



GIANLUCA

SPOSITO

OVERLOOK

SCARY

HOUSES

AND

WHERE

TO FIND

THEM

intra

**GIANLUCA SPOSITO**

# **OVERLOOK**

**SCARY HOUSES  
AND WHERE TO FIND THEM**

**intra**

**M**

Mysteria Series



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# INTRODUCTION

If you did not recognize the evocative image on the cover, we have a problem. And there are two possible solutions: give this book as a gift because you are not interested enough in cinema; or continue reading it to satisfy your curiosity.

The cover, in short, is a self-assessment test. However, I may honestly have gone too far. I should be more delicate in objecting your knowledge because it is really hard to remember that detail; to remember having seen that detail in a film, albeit a famous one, and although that detail is closely related to the enormous anguish produced by that scene. In short, we are talking about *The Shining* and the tricycle that runs, chased by the *Steadicam* of the cameraman, through the corridors of the Overlook Hotel on its vividly colored carpet with a labyrinthine and geometric design...



Little Danny Torrance (Danny Lloyd) in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* – © 1980 Warner Bros.

Good. There is no need to explain the title of this book and now that you have checked that the cover of this book bears that very image, we can finally talk about its contents. The gigantic Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* can be considered the greatest and most famous “haunted houses” in cinema of all time, the result of the fortunate meeting of creative geniuses: the literary one, Stephen King, and the cinematic one, Stanley Kubrick.

But the “spooky house” (haunted, or cursed as it may be) is not exclusive to cinema, but also – at least initially – to literature. It is literature, in fact, that has over the centuries created an effective semantic and multisensory short circuit through juxtaposition. Indeed, a “spooky house,” even better if it is “haunted,” causes dismay and anguish as it is opposed to the idea of “home” as a safe place where one can find shelter for oneself and one’s loved ones. And in this very juxtaposition lies the winning element identified and exploited by literature and, later, by horror cinema: turning something that is perceived as safe and reassuring – the “home” – into something devious and frightening.

Since classical and biblical-Christian antiquity, ‘haunted’ places have existed. Places in which the supernatural, whether religious or superstitious, manifests itself and, as such, are surrounded by the aura of *mysterium* and horrific thrill. The Bible describes some haunted places that are home to the divine and the demonic. For example, Bethel or “the house of God,” where Jacob is visited by the dream of the ladder leading to heaven, a place that is “terrible” because it is inhabited by the divine presence (*Genesis* 28:17). In fact, throughout the classical tradition the *locus horridus* is almost automatically *locus suspectus*, responsible for disturbing effects on those who approach it or even hear about it.

Within this tradition it is certainly possible to find sinister houses well before the emergence of a genre – fantasy – designated to the representation of the ‘sinister’ in literature. Think of Plautus’s (3rd-2nd century B.C.) comedy *The Haunted House* or *Mostellaria*, in which a fake *maison hantée* (haunted house) appears, a trick concocted by his spendthrift son to hide his own prodigality from his father who has returned from a long journey; or the eerie house described by Pliny the Younger (1st-2nd century A.D.) in one of his famous letters, often cited by specialists in fantasy as a remote archetype of the genre:

“Here was at Athens a large and spacious, but ill-reputed and pestilential house. In the dead of the night a noise, resembling the clashing of iron, was frequently heard, which, if you listened more attentively, sounded like the rattling of fetters; at first it seemed at a distance, but approached nearer by degrees; immediately afterward a phantom appeared [...]. By this means the house was at last deserted, as

being judged by everybody to be absolutely uninhabitable; so that it was now entirely abandoned to the ghost. However, in hopes that some tenant might be found who was ignorant of this great calamity which attended it, a bill was put up, giving notice that it was either to be let or sold.” (Pliny the Younger, letter to Licinius Sura, letter no. XXVII of Book VII of the *Epistolary*).

