigative study led by Dr. Markway, with Eleanor being the protagonist and focaliser agent. Whilst the other two members, the sceptical Luke, who's related to the heir of the manor, and Theodora, a psychic, have more logical reasons for accepting to take part in the experience, Eleanor's is personal. At first it is based on the fact she saw ghosts in her childhood, but early on it's revealed that after spending her young adult years taking care of her sick mother who eventually passed, she feels lost and without purpose. A prevalent theme in the film is the search for meaning and identity, embodied in the idea of a home. The Hill House's history is plagued by tragedy which is emblematic of the idea of mental illness being a family curse, both metaphoric and figuratively as the house is considered to either harbour suffering or be its cause. And this concept can then logically be followed by the idea that trauma can also follow a person and affect their perception. That is the premise for the chosen scene of this film.

**Scene: The first night**

After everyone's settled into Hill House, they spend their first night there. Eleanor, who the film spends the most time with and is thus the established main focaliser, is alone in one of the many rooms. She is awoken by loud banging sounds coming from the wall behind her bed. She at first responds tiredly thinking it's her mother, however she recognises where and when she is and joins a panicked Theo in the other room. Since Theo also experiences the same event alongside

Eleanor, she is the second focaliser in this variable focalisation. However, notably the main characteristics of the event tie back uniquely to Eleanor's trauma which only she is aware of and can recognise. So as the two bear witness to a sequence of supernatural activities terrorising them it is Eleanor who frames them in a perspective of her own and which the audience receives. For example, the first activity – i.e., horror element – is the noise of banging on the walls, which gets progressively louder and appears to move around the room. During this Eleanor thinks to herself, which is narrated to the audience, "It's not at all like Mother knocking on the wall". Later during the film, she reveals whenever her ill mother needed her, she'd knock incessantly on the wall whilst Eleanor sat on the other side, unable to have a moment of privacy or quiet. Her mother did this until Eleanor, growing tired, ignored her one day to rest, unaware her mother was dying. The guilt of which she confesses ashamedly to Dr. Markway and which – literally – haunts her all the way to Hill House despite her stay there being an attempt to escape everything (including her sister, who blames her for their mother's death). This is also symbolised by the direct inside view shot where Eleanor twice glances at herself in a mirror, unable to disassociate the situation from her own past and the feelings it triggers. Yet at this point in the story, she is still trying vehemently to deny what's she's experiencing, searching for logical solutions like the two men or the house's aging structure being the culprits. Since the topic of the supernatural is treated with both scepticism and curiosity the audience is not given clear indication on whether this is the case, or a coincidental interpretation triggered by Eleanor's intrusive reminiscence.



*Figure 1: Direct inside view shot of Eleanor looking in the mirror as she's reminded of her mother (The Haunting, 1963)*

Nonetheless, the haunting itself seems inescapably real to the focalisers – and thus the audience – as the pounding becomes so violent the sound distorts until it resembles a creature growling. A case of sound design being used to scare without much aid of visuals and provoke confusion in viewers. Eleanor tries to mask her fear by comforting Theo, mimicking the caretaking position she's been forced to grow into and which she's resented. Even though both characters are in the scene the editing often cuts to close-ups of Eleanor's reactions, particularly during narration, to emphasise how this is mostly her perspective. The unknown force tries to turn the doorknob only to suddenly return to banging, now accompanied by a maniacal female laughter. This in a way foreshadows Eleanor's demise at the end when she worsens mentally and dies in a car crash trying to escape the others and stay there forever. Therefore, elements like this voice, which goes from laughing to crying in another scene could be simultaneously mocking and mirroring Eleanor's inner turmoil of feeling guilty for trying to save her wasted youth and seek happiness by finding a home.

And so, because, in a moment of self-preserving selfishness Eleanor chose to keep sleeping the night her mother needed her most Hill House, the embodiment of one's innermost fears and obsessions, impedes her from sleeping now too. This scene's intention was to show the predatory and deteriorative effect of guilt due to one's role in a traumatic experience. Therefore, the use of focused camerawork, sound effects, and narration though effective on their own, added layers of intensity when contextualised by Eleanor's perspective, creating passive identification. Additionally, this scene is one of the most essential in establishing this film's underlying central antagonism as Eleanor's inability to cope with her family-based trauma and its horrific consequence on her grasp of reality.

### **Other elements in The Haunting**

There are multiple other moments that use filmic language to visualise the concept of mental unrest Wise was trying to portray. These include tight close-ups, foreshadowing transitions, a blend of suspenseful score and equally suspenseful silence cut by loud noises, and dramatic lighting setting focus on characters' fearful faces and sense of being lost in the dark. The set itself was built in a maze-like way with changing backgrounds and moving objects. These trap and confuse the characters and subsequently the viewers, much like mentally ill or traumatised

people become trapped by their minds. Its famous spiral staircase is an example of the architecture, when seen through the characters' perspective, alluding to the idea of a mind "spiralling" down into depression and subsequent madness.



