

## Spaces Unknown: Queer Articulations in James Wan's *Insidious* (2010)

Marcus Prasad

### Abstract

This article explores the representation of the suburban house and the concept of suburbia as a space of social normativity in the American context following World War II. I pursue this line of investigation by analyzing a work of horror film that questions and disrupts this distinct space: James Wan's *Insidious* (2010). The following reveals the unique means through which this work exposes a decades-long disdain held toward postwar suburban development and its deep ties to normativity by closely examining how Wan represents the space of the home and its subsequent undoing. I thread works of queer theory within my analysis to act as a guiding framework through which the productivity of the film's represented ulterior space may be read and understood. Primarily drawing from spatial and temporal theory, I articulate how normativity is formed in the space of the suburbs through structured rhythms, movements, and gestures that become attributed to the heterosexual, white, middle- to upper-class family. This investigation is followed by a methodology that adopts from queer theory a process of estrangement, a deviation from the normative space of the suburbs that seeks to disrupt and challenge existing scripts within dominant social frameworks unique to horror film. As such, this article provides a new method through which contemporary horror film may be analyzed, away from canonical or genre prescriptions, and toward the productive potential of spaces considered to be ulterior.

Revealing the more sinister flipside to American suburbanization, the suburban gothic is a subgenre of horror films whose narratives centre upon the peculiar social and physical space of postwar American housing. Foregrounding the manifold latent concerns surrounding unprecedented growth within suburban neighbourhoods at this time, this subgenre includes films such as Carpenter's *Halloween*, Hooper's *Poltergeist*, and Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street*, all of which hone in on notions of mindless conformity, rampant materialism, and oppressive familial roles that this emergent space had come to embody. Suburbia rapidly became a locus of collective social normativity responding to a need for order after the war, but the resulting exposure of its utopic attributions as such began to distinguish the wide-scale national housing movement as fraught and foundationally ill-advised. While this subgenre has specifically commented on the postwar American context, I am interested in the persistence of its implications and its grasp at a wider scale to contemporary horror film in and after 2010. I therefore center my analysis around James Wan's *Insidious* (2010) to elucidate a critical engagement with suburban space, the cultivation of normativity that has become attached to it, and the imposition of queer space as an opportunity for reformation.

One central question I consider throughout my investigation is how postwar ideals surrounding the structure of the nuclear family and home have persevered, given the continued desire to own a house in the suburbs by the white middle- to upper-class. More specifically, however, I am interested in the ways in which horror film possesses a critical acuity toward the notion of suburbia by its conflation of danger and fear as situated within the perceived comfort and safety of the home. The valence of these concerns increases when considering the deep-seated relationship between suburban development and the formation of national identity amidst the postwar climate. With the suburban gothic's distinct attention to foregrounding the destabilization of familial and domestic space, it becomes apparent that the subgenre aims to critique these developments and their induction into the dominant mode of American culture.

In the resulting dissolution of these suburban values, it is also necessary to consider and question what might take their place. I therefore mobilize queer theory for its focus on spaces of alterity and otherness to illuminate the tears within the fabric of the nuclear family. The process of othering familiar domestic space by an uncanny mechanism in *Insidious* signals a rupture of the normative framework it has come to emblemize, and begins to insinuate that forms of alterity exist just beneath, behind, and within what is seen at first glance.

Rather than falling back onto a conception of queerness as monstrous or abject as many queer analyses of horror film have, however, I intend to reorient my focus to the productive nature of its inherent difference, as a force of destruction that carries with it a restructuring potential. As Eve

Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, ideology and sexuality in kind epitomize and influence broader social relations of power, and each mediate between myriad structures of social experience.<sup>1</sup> Adhering to such a methodological parallelism between ideology and sexuality, my exploration will be premised upon the impetus to reformulate sociological interpretations of suburban space through the perspective of non-normative sexuality by its relegation to realms deemed ulterior.

