



Eleanor's absolute reality: The haunting sublimity of Hill House

Jacob Watkins

The opening line of Shirley Jackson's novel *The Haunting of Hill House* states that the eponymous structure exists 'under conditions of absolute reality',¹ which are incompatible with the existence of live organisms. The concept of an absolute reality, a state of being that transcends the limited reach of human cognition, has provoked much philosophical and psychoanalytical debate across the centuries; by applying some of this discussion to the novel, we can gain a greater insight into what causes Eleanor to submit to the reality of Hill House by its end.

Kant

When describing Hill House, Jackson writes 'No human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the [...] house.'² The specific lexical choice of 'human eye' implies that, while human perception lacks the faculty to access it, there is a plane beyond our cognition in which the true reality of Hill House resides. As Bryan Magee espouses, Immanuel Kant's doctrine of Transcendental Idealism posits that 'what we experience, or perceive, or know, must [...] depend on the apparatus we have for experiencing and perceiving and knowing'.³ Because this apparatus is naturally and necessarily limited, Winterbourne explains we can have knowledge 'only of appearances, and never of thing as they are in themselves'.⁴ Kant called the superficial realm of appearances accessible to human perception the phenomenal, and the true, imperceivable realm of things-as-they-are the noumenal. The dichotomy between these two realities is epitomised in Eleanor's first perception of Hill House; that 'she could not even have told its colour, or its size, or its style, except that it was enormous and dark, looking down over her'⁵ highlights her inability to comprehend the building's noumenon. This is further explored in Robert Wise's 1963 film adaptation, in which the first shot we see of the house is in wholly pitch-dark silhouette, where we can make out no detail, but simply its sheer enormity. His decision to film in black and white, and the use of an infra-red camera when capturing external images of the building, heightens the sense that this is a structure beyond normal human sensory understanding. Quite literally, we only perceive a shadow of its absolute reality.⁶

In particular, Jackson writes of the 'clashing disharmony that marked Hill House throughout',⁷ in how every portion of the building is 'chillingly wrong in all its dimensions'.⁸ Wise's adaptation expresses this through the camera work; scenes are often shot from an

¹ Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (Penguin:2009) p3.

² Ibid., p34.

³ Bryan Magee, *Great Philosophers* (BBC Books:1987) p175.

⁴ A.T. Winterbourne, *The Ideal and the Real* (Kluwer Academic Publishers:1988) p90.

⁵ Jackson, p35.

⁶ *The Haunting*, dir. Robert Wise (MGM, 1963)

⁷ Jackson, p38.

⁸ Ibid., p40.

Eleanor's absolute reality: The haunting sublimity of Hill House

angle too high or low, and the camera moves unpredictably around characters to heighten a sense of disorientation. An important facet of Kant's transcendental idealism is the claim that space and time, as we know them, are 'intuition[s] , rather than a general concept',⁹ contained only within the limits of human comprehension. As such, if Hill House exists on the noumenal realm, then it is independent of our understanding of spatial and temporal normalities; this is evident in the 'fairly large distortion of the house as a whole'¹⁰, a perversion that is both spatial and temporal. For example, the former is suggested in the constantly shifting physical layout of the rooms; the doors shut as if they were never opened, and furniture that Doctor Montague insists he 'could not have overlooked'¹¹ when clearing a path moves back to its place by its own volition. Meanwhile, a temporal discrepancy is insinuated in how Eleanor often forgets how long they've been in the house for.

While Kant's position is that 'we can only know things in so far as our knowledge is limited by [...] our faculties', in his 'The Ideal and the Real', Winterbourne goes on to mention that 'this truism is denied by philosophers who insist that we can know 'essences''¹² as well as mere existences. The terror of Hill House is a result of an exposure to these 'essences'; they provide a liminal suggestion of the noumenal beyond the phenomenal and evoke a feeling of the sublime. Kant himself described the sublime object as something that 'evokes a particular feeling of combined revulsion and attraction connected to cognitive failure [...] where the existence of something that is inaccessible to ordinary cognition is indicated'.¹³ As such, it is not the successful cognition of a reality greater than our own that creates the sublime effect in those exposed to it, but merely the implication that such a transcendental reality exists.