In short, the literary *topos* of haunted houses, at least in Western literature, is older than we might think, already making its appearance in the epic poems of Homer (VIII-VII BC) and Virgil (70-19 BC.), before reasserting itself mainly in the Middle Ages and becoming iconic a few centuries later, with William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1564-1616), as well as Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1546-1616) – in which it is a tavern that turns into a haunted house.

However, it is only from the late eighteenth century that the haunted house is consolidated as a *topos*, crowding the pages of nineteenth-century literature with a true proliferation of haunted houses. And here they are the castles of the Gothic novel (1764-1824), which becomes a real sinister-terrifying producing machine (think of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* from 1794). Castles, however, typically Anglo-Saxon, because our fiction produces nothing particularly significant.

After gothic castles, the haunted houses come at last. The entire West is full of ghosts crowding mostly mansions. In addition to this, a ‘fever’ for the supernatural invades America and Europe between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

It doesn’t however end here; Freud also puts his own into it. In the late nineteenth century, he notes that the house is one of the keys of dream symbolism, which uses it to represent bodily life:

“The human body as a whole is represented by the dream fantasy as a house, the individual organs as parts of the house. In ‘dental stimulus dreams,’ the mouth corresponds to an atrium with a vaulted ceiling, and at the transition from pharynx to esophagus, a staircase” (Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 1992, orig. ed. 1899, pp. 144-145).

The parts of the house and the objects that decorate its interior can be deciphered in a similar way. Rooms and chambers would have sexual symbolic meaning:

“The rooms in the dream generally represent women, and the very description of their different entrances and exits confirms this interpretation” (p. 327).

Leaving aside Freud and psychoanalysis, in genre fiction formed in the nineteenth century we find extraordinary examples such as Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959): just three examples, but they could lead us to cite dozens of films (and television series) based on or merely inspired by those narratives.

Thus, from the literary archetype of the haunted house we moved in the 20th century to the cinematic archetype of the haunted house movie. Often drawing further inspiration from debated and debatable facts ('supernatural' phenomena or at least so defined, tragedies perhaps very human but better defined as supernatural, and so on), or adding them as valuable genre marketing – summarized in the inscription that often looms large on posters: "Based on a true story." And so, the "house with eyes" of *Amityville*, or even that of *The Exorcist* in Washington and many others, becomes a destination for tireless fans in search of the origin of the thrill.

This is a book that aims to take readers on a journey that is literary, visual as well as properly geographical. We will focus on 50 films across almost 80 years (from 1944 to 2020); all of them characterized by the presence, strong and central, of a 'home'. Obviously not a 'home sweet home' but 'a home scary home.' We will ask whether the story of that film is rooted in fiction, chronicle, or both, and finally we will ask: does that place exist? And, if it exists, how different is it from the one depicted?

This is not a work of film criticism, nor literary criticism; but a true literary and visual journey, between words and images, between tradition and innovation, moved by the suggestions and stimuli of the thrill.

And without spoilers!

Safe travel.

## READING NOTES

The **fact sheet** for each of the 50 films analyzed includes the poster for the country of origin, the poster for another market (European or American), some essential technical data (with QR code for accessing the full data on IMDb), text, scene photos and images of the locations used (with QR codes for viewing on Google Maps – Street View).



A QR code is a two-dimensional bar code, composed of black modules arranged within a white square pattern, used to store information (usually, a link) and are read by a special optical reader or even the camera of a smartphone, tablet or computer. By scanning the QR codes in this book, you will be linked to websites and will be able to access additional information.

### IMDb

**IMDb** stands for **Internet Movie Database**, a website owned by Amazon, which catalogs and archives movies, actors, directors, production personnel, television programs, and even video games. By scanning the QR code with a camera, it is possible to start browsing the archive, check the movie card and access data, images, and videos.



If you see this symbol within a red box, it means that you can scan the QR code with a camera to open **Google Maps** and view the indicated location, also in Street View mode.



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