An immense amount of cultural production has addressed what we might consider to be a suburban gothic ethos. Several modern and contemporary artists have dedicated their work to engaging with similar questions surrounding the idea of the suburbs and the promotion of allegedly idyllic postwar housing developments. One canonical example is Dan Graham's 1966 work, *Homes for America*, which explores the alienating effect of these spaces and exposes an inherent unsettling contrast to their supposed desirability. Similarly, Gordon Matta-Clark's *Splitting* from 1974 explicitly critiques the mindless replication of American domestic space by slicing through an old frame house in New Jersey—a transformation that he calls “anarchitecture.” Extending these concerns decades forward, Gregory Crewdson's *Twilight* series from 1998 and Holly Andres' *The Fallen Fawn* from 2016 equally investigate the psychological underside of the American suburban vernacular, confronting the normal with the paranormal and the secretive, and transforming the suburban landscape into a space of anxiety. Discourses adhering to a gothic mode in their thought-provoking representation of domestic space are rife amongst modern and contemporary artists through a variety of media including sculpture, architecture, and photography. My aim with this project specifically is to investigate how a related inquiry into the spatio-temporal realm of suburbia occurs in contemporary horror film via Wan's *Insidious*.

Wan's family-centered narrative has been revered for its revitalization of many classic tropes from the haunted house prototype, brought into a distinctly contemporary context. Harkening back to its postwar precedents in the horror genre, *Insidious* fills its haunted house setting with dark and ominous corridors and corners, shadowy figures darting around peripherally, and inexplicable noises that turn the haven of the house into a space of danger. The narrative follows father and husband Josh Lambert and stay-at-home mom Renai Lambert (Patrick Wilson and Rose Byrne) who have just moved into a new house. When one of their sons, Dalton (Ty Simpkins), encounters an unknown supernatural spirit while exploring their attic, he falls into an inexplicable coma-like state, unable to wake up for months. As Dalton's vital processes are stable, doctors struggle to figure out what

---

<sup>1</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 13.

condition he suffers from. He is able to be cared for at home after some time at the hospital, but upon his return, further supernatural occurrences start to take place in the Lambert's home—doors opening by themselves, voices stirring in dark corners, and apparitions of unknown individuals making themselves present in increasingly violent and terrifying ways. They then decide to move into Josh's mother's house in another suburban neighbourhood, but the spectral occurrences continue to intensify. Josh and Renai hire supernatural investigator Elise (Lin Shaye) to help find some resolution, who is later revealed to have had a long history with Josh's family. Elise discovers that Dalton is trapped in “the further,” a supernatural realm containing a mass of spirits and demons existing in a dimension that is spatially and temporally superimposed onto the real space and time of the Lambert house.

Wan's particular visual approach pays careful attention to obscuring the space of the home, making its architecture into something unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and dark for the Lambert family, as well as his audience. Throughout the length of the film, the setting of the house is placed in an increasingly close confrontation with its opposing spatial articulation in “the further” (fig. 1 and 2). The peace and comfort of the domestic, familial space is forcibly made foreign by the dangerous closeness to this ulterior dimension, a territory completely unknown to the family despite its shared visual attributes.

*Insidious* can be situated within an extensive legacy of suburban horror films, which usually features suburban settings, preoccupations, and protagonists. Robin Wood asserts that the gothic genre broadly consists of a three-pronged thematic core: normality, figured by the dominance of heteropatriarchal capitalism, the other, figured by a threatening antagonistic force, and the relationship between the two.<sup>2</sup> A mechanism reminiscent of Freud's theorization of the uncanny is integral to this interplay of normativity and the other, and is amenable to the invocation of a queer reading which intends to disrupt the heterosexual status quo. As such, queerness, positioned as that which is unfamiliar, sets in motion a questioning of that which has been established as normal.<sup>3</sup> The rampant promotion of suburbia as the foundation of postwar normativity placed the suburban house and its embedded social network in the crossfire of the gothic mode, and consequently opened itself up to a disruptive queer potential.

