

# The Big Bad Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

Kubrick's 'Shining' on Domestic Abuse in *The Dark and the Wicked*

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## ABSTRACT

The thorough scholarly dissection of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) has yielded many results, among which is a reflection, led by Jack Torrance's "Big Bad Wolf" impersonation, that centres on the implicit theme of domestic abuse. This wolf metaphor stands as the starting point of an examination of Bryan Bertino's *The Dark and the Wicked* (2020) through the lens of *The Shining*'s domestic violence narrative. Both films, although widely different status-wise, and directed forty years apart, seem to tackle this thematic idea through common cinematic elements: prowling shots, hints of fairy-tales, and cannibalistic patterns, together depicting the home as the hunting ground of a patriarchal predator. The domestic abuse theme, subdued in *The Shining*, remains textually absent from *The Dark and the Wicked*, but their synoptic analysis shines a new light on the missing genesis of the characters' devouring trauma, as diverted through its visual narration.

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## INTRODUCTION

In terms of the tantalizing amount of interpretative content it spawned over the years, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) is arguably one of the most prolific examples of modern horror cinema. It has been examined through numerous lenses, ranging from the socio-historic perspectives of the Indigenous and Jewish genocides to that of the economic landscape of its period and the volatile territory of worldwide conspiracies. This ever-growing subtextual web encompassing *The Shining* has found (or re-discovered) its way into contemporary horror cinema, with some resurgences echoing louder than others. During the promotion of his debut *The Witch* (2014), director Robert Eggers straightforwardly admitted it "reeks of *The Shining*" ("Cinematic Exorcism"). Indeed, the two notably share a dark fairy-tale atmosphere that culminates in *The Witch*'s own

"Room 237" sequence, mirroring the content and composition of the original (Fig. 1). The editing of this sequence entangles the perspectives of Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) and his son Danny Torrance (Danny Lloyd), but almost entirely eludes the traumatic experience of the latter, which leaves him with a contused neck. In *The Witch*, Caleb (Harvey Scrimshaw) coalesces Jack and Danny's characters in his prepubescent impulses: his confrontation with the hag as a treacherously seductive woman is equally motivated by childlike curiosity and lustful fascination. The boy's fateful embrace of the witch even entails consequences that are reminiscent, if far more tragic, of Danny's bruised neck.<sup>1</sup>

Another example would be Ari Aster's opening of *Hereditary* (2018), which uses the same continuity trick used

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1 In a feverish bout, Caleb seems to be choking before he regurgitates a rotten apple.



**Fig. 1** | Jack's encounter in room 237 in *The Shining*, 01:12:49–01:15:24. Warner Bros., 1980. Caleb's encounter with the hag in *The Witch*, 00:40:29–00:42:00. Parts and Labor, 2015.

by Kubrick in one of his seminal sequences: the camera frames Jack studying the garden maze model displayed in the lobby before deceitfully assuming his “overlooking” point of view (00:39:40). A slow, vertical track on the maze ensues and, as distant voices can be heard, tiny figures appear to be moving within it. *Hereditary* reinvests and exacerbates this point of view, placing its protagonists inside the miniature replica of the family's home, itself located inside the actual house (00:01:55). The motif's wide thematic scope notably extends in the artificiality of the (real) home, which, just like the Overlook, was entirely built on set and rendered geographically impossible by the *mise-en-scène*.<sup>2</sup>

*The Dark and the Wicked* (Bryan Bertino, 2020) and *The Shining* first appear to share common elements, but their relationship proves more profound when investigated further. The former proposes a relentlessly bleak and violent variation on the familial disintegration—a theme very dear to horror cinema—that plagues the Torrances. Brought back to their estranged parents' goat farm to bid farewell to their comatose father (Michael Zagst), siblings Louise (Marin Ireland) and Michael Straker (Michael Abbott Jr.) soon come to realize the home is now ridden with a dark influence, seemingly linked to the half-dead patriarch and to which they will eventually fall prey. But beyond the small family unit that both films focus on, they also share a similar generic spin. A look at Bertino's first feature, *The Strangers* (2008), informs the lineage of its successor: an ailing couple is confronted with three masked killers, a scenario that fits it neatly into the slasher subgenre. Though the home invasion in *The Dark and the Wicked* is more ethereal, the merciless annihilation of its protagonists and the predatory vantage of the camera betray a similar kinship to the slasher. As for *The Shining*, Kubrick's notorious gliding shots prey on the Torrances as they wander down the Overlook's corridors, conveying a strong sense

of predation culminating in the final chase—Jack's wailing as he flails his axe in the maze evokes the last scene of Tobe Hooper's seminal slasher, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). As has been noted by Elizabeth Jean Hornbeck in “Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?: Domestic Violence in *The Shining*,” the film's initial straightforward Gothic horror later indulges a generic spin that is tied to Jack's pivotal character. His arc, representation, and interpretation “parody the Gothic horror genre and slasher films and even children's fairy tales in what is, at its core, a story about domestic violence” (689).

Hornbeck then places Jack's emphatic rendition of the “Three Little Pigs” tale (02:03:15) at the centre of her reading, making this Big Bad Wolf the emblematic figure of the domestic abuse narrative in *The Shining*. Furthermore, the association of “the nightmarish, predatory beast of fairy tales” (689) with domestic violence, along with the perspective it provides, shed new light on *The Dark and the Wicked's* own “wolf” metaphor. Heavily embedded in the film's aesthetic and narrative text, the figure of the wolf is similarly pivotal to this Southern Gothic tale of supernatural grief that veers into a deadly hunt. Moreover, it serves as the starting point for an interpretation of the film as a ruthless battle against the trauma of domestic abuse perpetrated by the predatory father.