Magee expounds that perceptions come to us in forms which are 'sense-dependent and mind-dependent',¹⁴ and also that 'space and time do not characterise things as they are in themselves [...] but are inescapable modes of experience for us'.¹⁵ In the novel, Eleanor thinks that nightmares are 'waiting, shadowed, in those high corners'¹⁶ of Hill House; the terror lurks in the irrational dimensions of the building, the sublime places that exceed human perception of space and time.

Consequently, the most harrowing experiences for those within Hill House are most prevalent when the sensory expectation is subverted. In Wise's adaptation, Luke denounces the cold spot's supernatural origin because he can feel it— but Eleanor also feels the hand that is not Theo's at the end of chapter 5, so tangibly that 'she could feel the fine bones of Theodora's fingers'.¹⁷ When the women hear the thunderous knocking on their bedroom door, they described it as if 'something knocked [...] with a cannon ball', but afterwards Eleanor verifies that 'there isn't even a scratch on the wood'.¹⁸ Likewise, when the later tremors on page 203 seem so loud that the house will collapse, once they are over, the house itself seems unscathed. In Wise's adaptation of the scene, meanwhile, the door buckles impossibly under the weight of what's outside, but again remains intact.

⁹ Winterbourne, p45.

¹⁰ Jackson, 105.

¹¹ Jackson, p102.

¹² Winterbourne, p94.

¹³ Bjorn K. Myskja, *The Sublime in Kant and Beckett* (De Gruyter:2001) p1.

¹⁴ Magee, p179.

¹⁵ Ibid., p178.

¹⁶ Jackson, p40.

¹⁷ Ibid., p163.

¹⁸ Ibid., p133.

Interestingly, during each of these supernatural occurrences, those experiencing them feel a severe cold that 'fill[s] and overflow[s] the room',¹⁹ which Eleanor explains is one of the symptoms of shock. This description is very reminiscent of Edmund Burke's symptom of a sublime experience, which he names as 'astonishment'; more specifically, a 'state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended'.²⁰ The haunted happenings of Hill House are so frightening, because they expose oneself to the sublime essence of Kant's noumenal.

Jung

Thus far, the discussion has explored encounters with the Kantian noumenon external to the human disposition. However, the driving force of the novel's plot is Eleanor's internal development, as Hill House gradually consumes her as its own. Kant explored the idea of an element within the human constitution that exists in his world of 'things-in-themselves', a space for such transcendental concepts as 'free will', 'rational agency' and 'right and wrong', which²¹ he reasoned to be the source of moral agency, the 'soul'. More than a century later, this idea was developed by such psychoanalysts as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jacques Lacan into the notion of the unconscious. For Freud, the unconscious is an underlying element of our mental structure, the 'site where a traumatic truth speaks out',²² whose machinations we are not comprehensive of but address the very core of our being. In his *Psychology of the Unconscious*, Carl Jung explains how the unconscious is able to influence our conscious state, through a process of 'dream thinking'. This is a method of cognition far less quantifiable and far more ancient than rational 'directed thinking', leading us from reality into fantasy as our thoughts 'float, sink and mount according to their own gravity'. Jung posits the primary characteristic of dream thinking as seeing 'not as it truly is', but as 'one indeed might wish it to be'.²³

This immediately strikes as parallel to Eleanor's own behaviour, particularly when first approaching Hill House. It is quickly established that Eleanor is extremely dissatisfied with her life; she has spent the last eleven years caring for her recently deceased, invalid mother, and now sleeps on her 'genuinely hated'²⁴ sister's couch. This lack of a place in the world is what catalyses Eleanor's eventual surrender to Hill House, but in the novel's beginning, she finds solace in daydreaming. As she drives, she entertains multiple fairy tales about obtaining agency; for example, she envisages a new life in a 'vast house, pillared and walled',²⁵ guarded by two stone lions whose teeth she brushes weekly. On another occasion, she fantasies about a home guarded by a row of oleanders, which she knows are 'poisonous'.²⁶ This is an embodiment of Freud's hypothesis about dreams being 'wish fulfilment'²⁷; like the poor man dreams of being a billionaire, and the stutterer a great orator, Eleanor creates a fantastical, happy, and most importantly well-guarded home for herself. Issues begin to arise, however, when Eleanor claims to the others that these stone lion fantasies are the truth; she envelops herself in Jung's fantastical thinking, which he describes as 'fed by our own egotistic wishes' and can only conjure an 'overwhelmingly

¹⁹ Ibid., p132.