*Figure 2: Transitioning fade showing Eleanor's fear and attraction to Hill House whilst also foreshadowing her becoming a spiritual part of it (The Haunting, 1963)*



*Figure 3: Dutch angle symbolising Eleanor breaking down and losing sense of her surroundings (The Haunting, 1963)*

**Example 2: Jacob's Ladder [1990]**

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**Contextual background of Jacob's Ladder**

The Adrian Lyne film shocked audiences with its disturbing surrealistic sequences. This was when the slasher subgenre was most popular, so to have a film rival in gory visuals, but centre its horror in mental anguish through an arthouse style narrative was rather novel. It even went on to inspire the use of psychological horror storytelling in the videogame series *Silent Hill* and can be said to have contributed to the discussion and awareness of war ethics, governmental experimentation and neglected mental healthcare.

**Synopsis of Jacob's Ladder**

The film's protagonist and main focaliser agent is Jacob, a Vietnam veteran working shortly after the war. He appears happy however his girlfriend, Jezebel is not only often dismissive of his mental struggles, but also tries to make him forget his former family life, including the memory of his youngest son who died before the war. This alludes to one of the film's general themes of confronting one's past pains to achieve happiness. Furthermore, Jacob is plagued by flashbacks to his last day in the war wherein his battalion was attacked physically, but also chemically. These are accompanied by increasingly distressing visions of people and monsters. His fellow battalion vets experience the same, believing these to be demons coming to send them to hell for their war acts. However, one by one each is silenced by force or murder by the military leading Jacob to try to uncover the truth whilst trying to keep his sanity and avoid the same fate.

**Scene: Jacob's hospitalisation**

This sequence uses fixed focalisation to follow Jacob as he is strapped to a gurney and carried through a hospital after being attacked by military agents. Just as everything else in the film, all Jacob witnesses here is his subjective point of view and therefore up to interpretation since he's an unreliable narrator. The narrative distance between the audience and the focaliser is small enough that the camerawork and sound design tend to be limited to what Jacob can feasibly perceive through proximate and direct shots. This increases character engagement where the audience is forced to share the experience. This technique is clear from the start of the sequence. As Jacob is being rolled through illogically long hallways, emphasising the dreamlike state, the

building transforms around him, appearing more abandoned and cluttered. He sees his late son Gabe's smashed bike spotlighted by the sun, representing the trauma of the accident and the subsequent loss of innocent life and happier days. The hospital then turns to a sanatorium where Jacob is surrounded by bloodied body parts and neglected patients acting erratically. Some intimidate him with hostile glares shot directly at the camera and thus at the audience. The unsympathetic employees ignore everything around them.

Jacob sees a man with a bagged, vibrating head, accompanied by echoed screams and a propeller. This reoccurring vision, like all the gore around him ties in with Jacob's war trauma, possibly representing the way he witnessed some of his comrades suffer seizures during the attack. It is later revealed that this was a result of a military chemical experiment to drug the soldiers into hyperaggression, but which led to a blind massacre and Jacob being stabbed by his own drugged comrade. The sensorial assault within the broken flashback scenes forces the audience to try to grasp onto any stimuli alongside the focaliser as they swing between distorted memories and realities. These include sounds – such as the rescue helicopter – and images – such as his comrades convulsing, all of which feature in nightmarish hallucinations haunting the focaliser.



*Figure 4: A reoccurring vision of a vibrating hooded man appears at the hospital likely reminding Jacob of his comrades being drugged (Jacob's Ladder, 1990)*

The employees eventually stop in an operating room where they mobilise Jacob to a bed and prepare him for an unknown surgery. Amongst them is Jezebel who is equally apathetic to the situation much to Jacob's added confusion and despair. At this point he starts sobbing and begging to be allowed to go home. One of the doctors probes Jacob about the purpose of going home because he claims Jacob is already dead, a reoccurring statement that Jacob refuses to believe. As he's panicking an employee with no eyes jabs a syringe through his forehead. Jacob screams and it cuts abruptly to another flashback. This end to the sequence is a representation of both traumas Jacob faced before, losing his son, and the attack during the war. The eyeless man injecting him is a visceral allusion to the ethically and morally blind attitude with which the military experimented on unwilling soldiers and that resulted in friend killing friend.



*Figure 5: An eyeless man operates on Jacob, seen from his helpless low angle POV, symbolising the military's disregard for ethics in their soldier experiments (Jacob's Ladder, 1990)*

At the end of the film, Jacob is revealed to have actually died right after the attack. Therefore, it is commonly theorised that this is purgatory and all his memories clashing into an offline perception of reality is his life flashing before him. It could be argued that he's being tested on whether he's going to survive or go to heaven or hell (hence the biblical title alluding to the path to heaven). This scene hints at this interpretation with the dialogue between Jacob and the doctor talking about Jacob already being dead but not letting go. This scene, like the entire film may be

Jacob's way of searching for purpose and will to keep going but being overwhelmed by the horror of his traumas.