In an attempt to track down the different steps of this theory's formation, I first explore the *cinematics of grief*, the immediate central theme of *The Dark and the Wicked*. A closer observation of these motifs, however, reveals that their subversive application feeds interestingly into the aesthetics of trauma. Both films lay out the common foundation of their domestic violence narratives through their portrayal of a deeply ambivalent home coalesced with the patriarch as a site of danger. What elements support this subtext in *The Shining*, and how are they echoed in *The Dark and the Wicked*? How do

<sup>2</sup> Explored, among other elements, in “L'horreur d'*Hérédité*: une mise en scène de l'inquiétant ‘familial,’” a soon-to-be published essay I wrote for the 17<sup>th</sup> issue of *Mise au Point*.



Fig. 2 | The ambiguously occupied bed and chair in *The Dark and the Wicked*, 00:03:47 / 00:05:47. Travelling Picture Show Company, 2020.

these works reflect on each other when considered through the lens of a paternal violence—past or present—intrinsic to the home? A constellation of narrative and visual elements akin to predation, devouring, and digestion is deployed around the emblematic figure of the wolf. I will thus explore how, primarily in *The Shining*, the articulation of these elements could be seen as feeding into the theory of chronic childhood trauma resulting from domestic violence. Finally, I will interrogate the intertwining of those tropes in the re-definition of *The Dark and the Wicked's* threat as the abusive patriarch and the return of the devouring trauma suffered at his hands in the wake of his passing.

**Both *The Shining* and *The Dark and the Wicked* lay out the common foundation of their domestic violence narratives through their portrayal of a deeply ambivalent home coalesced with the patriarch as a site of danger.**

#### **SUBVERTING THE CINEMATICS OF GRIEF IN *THE DARK AND THE WICKED***

In *The Forms of the Affects*, Eugenie Brinkema states that

There is a habeas corpus drive in the cinema, and when a body fails to appear . . . the loss can be framed by the environment, delimiting the missing being by marking out the space of or in relation to objects that that body should properly inhabit—hence, the clichéd images of unoccupied beds and chairs in narratives of loss. (95)

From its opening sequence (00:00:58–00:05:50), *The Dark and the Wicked* highlights the subversive nature of its central loss: not altogether there, nor completely absent, the unconscious father occupies a liminal space between life and death. In lieu of an empty bed, we are thus presented with an occupied one. As his soon-to-be widow, Virginia Straker (Julia

Oliver-Touchstone), chops vegetables, the camera slowly pans in on her back—the sound of a chair scraping against the floor, and settling under an unknown weight, can then be heard. She turns around to find the ominously empty chair has been placed right behind her. The use of these tropes establishes a clear link between the dying father, David Straker, and this menacing presence, but their diversion foreshadows the deceitfulness of this anticipated grief: “It’s not what you think,” the mother will later tell her son (00:15:23), a warning that could just as well be addressed to the viewers. While the marital bed is still occupied by the vacant body of the undead father, a polarizing disembodied presence sits in the empty patriarchal chair (Fig. 2).

The traditionally empty spaces of grief are therefore subverted in *The Dark and the Wicked*, and this play on vacancy is further exemplified by the second sighting (00:13:10) of the elusive, vampire-like creature that embodies the malevolent force invading the home. As Louise stands at the sink, the front door creaks open, tearing a dark crack into the safety of the house; in a shot-reverse shot dynamic, the camera assumes an eye-level perspective of the character, from the visually-vacant, dark exterior. A panning shot follows her as she crosses the room to the door and catches a backlit silhouette standing on the threshold of the marital bedroom (Fig. 3). The dark, but deceitfully empty, tearing in the protective house is transposed into this solid black shadow that is already inside the lit home. The apparition feeds into the vacant/occupied polarity introduced by the bed and chair and complements it with a play on light and shadow. Moreover, the equation of the menace with the (eponymous) dark recurs: as Louise, alone in the goat pen, scrutinizes the nocturnal space outside, what we first mistake for her own shadow elongates, ominously, against the back wall (00:48:35).

From empty spaces we thus move to shadowed ones, a prominent feature in *The Dark and the Wicked* that is used to convey the estrangement of the Straker family members.<sup>3</sup> Writer Virginia Woolf, here quoted by Gaston Bachelard in his work on space, compares the illuminated room to “an island of light in the sea of darkness . . . [wherein] [t]he people gathered under the lamp are aware they form a human group,

3 This estrangement is rendered apparent by the dialogues between siblings Louise and Michael (00:11:03–00:12:17).



**Fig. 3** | The first appearance of the “dark” transposed inside the home; Michael and Virginia in their islands of light in *The Dark and the Wicked*, 00:13:16–00:14:41. Travelling Picture Show Company, 2020.

### From its opening sequence, *The Dark and the Wicked* highlights the subversive nature of its central loss: not altogether there, nor completely absent, the unconscious father occupies a liminal space between life and death.

united in a depression, on an island” (Bachelard 128).<sup>4</sup> This poetic imagery highlights the dismantled state of the family unit: instead of being “gathered” under the light, the Strakers are isolated from one another in it, and, accordingly, they are separated by the dark voids creeping around it (Fig. 3). In *Mourning Films: A Critical Study of Loss and Grieving in Cinema*, Richard Armstrong invokes an eerily similar metaphor: “death means that our things have separated from us like objects in space no longer governed by gravity. They float indiscriminately, but inexorably, away” (94). These characters seem to have floated away from one another long ago. But what do these shadowed spaces, devouring the home as they expand throughout the film, stand for?