²⁰ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), p41.

²¹ Magee, p183.

²² Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (Granta:2006) p3.

²³ Carl Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, trans. Beatrice Hinkle (Headley Brothers, 1922) p11.

²⁴ Jackson, p6.

²⁵ Ibid., p18.

²⁶ Ibid., p19.

²⁷ *The Collected Works of Carl Jung, Vol 18: The Symbolic Life*, ed. Read, Fordham, Adler and McGuire (Routledge:1993) p188.

Eleanor's absolute reality: The haunting sublimity of Hill House

subjectively distorted²⁸ perception of the world, as opposed to the agonising yet rational reality that Eleanor is running from.

It is important to make a distinction between Eleanor's aforementioned daydreams, arising from conscious thought, and unconscious fantasies that Jung states 'win meaning only through the indirectly inferred unconscious contents'.²⁹ Their symbolic content has a 'wider unconscious aspect' that can 'never be precisely defined or fully explained'³⁰; while their meaning may seem unintelligible, they can provide greater insight into one's psyche than mere fanciful daydreaming. In Wise's film adaptation, the difference between these two states of dream thinking is achieved through a variety of techniques. When driving her car, Eleanor's conscious, inner monologue is conveyed through a non-diegetic, overdubbed narration. This interior voice has an echoing, ethereal quality to it, almost as if somebody is whispering in her ear. As the expression of these thoughts rely on words, they are more similar to directed thinking, which Jung describes as structured around our shared 'language and speech concept'.³¹ Instances of truly unconscious dreaming are harder to identify, but arguably the most prominent example of this would be Eleanor's sensory hallucination of holding Theodora's hand. While it is not explicitly stated that she is asleep, there are elements of Wise's *mise-en-scène* that imply she is not fully conscious during the experience. The lighting shifts dramatically from dim moonlight through the windowpanes, falling in slender shafts across Eleanor's face, to stark, artificial lamplight the instant that she bolts upright. Similarly, the abrupt switch from non-diegetic to diegetic sound (Eleanor's overdubbed monologue and the ghostly voices, to her scream and Theo's exclamation) also suggests that we move from an interior to exterior reality. The camera's sudden whip pan to face Theodora, almost from Eleanor's own point of view, in accompaniment with a bizarre musical flourish, evokes the disorientated alarm of one who has just been jolted awake by a nightmare. Lastly, the face in the wall seems a perfect Jungian dream symbol, relying on 'pictorial or picturesque language'³² to convey hidden meaning.

The notion of simultaneously experiencing both conscious thought (Eleanor's interior monologue) and unconscious thought (the symbolic imagery of the dream) may seem paradoxical, but Jung insists that the 'unity of consciousness is a doubtful affair'.³³ Often, he characterises these two wellsprings of cognition as originating from opposing yet intrinsically linked sources; intentional thought from the 'ego-personality', and symbolic from a 'subliminal part of the ego', or more tellingly, from its 'other side'.³⁴ Therefore, we can understand why Eleanor's overdubbed narration so abhors the face in the wallpaper; there is a 'basic resistance of the conscious mind to anything unconscious and unknown'.³⁵ But why would two oppositional forces be contained in the same psyche? Jung posits that whether a dream's influence is positive or negative is dependent on the 'actual contents of the unconscious'; if too many things that should be conscious are repressed, then its function becomes 'twisted and prejudiced'.³⁶ In Eleanor's case, it is no surprise that one who has been so repressed while caring for her mother should now struggle with such revolts of the

²⁸ Jung, p19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p19.

³⁰ ed. Read, Fordham, Adler and McGuire, p185.

³¹ Jung, p7.

³² ed. Read, Fordham, Adler and McGuire, p204.

³³ *Ibid.*, p195.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p202.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p192.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p225.

psyche. In this light, we can consider the true meaning of the mysterious hand through a discussion of queerness in the novel. It is clear that there are many instances when Eleanor and Theodora have a homo-erotic attraction to one another; Jackson even states that the question of ‘Do you love me?’ hangs over their heads before they are interrupted by the picnic hallucination. But as Eleanor says, she is ‘no good at talking to people and saying things’³⁷; this inability to manifest her unconscious desire consciously means that, whilst in dreams she can ‘feel the fine bones of Theodora’s fingers’³⁸ in her palm, upon waking they will always be far apart.