### **Other elements in Jacob's Ladder**

The general non-linear narrative of the film acts as a primary form of disorientation that successfully captures the confusion and panic soldiers feel in war. This is seen whenever the film flashes back to the war scene which starts resembling Jacob's deteriorating reality more and more. Here the use of visual gore, especially with body parts and monstrous figures, can successfully disturb viewers alone whilst providing connections between the timelines as Jacob perceived them. Some examples like a disfigured nurse or flying bloodied goat teeth that try to bite Jacob can be compared to the severe injuries he and his comrades withstood during the war. However, it's the added camera movement (which often rotates whilst anchored on Jacob), shallow depth of field, the claustrophobic close-ups, the echoes of familiar noises and low-key lighting which most often create the focalised intensity needed to simulate Jacob's helplessness. On top of the war themes, it also serves as a look into the perspective of a mentally ill person struggling with their failing autonomy.



*Figure 6: The use of proximate reaction shots, camera movement and shallow depth of field simulate the focaliser's disorientation as he starts falling apart mentally (Jacob's Ladder)*

**Example 3: The Babadook [2014]**

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**Contextual background of The Babadook**

Jennifer Kent's debut film was dubbed "art-horror" and "elevated horror", retroactively named but only recently studied sub-genres with the latter being a 2010s term. Like other entries of its kinds, these sorts of films experiment with stylistic concepts and focuses on psychological character study as a form of horror. They also strive to avoid using common scare tactics and prefer intellectual horror storytelling. Whether or not *The Babadook* matches this definition is up still up for debate today, but there is a definitive observable attempt to construct an emotional narrative over focusing solely on typical horror elements.

**Synopsis of The Babadook**

Grief-stricken widow, Amelia, struggles to raise and discipline her troubled young son, Sam, who she seems to resent as her husband, Oskar, died driving her to give birth. As a result, he becomes aggressive and antisocial. Amelia herself has also grown depressed and shut-in since the accident so the two fail to communicate constantly. After Sam finds a children's book warning the reader of being cursed by a monster called *The Babadook* Sam believes it and causes them trouble trying to prepare himself by building weapons and traps. Though Amelia eventually realises the *Babadook* is real she still fights with Sam, slowly becoming more violent. It is implied the *Babadook* is manipulating her, even making her have visions of killing Sam. He must defend himself without severely hurting his mother. Eventually he manages to awaken her from her possession by returning her violence with a loving gesture, leading to the chosen scene.

**Scene: Confronting the Babadook**

Though both Amelia and Sam share the role of focalisers in their own respective times onscreen, it is Amelia who is given more prominent attention as the more emotionally complex protagonist. Therefore, here in the climax leading to the third act, though Sam features in part of the scene he is mostly kept offscreen or in the shadows and what the viewer sees is framed almost entirely through Amelia's perspective. This makes her an unreliable narrator to a certain extent as without Sam's presence or input every element can be taken as literal or hallucinatory. Once she is back to herself, she realises the *Babadook* will never truly go away as is forewarned in the book.

Whilst feeling hopeless she gets baited by the Babadook who drags Sam to the bedroom where Amalia screams at the Babadook about what it wants. Out of the shadows then comes a vision of Oskar. Here, he and Amelia are both in centre frame, staring directly at the camera to represent staring at each other, but also engaging the audience in Amelia's perspective through her reactions. He tells her to "Keep breathing", quoting the memory of him reassuring Amelia whilst driving her to the hospital the day he died. However, here it can be also read in the sense of keep living. In the prior scene Sam tells Amelia he knows she doesn't love him because the Babadook won't let her, but he does. That reinforces the idea that the Babadook represents not only the trauma of her loss, but also the depression that followed her, thereafter, impeding her from being able to enjoy life and even her own son. She finally acknowledges this here after the vision forces her to relive Oskar's gruesome death, her biggest pain. Since the composition is centred and the background is blackened out to spotlight his figure it is inescapably confrontational for the viewer too. His imaginary body is then dragged away by the invisible force of the Babadook, who essentially is trying to bait and consume Amelia at her most vulnerable state. This symbolises how depression from trauma can trigger intrusive negative thoughts and painful PTSD-related memories.