---

<sup>2</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) quoted in Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 5.

Reflecting the notion that a neighbourhood of identical houses, white picket fences, and well-manicured lawns is hiding a terrible secret, Bernice Murphy asserts that such a negative outlook on this space emerged from the rapid change in lifestyle that accompanied its development, forcing residents to break ties with old patterns of existence that characterized the everyday during and before the war.<sup>4</sup> One facet of this shift was the simultaneous rigidification and disempowerment of the nuclear family's constitutive roles—the breadwinning father was now subject to additional hours of commuting, leaving the mother in charge of a house of unruly children—forming a wealth of emotional and psychological problems as a result. Robert Beuka explains that the movement toward the suburbs in concert with the baby boom created an entrapping space for women of the postwar years, forcefully relocating them to isolated and child-centered environments. This resulted in a sense of dislocation and purposelessness, even as the culture at large was celebrating them as the central symbols in a new cult of domesticity.<sup>5</sup>

A second facet of this break from old patterns was the flight of the white middle- to upper-class away from the urban center, which entailed an inherent escape from, and consequent repression of, identities considered to be deviant or other. Lizabeth Cohen notes that while extreme housing growth in new suburban areas accommodated the influx of veterans after World War II, they were distinctly geared toward white families, leaving 53 percent of married Black veterans to live with relatives, to live in trailers, or in small, rented rooms.<sup>6</sup> Emergency facilities such as the Veterans Affairs (VA) mortgage insurance program required vets to initially qualify at private banks and loan associations, which were known to discriminate against Black folk on several fronts. As such, Black families were relegated to specifically delineated “red zones,” which were usually urban, old, and perceived as deteriorating simply by virtue of hosting predominantly minority residents.<sup>7</sup> The practice of red-lining formed barriers around the suburban neighbourhood and insulated white families from contact and interaction with members of the Black community who hoped to buy within these areas.

The negative implications of such an emphatic domesticity, as well as the notion of escaping the city which itself was rooted in racist imperatives, articulate two of the many concerns that come to threaten the integrity of suburbia as a space of equal opportunity, a utopia for all. Driven by a deep-seated fear of otherness, the motivations fuelling the nuclear white family and their newly deployed domestic space became troubled, allowing the repressed alterity to emerge through a wealth of family

---

<sup>4</sup> Bernice Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2008), 170.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*, 170.

problems in the resulting sociological formation of normativity. This destabilization had far-reaching effects on cultural production and was responded to by a lurking anxiety to be mined by the gothic mode. The shift allowed the source of fear emerging from the other, characteristic to the gothic tradition, to be repositioned to a place closer in proximity to oneself—fear and danger were now thought to come from one’s own family and home, rather than from external threats.

The purpose of such a historical delineation is to outline the ways in which forms of cultural, artistic, and filmic production adhered to the gothic mode to articulate the many transformations occurring in the American socio-economic realm at this time. Levittown, New York is one of the most famous suburbs that sprang up in a notoriously short amount of time. Designed and built by the real estate firm Levitt & Sons, the innovation of this development was attributed to their assembly line method, constructing two-floor, two-bedroom houses quicker and more efficiently than any housing initiative that preceded it.<sup>8</sup> Between 1948 and 1958, 11 million new suburban homes were established in America—83 percent of all population growth during the 1950s took place in the suburbs.<sup>9</sup> The 1946 architectural plan of Levittown was key to creating a visual lexicon of American futurity, as developers followed its inaugural structure in the development of subsequent suburban neighbourhoods. The living conditions in North America were undergoing a seismic shift by the rapid onslaught of modular housing, which was establishing its own role in the formation of national ideology equally as fast.