Lacan

The question still remains as to what it is about Eleanor’s disposition, and the human disposition as a whole, that is so susceptible to the sublimity of Hill House. While Jung’s dream thinking explains how the unconscious can subliminally influence conscious thought, Lacan explored the interplay between the various parts of the human psyche. One of Lacan’s main avenues of thought was the notion of perceived identity, as contained within the ‘ego’ of the ‘Imaginary realm’ of the psyche, as opposed to a fundamental ‘Subject’, which contains the real state of individuality.³⁹ According to Lacan, when a child becomes old enough to acknowledge its own reflection, it begins to formulate a unified psychological self to correspond with the fully realised object it sees in the mirror. Lacan names this key stage in a child’s development the ‘Mirror Stage’.⁴⁰ During this moment of development, the child begins to conceptualise a basic perception of itself, its ‘ego’, through its experiences in the external world; for example, its own name, descriptions of itself overheard from its parents, and interactions with other children. On the one hand, this process is necessary for a child to assimilate itself into its surroundings; conversely, this awareness of oneself is founded ‘upon something that is both inherently false and powerful— an image’ derived from sources other than oneself. This Imaginary state of self-perception is a ‘realm of illusion’,⁴¹ and its development is an ‘alienating experience and the beginning of a series of untruths’⁴², as one builds an internal awareness from the external other.

Relating this to Eleanor, it is clear that her self-perception is contained within this Imaginary state, in that she constantly bases her own identity on superficial, external images. A passage on page 85 sees her deem herself a ‘complete and separate thing’, before defining her existence entirely through superficial images. She is made Eleanor because she has ‘red shoes’, she ‘dislikes lobster’ and sleeps on her ‘left side’.⁴³ In Wise’s adaptation, upon the Doctor’s opening identification of her as Eleanor, she replies that ‘she’s not sure at the moment’⁴⁴; then she reasons that she is herself because she is wearing tweed, as opposed to Theodora in velvet. All of this is evidence to how Eleanor suffers a grievous ‘méconnaissance’, or misrecognition, of the self that mires her in the Imaginary state’s fantastical realm.

For Lacan, the foundation of the ego is a vital phase of a child’s development, as it is through this simplified awareness of oneself as an independent being that the Subject is

³⁷ Jackson, p174.

³⁸ Ibid., p163.

³⁹ Lionel Bailly, *Lacan: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oneworld:2013) p28-29.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p29.

⁴¹ Ibid., p92.

⁴² Ibid., p30.

⁴³ Ibid., p85.

⁴⁴ *The Haunting* [26:40].

Eleanor's absolute reality: The haunting sublimity of Hill House

allowed 'access to the Symbolic realm'.⁴⁵ While the Imaginary state is founded on sensory perception of the external world, the Symbolic is the realm of 'language and the law'; as Žizek expounds in *How to Read Lacan*, it is 'society's unwritten constitution [...] the second nature of every speaking being'.⁴⁶ Within it is found the 'big Other', whose demands as an omnipresent order provide the social guidelines that we must follow to co-exist with other humans. As Bailly writes, in 'all our lives we will play with, struggle against, and learn to use its manifestations'⁴⁷ in conjunction with our own Subject. Crucially, the social order contained within the big Other, as well as the alienating doctrine which it carries, is conveyed to a child by its mother. After all, the 'gaze of the mother is the first mirror in which the child' receives a sense of their own image; it is through her affection that it deems itself an object in relation to other objects. However, if a mother fails to be a suitable mirror for the child's development, it will 'provide the effect of a distorting mirror or no mirror at all', and the child's identity will become fraught, built on a 'fault line'.⁴⁸ Considering the restrictive presence of Eleanor's mother, 'built up devotedly around small guilts and small reproaches, constant weariness, and unending despair',⁴⁹ it seems likely that a lack of this maternal mirror is the source of her fractured sense of self.