*Figure 7: The Babadook forces Amelia to relive her husband's death in a vision, much like an intrusive and inescapable PTSD flashback (The Babadook, 2014)*

Whilst Amelia is sobbing on her knees, she hears the growl of the Babadook, and it angers her enough to rise and confront it by telling it "You are nothing". The creature's arms creep out of the darkness towards the audience and the room shakes violently, simulated by camera

movement. Although Amelia and Sam are terrified, she stands her ground. She tells it that it's her house and to leave, threatening to kill it if it ever touches her son again. The Babadook, infuriated to grab Sam, but Amelia manages to get a hold of him and protects him. The two scream at the Babadook, Sam in terror but Amelia in defiance, the power of which shatters all the glass in the room and successfully makes the monster stop. His figure hovers near them for a moment but then disappears, leaving only clothes behind. Amelia gets curious and tries to approach it, despite Sam's protests and is startled by a burst of light – seen only on her face and not onscreen - that screams at her then flies into the basement where it stays. Its voice resembling a female's likely showing the Babadook was but a mere manifestation of Amelia's worst self, influenced by her own fears, anxieties, and pains and becoming a threat to herself and to her son.



*Figure 8: The Babadook's figure heading towards the camera aka towards both Amelia and the audience (The Babadook, 2014)*

By defying the Babadook in this scene Amelia is not allowing her trauma to consume her any longer and finding strength and will in her love for her son instead. As she asserts herself over her house and her son, she regains bodily, mental, and emotional autonomy whilst finding her core values again. Though the weakened Babadook eventually hiding in the basement represents how trauma-related depression may not be cured and still lives in the mind it can no longer haunt a person as the focus of their everyday life. The scene being shot in a way that attaches itself to Amelia's perspective more than in most of the film both enhances character engagement for this climax as well as allows the audience to share Amelia's traumatic experience and her emotional release. The confrontational and claustrophobic filmic techniques put focus on Amelia's view but

also leave room for doubt of how much of it was online – i.e., real – or offline perception affected by Amelia’s mental breakdown and traumatic flashbacks.

### **Other elements in *The Babadook***

The film follows certain classic horror elements like an old house, movements in the shadows and strange noises, to represent Amelia’s fears of parental failure and mental illness. This is seen primarily in plot and dialogue with most antagonisms being judgement or threats to Amelia’s unhealthy coping mechanisms and parenting. And once she becomes possessed, she gains superhuman strength which emphasises her fear of hurting her child due to being mentally unwell. In these moments Sam becomes the single or extra focaliser to allow the audience to view the situation from both affected parties’ perspectives.

Design-wise the lighting and colours are bleak, and silence often interrupts the otherwise equally uncomfortable sombre score, all to signify the family’s isolation. However, even though both are affected by the same tragedy it is Amelia who has to bear the brunt of the horror as the responsible adult. Therefore, the film mainly focuses on her experience. This is represented in the long, silent takes shot from her proximate or direct inside view, forcing the audience to share her loneliness and fear.



*Figure 9: A possessed Amelia sits alone in the dark, faintly lit by the TV, showing the isolating power of depression from both her and the audience’s outside view (The Babadook, 2014)*

## Conclusion

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The findings showed that the main elements used to represent trauma through focalisation were audiovisual hallucinations, soundtrack that varied between a suspenseful score and silence/ambience, thematic/emotive lighting, and disorienting proximate or direct inside view-based photography and editing. The use of focalisation in all selected films meant to place the audience within the mind of the focaliser(s), creating a distressing atmosphere and contextualising each plot point through their perspective and interpretation. That way each film could explore the theme of trauma as experienced by an affected person with a deeper level of narrative closeness to the audience, enhanced by filmic techniques. Though their plots varied, all films dealt with the subject of loss, primarily that of a close family member and the effect it had on all main characters as the unprocessed emotions, such as guilt and pain, haunt them. And the effectiveness of these techniques was significantly impacted by the genre. Through the context of psychological horror these emotions could manifest symbolically as surrealistic supernatural events thus allowing stylistic creative freedom for higher use of offline perception. This framework also allowed for exploration and a more emotionally accurate simulation of the focaliser agents' deteriorating mental health due to depression and PTSD as results of their traumas. In *The Haunting's* case focaliser Eleanor is haunted by her role in her mother's death, in *Jacob's Ladder* focaliser Jacob is haunted by both his son's death as well as his war tragedy, and in *The Babadook* focaliser Amalia is cursed by the loss of her husband as an obstacle to her love for her son. This allowed more insight for viewers to better understand or even relate to the focaliser by journeying through their psyche as opposed to being passive outsiders.

In essence horror, and specifically psychological horror, has a unique social function wherein by representing the mental or emotional turmoil of characters, albeit metaphorically through surrealistic storytelling, they can consequently reflect and affect society. And when this is paired with the concept of focalisation the product becomes more immersive. Therefore, the results serve as effective inspiration for elements and techniques to be used in the final bachelor film to achieve increased identification and audience engagement. Additionally, the tendencies found in this study indicate a narrative trend that can be further explored in a larger scale analysis as genre develops its potential or in other genres.

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