National ideology in the American postwar sphere was developed through a lens that heavily encouraged consumption on the home front. Lizabeth Cohen notes that the central importance of consumption to the smooth operation of the home meant that women, who were now perceived as the main force behind purchasing under the guise of “homemaking,” gained a new political authority in America as the war came to a close.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, businesses argued that a flourishing of a mass consumption economy with a newly competitive and unregulated pricing of new cars, suburban homes, and products to fill them would better protect the general good than the state controls then in place. A higher and more equitable standard of living for all derived from economic growth was posited to be the best way to fulfill the nation’s longstanding commitment to equality and democracy.<sup>11</sup> The convergence of personal and national fulfillment via consumption accordingly incited the intertwining of postwar purchasing power on the home front with a national and political identity.

---

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Garvin, *American Cities: What Works, What Doesn't* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001), 397.

<sup>9</sup> Garvin, *American Cities*, 397.

<sup>10</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*, 77.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*, 101.

This was exacerbated by a shift from the preliminary gendering of the consumer during the war as specifically female to the notion of “the couple” after the war, as men returned to their families.<sup>12</sup> A consequent consuming unit was formed, constituted by the heterosexual couple that was encouraged to purchase a house and products for it under the idea that together, through a consumerist ethos, they were simultaneously staking their claim and contributing to the greater good of America.

As consumption began to structure the American ideal of postwar home life, horror film and the suburban gothic were growing and crystallizing their arsenal of critical tools. The subgenre specifically exploits a set of contradictory attitudes, which Bernice Murphy outlines as a set of binary oppositions. It rests between two poles: the suburban dream, articulating the utopic hopes of a well-adjusted and comfortable space for the family to be nurtured, and the suburban nightmare, a revelation of the darker realities of conformity, consumption, and isolation underlying the mandate of this dream.<sup>13</sup> This bifurcation creates an ideological link to the actual geography of suburbia as existing physically and philosophically between the urban and the rural, in what Beuka calls a borderland space.<sup>14</sup> The wider gothic tradition asserts that fear and anxiety often emerge from the gaps between what something is and what it is not—suburbia can accordingly be positioned within this indeterminate gap both literally and figuratively. The subsequent indeterminacy of suburbia’s physical and conceptual existence gives it a porous texture, its fabric permeable to a multitude of shaping forces.

Foregrounding the fabric of nuclear heteronormativity and the malleability of its existence, the force of alterity that pushes against the perceived dominance of its social structure assumes a particular visual representation via the gothic mode. *Insidious* presents this space explicitly by its visual rendering of “the further,” the uncanny supernatural realm premised upon the architecture of real space that is both familiar yet strange to the characters that travel through and around it. “The further” is accessed through a sleeping or hypnotized state and possesses a dream-like quality as characters within it meander from place to place, without an established network between them. Each location in this space, like the Lambert’s house, is rendered in a familiar way, possessing visual similarities to its actual representation, but obscured by a looming darkness, coldness, and unknown vastness, deplete of any homely attribute.

---

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic*, 147.

<sup>13</sup> Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 14.

In such a duality of space that is grounded by the singularity of the Lambert's house, I introduce Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus* as a methodological underpinning to envision the production and reproduction of normative social structures, as well as deviations from it. Considering "the further" and its visual replication of normative domestic space into something strange, the social structures produced by the house fall under a clear form of critique. Bourdieu asserts that the *habitus*, a system of durable and transposable dispositions, is produced by structures that constitute a particular type of environment. The *habitus* is seen as a principle of generation and a structuring of practices and representations which can become objectively regulated.<sup>15</sup> By this specific constitution of normativity, the operations of the *habitus* visually manifest themselves within the suburban house, which privileges the social practices, embodiments, and movements of the heteronormative, nuclear family, and is built to optimize production and consumption on the home front. Endowing the domestic space with this particular form of normativity accounts for one of the fundamental effects of the orchestration of the *habitus*: the consensus on the *sens*, or meaning of practices and the world, and its continuous reinforcement.<sup>16</sup> Following this logic, the social dynamics of the nuclear family become the practices that perpetuate and reinforce the form of the *habitus*, all of which fall under the architectural emblem of the suburban house.