*The Dark and the Wicked*'s subversion of the empty spaces of grief—ambiguously occupied or invested by shadows—ultimately consists of a manipulation of the absence/presence dialectic which has been investigated, notably, by Tarja Laine

in regards to the representation of trauma onscreen. In an article titled “Traumatic Horror Beyond the Edge, *It Follows* and *Get Out*,” the author notes that traumatic events are defined by absences, in both visual and narrative forms. Drawing from that observation, she argues that these two films create and maintain an atmosphere of trauma via a displacement of the threat offscreen, thus conveying “the eternal presence of an absent dread” (284). The ever-present threat of this compounded offscreen presence/onscreen absence, she states, adequately stands for the missing narrative of the characters’ trauma, as a suggested event lying just outside the borders of the film’s narrative.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Laine mentions the work of Miriam Haughton, who speaks of trauma as a “shadowed space.” With this metaphor, Haughton points to the fact that the kind of trauma suffered in the plays studied—which, interestingly, are focused on domestic violence towards women and children—is figuratively “shadowed” from public discourse and representation (5).

<sup>4</sup> “Un îlot de lumière dans la mer des ténèbres... Les êtres réunis sous la lampe ont conscience de former un groupe humain réuni dans un creux de terrain, sur une île.”

<sup>5</sup> Very little, if anything, is indeed said or shown about the initial trauma of the characters, such as the death of Jay’s father in *It Follows* (Robert Mitchell, 2014) or that of Chris’s mother in *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017).





**Fig. 4** | Jack's "home" twisted cliché in *The Shining*, 02:01:57. Warner Bros., 1980. The ambiguous "home" declaration as motive for the masked family in *The Strangers*, 01:10:40. Vertigo Entertainments, 2008.

I therefore posit that the ambiguously occupied, and the literally shadowed empty spaces of the Strakers' home, participate in an expression of trauma. These figures convey the persistent threat of an event that is, in itself, glaringly absent from the narrative. The source of this trauma is domestic abuse, as I will try to justify further in light of Kubrick's *The Shining*.

#### DOMESTIC ABUSE AND THE AMBIVALENCE OF HOME

Drawing from the work of Judith Herman and her observations on violence within the domestic sphere, Haughton notes, "one may conclude that the most dangerous place for women and children is the home" (27). Indeed, the home is depicted as a highly ambivalent milieu in both of our films, and in ways that seem to respond to one another. Greg Keeler approaches films like *The Shining* through a synoptic analysis articulated around the duplicity of the home. The Torrance's problems, he writes, "are no sooner confronted than they go whipping into the void of the huge 'home' which isolated the three of them" (3). This "void of the home" also adequately portrays the ambiguous space within (or from) which *The Dark and the Wicked's* invisible guests and infiltrating shadows emerge.

In the climactic sequence of *The Shining*, Jack uses an axe to take down not one, but two doors during his rampage into the heart of the family quarters (Fig. 4). "Wendy, I'm home!" he emphatically exclaims as he hacks through the first one (02:01:56), and just before hacking into the second one, he recites the words of the fairy tale antagonist, the Big Bad Wolf: "Little pigs, little pigs, let me come in..." (02:03:15). This anticlimactic doubling of the intrusion, along with Nicholson's lines, serves a single purpose in two ways. First, the formulation

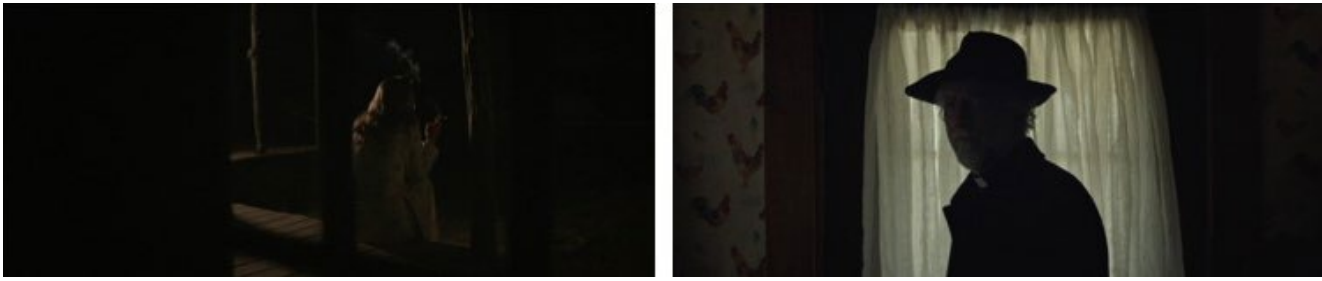
of this clichéd greeting of the bread-winning patriarch to his household, in its very linguistic structure, collapses the abuser and the environment into the ambivalent concept of the "home," effectively associating it with danger: Jack *is* the home. Second, in the repetitiveness and rapid succession of the two scenes, a slippage occurs between his consecrated role as protector and provider, and the "beast within" transpiring in the "Three Little Pigs" re-enactment. Moreover, the reference to this precise tale—"then I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house in!"—insists on the illusory protection provided by the "home" that the abusive patriarch is conflated with.<sup>6</sup>

When questioned by their desperate victims about the reason they were chosen, the intruders of Bertino's *The Strangers* coldly respond, "because you were home" (Fig. 4). This emblematic line offers a deformed reflection of Jack's ambivalent phrase, and thereby discloses similar concerns. As Kimberly Jackson underlined in her discussion of the film, these antagonists comprise a masked, stereotypical family unit of their own (53-54), and the fact that they are attacking a failed attempt at one adds another layer of irony to their statement.<sup>7</sup> Stripping down the home-invasion genre to its minimalist core, this nihilistic posture further posits the household as a site of impending danger: "... the punishment the strangers mete out happens specifically to those who are 'home'; it is a form of terrorism reserved for the domestic space and those who occupy it" (57). In the same way, the Straker siblings' demise is precipitated by their return to the farm, although this "home" has not been their own for quite some time.