Here, then, is where we find the true role Hill House plays in Eleanor's fate. A prominent element in Wise's *mise-en-scène* is the usage of mirrors; they are to be found in almost every room, sometimes in multiplicity, and Eleanor is startled by her own reflection at the moments of highest tension. There are also many different eyes watching Eleanor too, whether on statues, in nightmarish wallpaper visions and startling jump cuts to fish, or even resembled in the two square windows at the top of the tower. Indeed, the camera watches Eleanor drive up to Hill House from high, almost as if from the perspective of the house itself. Therefore, whereas she lacked a suitable mother's eye beforehand, Eleanor seems to enter a second Mirror Stage within Hill House, with the building acting as the revealing mirror. This is why Eleanor is so obsessed with whether the others 'are going to talk about [her]'⁵⁰ in the novel's later stages; as Bailly expounds, the child becomes 'profoundly narcissistic'⁵¹ as it builds its ego, as this allows it to fathom its exact place amongst those around it. And yet, as we have already established, Hill House exists outside any human reality, and thus beyond either the Imaginary or the Symbolic state. Rather than transfer unto Eleanor the linguistic structures of the big Other, Hill House instead reverses the ego development, dismantling her fragile sense of Subject until, in her own words, 'I had forgotten Eleanor'.⁵² Instead, she 'disappear[s] inch by inch into'⁵³ the house, as she is consumed by Lacan's third, deepest realm of the psyche, the 'Real'. In Bailly's words, the Real is 'imperceptible' and 'unsymbolised', the 'chaos from which the word came unto being'.⁵⁴ For Žizek, it is the 'primordial abyss that swallows everything, dissolving all entities'.⁵⁵ Eleanor's submission to the incomprehensible, irrational reality of the Real is complete upon her death; as Bowie

⁴⁵ Bailly, p30.

⁴⁶ Žizek, p8.

⁴⁷ Bailly, p73.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p38.

⁴⁹ Jackson, p6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p219.

⁵¹ Bailly, p68.

⁵² Jackson, p229.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p201.

⁵⁴ Bailly, p99.

⁵⁵ Žizek, p64.

Jacob Watkins

writes, 'Death is the eventual triumph of the Real'⁵⁶ over the fantastical identities contained within the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

By applying the theory of Kant, Jung and Lacan, we can see how the sublime reality of Hill House causes Eleanor to succumb to the transcendental, unconscious aspect of her own psyche, the Real. Having relied on fantasy as a salve for the intolerable frustrations in her real life, Eleanor's perception of her inner self is fractured, and her relation to the external world superficial. As such, by entering Hill House, she begins the process of severing her existence within the rational entirely. This is why Eleanor is led on by 'mother' at the end of the novel; it is not some lingering memory of her own, deceased parent, but the new, maternal mirror provided by Hill House itself. By formulating a new psyche within the intangible Real, perhaps Eleanor finally does find a home where she can be truly happy—but her existence becomes of the Kantian noumenal, and she is never again able to reconnect with the realm of the human. Thus, when she walks Hill House, she walks 'alone'.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Harvard University Press:1993), p100.

⁵⁷ Jackson, p246.

Bibliography

- Allison, Henry E., *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (Yale University Press:1983).
- Bailly, Lionel, *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide* (Oneworld:2013).
- Broad, C.D., *Kant- An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press:1978).
- Bowie, Malcolm, *Lacan* (Harvard University Press:1993).
- Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).
- Freud, Sigmund, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (Penguin:1991).
- Jackson, Shirley, *The Haunting of Hill House* (Penguin:2009).
- Jung, Carl, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, trans. Beatrice Hinkle (Headley Brothers, 1922).
- Leader and Groves, *Introducing Lacan* (Icon Books:2005).
- Liotard, Jean-Francois, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press:1994).
- Magee, Bryan, *Great Philosophers* (BBC Books:1987).
- Myskja, Bjorn K., *The Sublime in Kant and Beckett* (De Gruyter:2001).
- The Collected Works of Carl Jung, Vol 18: The Symbolic Life*, ed. Read, Fordham, Adler and McGuire (Routledge:1993).
- The Haunting*, dir. Robert Wise (MGM, 1963).
- Winterbourne, A.T., *The Ideal and the Real* (Kluwer Academic Publishers:1988).
- Zizek, Slavoj, *How to Read Lacan* (Granta:2006).
- Zizek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso:1997).