Recalling the postwar environment in which these normative structures of the nuclear family were formed, the histories surrounding the suburban enclave reveal the performances and embodiments that have come to constitute normativity—namely, a white, middle- to upper-class, heterosexual subjectivity. The deliberate exclusion and red-lining of minority communities and the positioning of the monogamous heterosexual couple as primary consumers on the homefront was integral to the ethos of suburbia. Both of these collective alignments directly informed what it meant to identify as a contributor to the greater good of America amidst the murky postwar climate, and articulated that a specific performance of nuclear normativity was key to achieving a widespread utopian aspiration of human experience.

Bourdieu, however, is adamant in pointing out that the objective structures producing the *habitus* and the concept of normalcy are themselves products of historical practices and are constantly subject to reproduction and transformation.<sup>17</sup> In what appears to be a lapse in the creation of a normative structure emerges the critical potential of suburban gothic film in this context. A disruption within the continuity of producing normativity suggests that the forces of alterity characteristic to the

---

<sup>15</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.

<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 80.

<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.



suburban gothic have a role in shaping the system that reproduces these practices. Additionally, Sedgwick notes that a break from the formulation of normativity as such creates a contingent space of indeterminacy, a notion of place that shifts over time in which the boundaries between the political and sexual become a fertile space of ideological formation.<sup>18</sup> Characterizing this space of repressed alterity as encompassed by a variety of non-normative sexualities and identities, the potential for the development of queer frameworks emerges. The represented estrangement, abstraction, and ultimate obfuscation of domestic space made visible by “the further” directly threatens the *habitus* of nuclear normativity that had been established by the social practices of the heteronormative family. In *Insidious*, Josh and Renai are threatened by elements of the supernatural realm that violently impose themselves onto their family. The resulting dissolution of the heterosexual couple, suggested by the film’s ending in which Josh returns from “the further” not as himself, but rather as a supernatural entity that had been following him since childhood, insinuates a break with the objective structures of the *habitus* governing the social space of the home.

“The further” is an ontologically intangible and ephemeral space that automatically registers as unsafe, as if a threat from the darkened corners of what was once a comfortable living space is imminent. This ulterior realm of fear and danger is home to demons and evil spirits of all kinds that seek out and want to consume those who are alive in order to absorb their power. In *Insidious*, the father and the son are primary targets. At the point in the narrative where Josh enters “the further” to find Dalton, Elise reveals Josh’s own history with astral projection into the supernatural plane from his childhood, an experience that he had repressed and forgotten. This generational secret was passed on to Dalton unknowingly and is the reason for their encounters with evil forces in this secondary space.

The revelation of this secret ability acts as a reversal of the family line’s continuation, precisely as that which attempts to destroy it entirely. This notion recalls Lee Edelman’s concept of the Child, in which the biological reproduction of children has come to embody the chronological progression and perpetuation of a heteronormative social order. He argues that as an emblem of futurity within cultural texts and politics, the Child is imbued with nationalistic idealism that carries with it the promise of a healthy continuation of the nation, as well as an inherent requirement of the heterosexual couple to uphold and reproduce it.<sup>19</sup> Queer sexual identities, by contrast, do not have as much of an oppositional emblem to counter this heterosexual dominance,

---

<sup>18</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 11.

since they exist outside of the trajectory of biological reproduction entirely. As such, queerness is given a role of dissolution, one that can break into and redefine notions of civil order that rely so heavily upon equating the future with the Child.<sup>20</sup>

As the film frames Dalton's inherited ability to astral project as the source of their unwanted engagement with "the further," the prospect of reproducing such an ability is tarnished and renounced. Interfering with the biological and social reproduction of the nuclear family to then present it as the cause and locus of this cursed ability metaphorizes the interventionist framing of queerness by Edelman; the ghostly forces of "the further" become threats to the order and logic of heterosexual reproduction and the ultimate configuration of the nuclear family.