During *The Shining's* crucial scene in the red bathroom, Jack and Charles Grady (Philip Stone) get into a confusing debate: who is the caretaker here? This ambivalence is

6 Jack's last line—"Here's Johnny"—has been said to replicate the introduction of *The Tonight Show's* host Johnny Carson, circling back to popular culture. But in the perspective of it marking the completion of Jack's transformation from the stereotypical patriarch, through the beast, and to a full-blown "pater familicide," I suggest that it alludes to the infamous John E. List, who executed the five members of his household in 1971. The main motive of his crime, compounding the shame of imminent economic ruin—he was pretending to go to work everyday though he had lost his position years past—and subsequent social demotion are not far removed from Jack Torrance's preoccupations.

7 In *The Strangers*, Kristen (Liv Tyler) just rejected her boyfriend's proposal.



**Fig. 5** | A hidden shot of Louise; the priest silhouetted as a solid black shadow in *The Dark and the Wicked*, 00:14:37 / 00:45:50. Travelling Picture Show Company, 2020.

primarily embedded in the narrative through Jack's complete negligence of the facility's maintenance, as Wendy (Shelley Duvall) is shown fulfilling those daily duties. Grady then encourages Jack's legitimate reclaiming of the title: he *is*, and *has always been*, the caretaker. Here, it seems relevant to highlight the pivotal role of the figure in the etiology of trauma akin to domestic violence. As Herman states in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, "chronic childhood abuse takes place in a familial climate of pervasive terror, in which ordinary caretaking relationships have been profoundly disrupted" (98). Thus, in the midst of a scene concerned with patriarchal violence, the heavy emphasis on the polysemous term betrays its subversiveness—meanwhile, the ball band's "home" filters through the walls, bringing this ambivalent caretaker back to the ambivalent home he personifies.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, when confronted with Wendy's suggestion of an abandonment of post (01:43:50), Jack's aggressive reaction makes it clear that the responsibilities he feels so strongly about are not those stated in his initial contract. He must now *take care* of his family, in the treacherous sense implied by Grady as he comes to rescue him from the pantry (01:54:33): "I see you can hardly have *taken care* of the business we discussed." Grady then adds, "We have come to believe ... that you haven't the belly for it," and the phrase, stripped of its figurative meaning, rings particularly true in advance of the following segment.

### THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE OF PREDATION: HUNTING, DEVOURING, AND DIGESTING

The crucial figure of the wolf in the domestic abuse narrative of *The Shining* was the starting point of this essay, and now that the ambivalence of the home coalesced with the patriarch as a site of danger has been established, I will explore

the cinematic forms that this danger assumes. *The Dark and the Wicked* composes imagery of predation from its opening sequence: after Virginia, the mother, hears wolves howling outside, the prowling camera catches a glimpse of a vampiric creature crouched among the agitated goats (00:04:40). It will then hunt the characters through the lighting—or, more accurately, the shadows—as well as the camera work and sound, using deceitful human disguises. The darkness that devours the home as the film progresses evokes the predatory traits that Mary Webb, quoted by Bachelard, attributes to the night: "to those who don't have a home, the night is a wild beast ... an immense beast, that's everywhere, like a universal threat" (130).<sup>9</sup> Very low and partially concealed camera angles give off the persistent impression of a creeping predator hidden in dark corners of the room to spy on his prey (Fig. 5). As Jeremy Kibler aptly writes in his review, "long-time character actor Xander Berkeley, a priest who claims to be a friend to Louise and Michael's mother, also makes a lingering impression as a possible wolf in sheep's clothing." The deceiving figure first engages in a cryptic dialogue with the siblings, comparing the evil plaguing them to a wolf.<sup>10</sup> His next visit offers an interesting counterpart to Jack's impersonation, as it is composed and shot like a Big Bad Wolf encounter: in a growling drawl, the hunched-over imposter enjoins Michael and Louise, who are huddled on the threshold of their house like the scared children of fairy tales, to "come outside" (Fig. 6).

The threat of being devoured already implied by this mise-en-scène of predation is intricately woven into *The Shining*. The overt allusion to cannibalism during the family's journey to the Overlook and the repeated reference to the Roadrunner's chase by a ravenous Wile E. Coyote are further elaborated by precise visual and narrative elements. Fairly early in the movie, a dolly shot precedes then tracks Wendy as she wheels a catering cart down from the kitchen to the family quarters. A hard cut switches to a stalking shot of Danny's compulsive tricycle ride around the

8 In the "Soundtracks" section of *The Shining's* IMDb page, the song is credited as "Home (When Shadows Fall)" and performed by Henry Hall and the Gleneagles Hotel Band. The lyrics read, "When shadows fall, trees whisper day is ending. My thoughts are ever-wending home."

9 "Pour ceux qui n'ont pas de maison, la nuit est une vraie bête sauvage... une bête immense, qui est partout, comme une universelle menace" (Bachelard 130).

10 Berkeley states, "You think she's crazy cause she saw a wolf, saw it coming? He's not out there. He's already here" (00:46:00). As he says this last line, he is silhouetted against the front door as a solid, black shadow.



Fig. 6 | The Big Bad Wolf encounter with the priest (left to right) in *The Dark and the Wicked*, 00:51:05–00:52:40. Travelling Picture Show Company, 2020.

*The Shining* therefore seems to display a “to eat or be eaten” logic to the characters’ confrontation with their traumas: by regurgitating Tony, Danny manages not to be devoured by his father who, conversely, failed to assimilate his own experience of childhood abuse, and instead revisited it upon his son and wife.