Moving away from the centrality of children in Edelman's analysis as well as in *Insidious*, it is also important to consider Michel Foucault's exploration of repressed sexuality and its spatial manifestation as an arrayed refraction. He asserts that modern society has attempted to reduce sexuality to the heterosexual, and therefore legitimate couple, but in so doing, created and proliferated groups with multiple elements and a circulating sexuality.<sup>21</sup> Questioning the definitive nature of the monogamous space of the nineteenth-century family, Foucault posits that familial space, in its incessant promotion of heterosexuality *as* normativity, created a network of pleasure and power linked together at multiple points and according to a variety of transformable relationships.<sup>22</sup> In the specific construction of the family house, heterosexuality and monogamy figured prominently through the deliberate separation of space for adults via the polarity between children's and parents' rooms as well as the segregation of boys and girls. By prohibiting and rendering secret the dangers of masturbation, promoting the importance of puberty, as well as implementing methods of surveillance by parents, Foucault suggests that the supposed heteronormativity attributed to housing architecture in fact suggested that the family, when brought down to its smallest dimensions, was revealed to be made of a complicated network, saturated with multiple, fragmentary, and mobile sexualities.<sup>23</sup> Encountering the twofold valence of the family house as such, a diametric opposition appears in Foucault's analysis that is similar to Bernice Murphy's. This suggests that the house engages simultaneously with a notion of a suburban dream, a space of monogamy, heterosexuality, and non-deviant sexual activity, as well as a suburban nightmare, a space of refracted sexual performances and identities. The house, therefore, counters the intended formulation of social normativity. By this split act, the threatening presence of

---

<sup>20</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 45-46.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 46.

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 46.

deviant sexuality can be visualized as a space of alterity that presses against the façade of the nuclear suburban realm, which has historically prioritized the heterosexual couple.

The notion of spaces of alterity which hinge upon the dominant mode of sociality can be further expanded upon by turning to Elizabeth Freeman's work on queer temporality. She introduces a video work called *K.I.P* by Nguyen Tan Hoang (2002) to articulate how the medium of video can produce a specific form of sexual disorientation. The way in which this piece fragments its depicted sequence of intercourse is argued to possess the ability to open up gaps in the sexual dyad.<sup>24</sup> Hiccups in sequential time as such can connect groups of people beyond monogamous couplehood, and Freeman suggests that this perception of temporality forges an important link to queer politics and theory.<sup>25</sup> The fragmentation of time, represented in this film by visual glitches and unexpected lapses in sequence, exposes how time itself binds social space. Also drawing from Bourdieu, Freeman inaugurates the concept of *chrononormativity*, outlining how the body is bound into socially meaningful configurations through temporal regulations.<sup>26</sup> *Chrononormativity* can be further understood as "a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts."<sup>27</sup> Things like schedules, calendars, and time zones constitute inner rhythms that nestle themselves beneath the surface, manifesting as temporal experiences that "seem natural to those whom they privilege."<sup>28</sup> Mobilizing the concept of *chrononormativity* for this analysis can begin to account for the temporal aspect inherent to constructing and perpetuating the *habitus* and its operative reproduction of normative social structures.

Freeman lists a series of experiences that counter or exist outside the dominant temporality, including mourning, maternal love, domestic bliss, romance, and even bachelorhood, all of which entail "sensations that move according to their own beat."<sup>29</sup> Specifically, regarding domesticity and the development of such an ideal, love, security, peace, and harmony were figured as timeless and primal. They were experiences that were exclusive to the home while simultaneously being located in and emanating from the psyche's interior. She argues that emotional, domestic, and biological tempos are, though culturally constructed, somewhat less amenable to the speeding up and micro-management that increasingly characterizes industrialization.<sup>30</sup> Positioning the domestic outside of dominant temporality as such recalls the spatio-temporal gap addressed by Murphy, who asserts that the gothic

---

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 7.