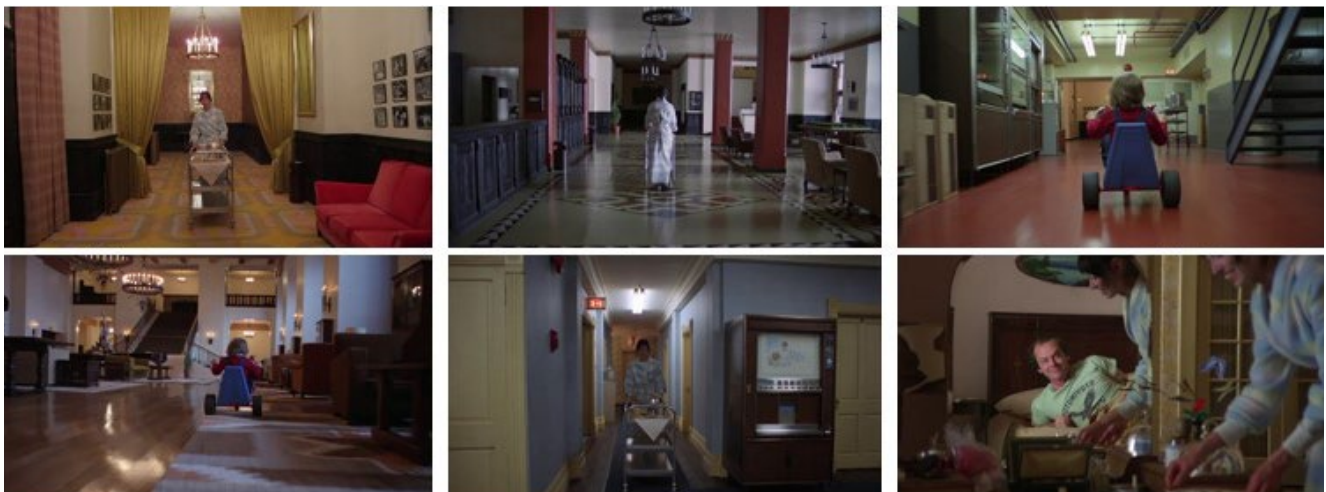


Fig. 7 | Danny getting served as Jack’s breakfast (left from right) in *The Shining*, 00:34:21–00:35:50. Warner Bros., 1980.

hotel’s ground floor, before going back to Wendy as she wheels the cart to the door of the apartment and brings the tray into the bedroom, waking Jack up with a breakfast in bed. These alternating cuts and the continuous tracking shot connecting them equate Danny to Jack’s meal (Fig. 7). In “My Dinner with Stanley: Kubrick, Food, and the Logic of Images,” Mervyn Nicholson highlights that “the motif of eating people is subtextually present throughout the movie, where dismemberment and death suggest food preparation for a demonic banquet” (285).

This image is first brought up by Jack and directly relates to the figure of the predator: when awoken from his grunting nightmare by Wendy, he tells her he “cut [her and Danny] up into little pieces” (00:58:52).

The “little pieces” motif will recur not only to extend this devouring theme with the subsequent organic process—digestion—but also to articulate those aesthetic elements inside *The Shining*’s narrative of domestic abuse. The image is summoned back during Jack and Grady’s encounter: “You





**Fig.8** | The play theme of Jack and Danny's traumatic bond conveyed through the porous spaces of the Overlook and the maze in *The Shining*, 00:37:37–00:40:12 / 00:57:10. Warner Bros., 1980.

chopped your wife and daughters into little bits” (01:27:28). Keeler describes it in a curiously fitting sarcastic tone:

Also the little fellow dreams about a strange word spelled redrum, which could easily be mistaken for red room except that it actually spells murder backwards. The most noticeable red room in the huge lodge is a symmetrically designed Stanley Kubrick style public bathroom, a bathroom where the little girls' daddy tells his daddy how he made his kids take their medicine, and his daddy takes this as good advice. (4)

As written by Amy Nolan in an essay titled “Seeing Is Digesting: Labyrinths of Historical Ruin in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*,” this room “embodies an interior, claustrophobic atmosphere, evoking the womb, or heart, or stomach” (101). As domestic abuse is calmly discussed in the Overlook’s stomach, Wendy is anxiously rehearsing her escape plan when Danny’s Tony starts chanting “redrum” like a broken alarm clock (01:31:41). Thus, decor and sequential continuity are used here to further link the *mise-en-scène* of predation to its peripheral themes of devouring and digesting, thereby inscribing it inside the domestic abuse narrative.

#### THE EXPRESSION OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA IN *THE SHINING*

The motifs observed so far in *The Shining* are consistently linked to Jack’s character and feed into the domestic violence narrative, providing solid ground for a shift of perspective: I now propose to examine the film through the lens of trauma—that of Danny and of Jack—or under the light shone back on this violence by its consequences. Although Kubrick’s adaptation eludes it entirely, Hornbeck notes that the paternal violence

*The Dark and the Wicked*’s “wolf in sheep’s clothing” eventually visits Louise as a young woman wearing a red cloak, a piece of clothing that hints at the “Little Red Riding-Hood” tale as a counterpart to *The Shining*’s “Three Little Pigs.”

suffered by Jack as a child is a crucial backdrop to Stephen King’s novel (702–03). This intergenerational trauma narrative is absent from the film, but Jack and Danny appear to be linked through the motif of play, which is “obsessively repeated” post-trauma (Herman 39). The previously approached breakfast sequence includes an inserted tracking shot of Danny’s tricycle loop around the hotel’s ground floor and ends with Jack’s retelling of his first encounter with the Overlook (00:37:04): “It was almost as though I knew what was going to be around every corner,” he states, projecting the repetitive play of his son. An offscreen rhythmic sound accompanies the following slow dissolve into a shot of his typewriter, and the camera pans out to reveal Jack’s own repetitive play—the throwing of a ball against the lobby’s wall—as the origin of the sound. This traumatic bond is symbolically reinvested and further articulated in a later sequence. In this sequence, Danny plays in an upstairs corridor when a pink tennis ball rolls into the panning-out shot towards the boy, then a reverse shot reveals the eerily empty corridor from which it emerged. It is as though the ball travelled from Jack’s playing session, through the permeable twin spaces of the maze and the Overlook to resurface, days later, in the labyrinthine upstairs corridors (Fig. 8).<sup>11</sup> The travelling

11 This porosity is established in the following succession of sequences and concludes in the seamless transfer from the maze’s model to the real one (00:38:02–00:39:45).





Fig. 9 | Jack's patriarchal throne in *The Shining*, 01:02:41. Warner Bros., 1980.

ball then lured Danny to room 237, where he suffered abuse that would be immediately blamed on Jack. Something akin to an inheritance from father to son is therefore symbolically conveyed here: a “traumatic play” legacy. The later revelation of Jack’s neurotic mantra—“All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” (01:42:17)—further confirms this intuition.

Hornbeck aptly suggests that an “interpretation of Danny’s psychic ability is as a display of a split personality, known today as dissociative identity disorder” (705), a disorder that has been correlated to “situations of massive childhood trauma” (Herman 102-03). This fragmentation of the personality mirrors that of the body, the one dreamed up and then attempted by Jack: could Tony be one of Danny’s “little pieces”? This traumatic personality fragment as the little boy that “lives in [his] mouth” and “hides in [his] stomach” (00:12:10) also harbours a strong connection to the ingestion and digestion pattern. Moreover, when needed, Tony is “regurgitated” by Danny in a motion reverting the devouring or ingesting dynamic of the predatory patriarch. Grady incites Jack to “correct” his wife and son in the red room (01:31:41) when “Tony takes over completely... In psychological terms, the alternate personality performs the function for which it was created, to protect the abused child from a dangerous parent” (Hornbeck 706).

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman states that reliving a traumatic experience represents an attempt “to ‘assimilate’ and ‘liquidate’ traumatic experience” (41), thus invoking a biological process that further extends the digestion metaphor. Relying on the same intertwining of the Overlook and its garden maze that allowed the transfer of Jack’s ball, Hannah Mowat writes that “[Jack’s] death in the maze has resulted in his complete absorption into the hotel’s history—through the hedge-lined exterior and onto the plastered walls of the interior.” Additionally, she invests the biological term mobilized by Herman within the context of trauma: “the final dissolve to an extreme close-up of Jack’s face offers further confirmation of this ultimate assimilation” (Mowat). *The Shining* therefore seems to display a “to eat or be eaten” logic to the characters’ confrontation with their traumas: by regurgitating Tony, Danny manages not to



be devoured by his father who, conversely, failed to assimilate his own experience of childhood abuse, and instead revisited it upon his son and wife. Having unfolded the different threads weaving the domestic violence theme into Kubrick’s cinematic text, I would now like to superimpose this canvas onto *The Dark and the Wicked*.

#### TO EAT OR BE EATEN (BY TRAUMA): ECHOES OF THESE TROPES IN *THE DARK AND THE WICKED*

The opening sequence of *The Dark and the Wicked* (00:00:58–00:05:50) along with the one preceding the mother’s suicide (00:16:11–00:17:28) display elements that establish a connection between the patriarch, the figure of the wolf, and the threat of being devoured. Similar to the one observed in *The Shining*, this pattern hints at an absent narrative of domestic abuse and childhood trauma. The ambiguously empty chair of the opening sequence is not only associated with the father as the “underbelly” of the occupied bed, but is also charged with a threat of a patriarchal nature: its unseen occupant seems to ensure that the mother’s domestic duty—she is chopping vegetables—is fulfilled with due diligence. Virginia’s defeated attitude is eerily devoid of surprise, indicating that this is, or was, a regular occurrence. The second sequence (00:16:11–00:17:28) repeats this oppressive ritual: Virginia is once more chopping vegetables when she is made distraught by the chair’s scraping noise, followed by the sound of its seat settling under an unknown weight. Suffice to say that this domestic throne is established fairly quickly as the token of the dying, abusive patriarch’s persisting dominion over his household. *The Shining*’s patriarch has been associated with kingship as well. While being berated by Wendy for abusing Danny (01:02:04), Jack sits “stupefied in his throne-like, Napoleonic chair” (Nolan 189), and the dissolve into the next scene then puts a chandelier very much resembling a crown onto his head (Fig. 9).

Finally, this versatile symbol of the chair is depicted as an instrument of harm. Its scraping sound causes such distress in Virginia that her domestic task seemingly turns against her, and



**Fig. 10** | The menacing patriarchal chair and Virginia's fragmentation in *The Dark and the Wicked*, 00:16:10–00:19:30. Travelling Picture Show Company, 2020.

Thus, *The Dark and the Wicked's* Big Bad Wolf hunts down the members of this fractured family unit while the menacing patriarchal throne stands for the persisting, destructive influence of the domestic abuser.

she proceeds to mince her own fingers along with the carrots.<sup>12</sup> This gruesome occurrence recalls *The Shining's* “little pieces,” suggesting cannibalistic consumption and the traumatic fragmentation of the psyche in victims of chronic abuse. The next morning, as the siblings frantically search for Virginia, the creeping camera slowly retracts in the shadows of the goat pen, soon to include in the frame her hanged, backlit silhouette. The ensuing shot of the patriarchal chair placed around the dinner table implies that it was the instrument of the suicide, therefore imputing the mother's fateful gesture to the absent narrative of domestic violence (Fig. 10).