gains its power from the liminality of suburbia's geography as situated between the urban and the rural, as well as phenomenologically, and by this understanding, temporally, between its perceived aspirations and lived reality.<sup>31</sup> As suburbia emerged from a modern shift in temporality characterized by the postwar environment, Freeman posits that sexual dissidents did as well, possessing a temporal ethos that is equally aligned with the forces of modernization. She stresses that the moment of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century industrialization was identified as a double-time, which evoked signs of fractured temporality.<sup>32</sup> Queer identities and those considered to be non-normative are consequently products of this temporal wound, acting as agents of these seismic cultural shifts. Where queer theory aligns itself here with deconstruction, the play of signifiers, and the possibilities of understanding identities as relational and constructed, Freeman encourages us to see that traumatic experiences, perhaps brought about by significant shifts in temporality at an individual or larger societal level, can productively bolster new epistemological modes of knowing, being, and existing.<sup>33</sup>

*Insidious* interacts with the concept of *chrononormativity* by a specific sonic mechanism. As we understand the supernatural space to be increasingly interwoven with the real space of the house, diegetic sound in the film exaggerates the ticking of a clock, the beeping of a heart monitor, or the constant strokes of a metronome immediately before a character's encounter with the supernatural. This gestures toward an idea of "real" temporality and reminds us that the supernatural in this context exists to threaten it. At the climax of the film when Josh is hypnotized in order to enter "the further" to save Dalton, Elise plays a metronome, so he knows that when its consistent ticking is slowed down or abstracted, he has left the real world. As such, the represented departure from markers of *chrononormative* time insinuate an interaction with the ulterior space of "the further," which is itself constructed by deviant forms of sociality.

The interdimensionality of the supernatural realm tangled with the real produces a new body of social relations within the home that are marked by alterity. A wealth of implications begin to present themselves by this mechanism. Positioning the suburban house as a visual and social structure of the *habitus* itself, the embodiments, movements, and performances of the nuclear family have been shown to reproduce and perpetuate a specific form of social normativity established by the heterosexual couple, under a set of nationalistic prescriptions articulated by the postwar environment. The reinforcement of this particular social space was integral to the construction of national ideology in America, whose inherently fraught utopian notions of everyday life placed the white, heterosexual,

---

<sup>31</sup> Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 10.

product-consuming couple on a pedestal. As artists and filmmakers mobilized the gothic mode to articulate their critiques of the suburban neighbourhood, a repertoire of pejorative attributes to this “idyllic” space emerged, including the dissolution of the heterosexual couple and family, which had built its reputation on a myriad of social disengagements including the red-lining of minority communities. By positioning the feared other in the assumed safety and comfort of the home, Wan’s *Insidious* taps into a particularly suburban gothic ethos to suggest that these repressed forms of alterity—specifically those that challenge the cultural dominance of the nuclear family *as* normativity—are closer than perhaps previously anticipated. This is articulated specifically by the existence of “the further,” a realm that threatens the spatial and temporal constitution of the suburban house to insinuate the deconstructive potential of non-normative sexuality emblemized by this ulterior space. The normativity that the home had once represented is now threatened by an unknown other whose ulterior social configuration builds a foundation for the reproduction of non-normative practices to enter the space of the home. *Insidious* therefore marks a starting point for many other contemporary gothic films to explore the threat of alterity on the dominant order through the destabilization of the suburban house and its representative valence.

*Marcus Prasad is a PhD student in the department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University, advised by Dr. Bobby Benedicto. He works on film philosophy, psychoanalysis, and queer theory as they pertain to modern art and horror film. He received his MA and BA Honours in Art History from the University of British Columbia, where he was awarded the Joseph Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship, The Ian Wallace Award in Art History, and the Patsy and David Heffel Award in Art History.*



Figure 1: James Wan, *Insidious*, 2010. Screenshots by author. © FilmDistrict



Figure 2: James Wan, *Insidious*, 2010. Screenshots by author. In these images, the Lambert's house is shown in "the further." © FilmDistrict