In the closing segment of this essay, I would like to recompose the absent narrative of domestic violence through each member of the Straker family, as all of them seem to display symptoms that endorse this hypothesis. The cinematic portrayal of their battle against dark forces lured to the home by the patriarch's liminal state is lined with another, more grounded tale: the struggle to “assimilate” their resurgent trauma or be devoured by it. In a diegetic lifespan encapsulated between the two “vegetable sequences,” Virginia exhibits ambivalent behaviour ranging from meekly disapproving of her

children's visit to aggressively enjoining them to leave. The oddly resigned attitude she otherwise displays rings true to the frozen state adopted by captive victims of chronic abuse. Herman contends in a metaphor particularly fitting here that “these are the responses of captured prey to predator” (42). Virginia's attitude betrays an obscure knowledge of what is coming while embracing a somewhat passive, sacrificial posture that could be interpreted as the expression of a guilt-inducing complicity in her children's past abuse. This equivocal stance is moreover reminiscent of Kubrick's portrayal of Wendy's character, which, as Hornbeck highlights, sparked ambivalent commentaries (706).

As for the avoidant attitude of the brother, Michael, it could be seen as re-enacting a past, precipitated departure from the home, one that left his mother and sister to fight for themselves. After he fled in the middle of the night, Louise's harrowing and infantile reproach — “You left me!” — rings like an echo of their history (01:18:38); this point resonates all the more so when her huddled figure is framed in a “dirty shot” with the empty chair previously placed around the table now facing her (Fig. 11).

12 Dawn Keetley took notice of the obsessive wood-cutting associated with male characters to “express their sublimated hostility toward [their] family”; this motif, she states, is notoriously used in Stuart Rosenberg's *The Amityville Horror* (1979) and has been recently reclaimed in Eggers's *The Witch* (Keetley). *The Shining* followed *The Amityville Horror* closely, and Kubrick's trading of the mallet for the axe as the instrument of Jack and Grady's familicides could be speculated to reference this anger-fuelled, stereotypically masculine wood-cutting. In the scope of gender representations, a case can be made of the neurotic vegetable-slicing motif typically attributed to female characters: the fanatic mother of Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) and the traumatized one of *The Dark and the Wicked* seem to mirror this wood-cutting in horror cinema.



Fig. 11 | Louise reliving her brother's desertion in *The Dark and the Wicked*, 01:18:38. Travelling Picture Show Company, 2020.



Fig. 12 | The shower sequence in *The Dark and the Wicked*, 00:26:17. Travelling Picture Show Company, 2020.

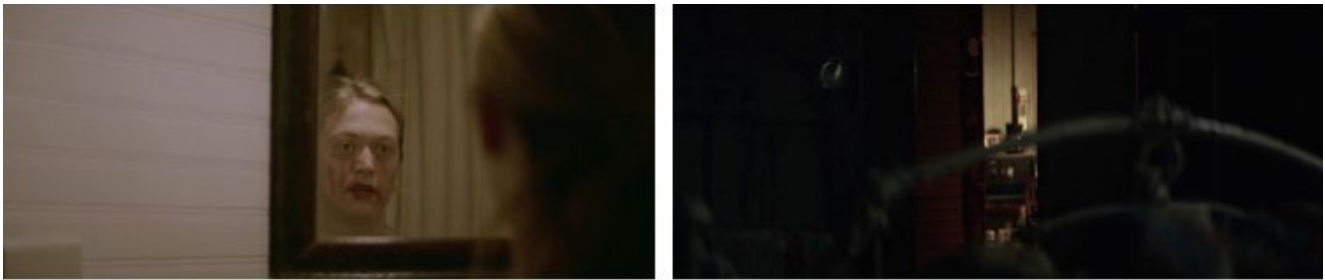


Fig. 13 | Louise's face smeared with red lipstick and the briefly visible chair right before her assault in the bedroom in *The Dark and the Wicked*, 00:40:16 / 1:09:50. Travelling Picture Show Company, 2020.

Michael is then driven to suicide by a hallucination of his decimated daughters and wife around the dinner table, a brutal vision that plays on the illusion that he brought the “trauma” home and visited it upon his own family. The sequence illustrates a divisive point between *The Dark and the Wicked* and *The Shining*, as it feeds into the fact that “contrary to the popular notion of a ‘generational cycle of abuse,’ the great majority of survivors neither abuse nor neglect their children” and are “terribly afraid that [they] will suffer a fate similar to their own” (Herman 114). Michael catches a glimpse of the table surrounded with empty chairs as he dies: this last occurrence of the fateful symbol conveys his deceptive fear of perpetuating the cycle of patriarchal violence.

But as the last surviving member of the household and primary victim of abuse, Louise represents the most telling case. During a sequence reminiscent—if reversed—of Danny and/or Jack's venture into Room 237, she is confronted with an intrusion of her dying father while in the shower. Shot from her low-angle perspective as she is reduced to a scared child or

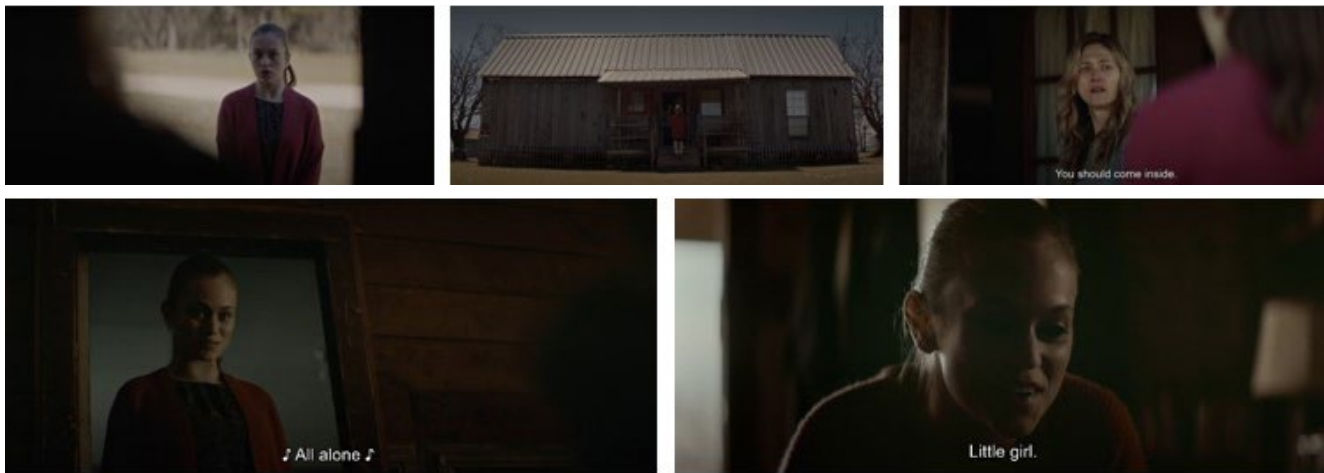
animal cowering in the bathtub, the apparition sternly stares down Louise (Fig. 12).

She yells for Michael, telling him that “Dad's in here!” and when the siblings later stand around the still bedridden father, she insists, “He *was* there.” This line relocates the incident in the character's past, reframing it as a re-enacted recollection. A string of similar occurrences then befalls her. First, she awakes to discover her face smeared with red lipstick in the mirror—two elements echoing *The Shining's* “Redrum” episode—and finds the tube in the marital bed she now shares with her dying father. She will later lay in that bed, an unseen, grunting beast grinding the springs under its weight while an ominous shadow spreads over her; through the cracked open door of the bedroom, the patriarchal chair fleetingly appears (Fig. 13).

*The Dark and the Wicked's* “wolf in sheep's clothing” eventually visits Louise as a young woman wearing a red cloak, a piece of clothing that hints at the “Little Red Riding-Hood” tale as a counterpart to *The Shining's* “Three Little Pigs.”<sup>13</sup> Their encounter, in composition, mirrors the nocturnal appearance

13 Other elements seem to refer to this tale: Louise is seen wearing a red coat several times, and just as she shared her dying father's bed, Little Red Riding-Hood slips into bed with the wolf posing as her previously devoured grandmother (Perrault 82).





**Fig. 14** | The last Big Bad Wolf's encounter and intrusion in the house in *The Dark and the Wicked*, 01:13:29–01:17:28. Travelling Picture Show Company, 2020.

*The Shining* builds its narrative of domestic violence upon cinematics of predation that are themselves composed of motifs embodying the hunting, devouring, and digesting gestures proper to the predatory animal, namely the Big Bad Wolf from fairy tales that Jack impersonates in the last segment of the film.

of the priest as the Big Bad Wolf with a shot-reverse shot dynamic revolving around the threshold and a wide framing of the house (Fig. 14). This time, though, Louise explicitly subverts the priest's malicious invitation of "You should come outside" by enjoining the female intruder to come in (Fig. 6). Once inside the home, the creature's metamorphosis unravels, ever-faithful to the tale: her voice distorts to a masculine growl as she chants, "All alone..." and she calls Louise "little girl" while displaying wide black eyes and eerily elongated teeth.<sup>14</sup> This last infantilizing torment reconvenes the wolf and ties the sexually-charged previous occurrences—the shower, lipstick, and bedroom scenes—back to the character's childhood, therefore reinforcing the intuition that we are dealing with the return of repressed (and possibly sexual) abuse from the predatory patriarch.

## CONCLUSION

*The Shining* builds its narrative of domestic violence upon cinematics of predation that are themselves composed of motifs embodying the hunting, devouring, and digesting gestures proper to the predatory animal, namely the Big Bad Wolf from fairy tales that Jack impersonates in the last segment of the film. The wolf figure takes centre stage in Bertino's *The Dark and the Wicked*, too, and this shared antagonist has motivated a cross-examination that not only provided a deeper insight on the domestic violence narrative of *The Shining*, but brought *The Dark and the Wicked's* implicit one to the forefront. Although formally absent in the film, Jack's own history of abuse is still

an ongoing narrative perpetuated in his relationships with his son and wife. Centred around the empty space left by the dying father, *The Dark and the Wicked* tracks its own absent narrative of domestic violence backwards, piecing it together through the belated and far more fatalistic reckoning of the characters' past trauma. About the catalyst of such devastating aftermath, Herman writes,

Eventually, often in the third or fourth decade of life, the defensive structure may begin to break down. Often the precipitant is a change in the equilibrium of close relationships: the failure of a marriage, the birth of a child, the illness or death of a parent. The facade can hold no longer, and the underlying fragmentation becomes manifest. (114)

Thus, *The Dark and the Wicked's* Big Bad Wolf hunts down the members of this fractured family unit while the menacing patriarchal throne stands for the persisting, destructive influence of the domestic abuser. Sucked back into the dark voids of this wicked home, the Strakers get caught up in the "repetitive reliving of the traumatic experience" (Herman 41) that they are unable to assimilate: reduced to the "little bits" of Jack's nightmare, they "may well provide dinner for a wolf" (Perrault 84). In the last minutes of the film, Louise refuses to leave her father's bedside. As darkness engulfs them both, he awakes to devour her. This final image, in mimicking the tragic ending of the "Little Red Riding-Hood" tale, seals *The Dark and the Wicked* and *The Shining's* iconographic bond and thematic kinship. ■

<sup>14</sup> In Charles Perrault's version, the unsuspecting little girl comments on the wolf's big voice, eyes, and teeth (Perrault 84).

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