Five Shots, Twice Disappeared:
Staging Memory through the Long Take in The Haunting of Hill House (2018)

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ABSTRACT
The mini-series The Haunting of Hill House attracted substantial critical acclaim and perpetuated a developing cycle of formally transgressive horror television, which includes American Horror Story, Bates Motel, and Hannibal. True to this cycle, Haunting employs recognizable visual tropes of horror to illuminate a psychological examination of its characters. Each episode is structured around two distinct time periods marked by flashbacks and flashforwards—the former depicts the Crain siblings as children, growing up in the haunted Hill House; the latter reveals their adulthood, traumatized and fractured from their childhood experiences. This structure draws the focus away from the haunted house itself, towards a complex examination of trauma. This paper focuses on the sixth episode, “Two Storms,” which focuses on Nell—the aftermath of her death in the present, and a night when she physically, briefly disappeared as a child. Unlike other episodes, structures its narrative around five significantly long takes. I argue this formal shift enables an increased complexity to the show’s examination of trauma not just through narrative means, but formal as well. This argument opens up two parallel lines of analysis. First, using Edward Branigan’s work on flashbacks and subjectivity, I explore how each long take’s staging establishes the flashbacks as shared, combined subjective memories for the Crains, and how the specific temporal transitions are executed reveal the emergence of their traumatic past. Second, drawing on contemporary horror scholarship, I explore the episode’s source of horror. I chart the use off-screen space (rather than an identifiable physical ‘monster’) as a new potential threat; the camera expels characters off the lateral edges of the frame, making them also disappear diegetically. Using this analysis, this paper shows how the narrative exploration of family trauma extends into the stylistic and formal elements as well, requiring us to reconsider our understanding of the flashback, subjectivity and framing throughout the series.
departure from other film and television haunted house narratives by drawing the focus away from the house itself as haunted space and towards a complex examination of the memories of the individuals who lived there. As television critic Jason Zinoman puts it, the “apparitions [encountered by the family] can seem like the manifestation of a fragile mental state” (n.p.). In this vein, the hauntings experienced by the Crain children figure as a metaphor for their losses, anxieties, addictions, and instabilities that later plague them as adults.

While each episode employs the flashback to explore traumatic memory, this narrative device adopts an additional function in the series’ sixth episode, “Two Storms.” In this episode, four adult siblings—Theo (Kate Siegel), Shirley (Elizabeth Reaser), Luke (Oliver Jackson-Cohen) and Steve (Michiel Huisman)—and their father, Hugh (Timothy Hutton), gather to view the body of their sister and daughter, Nell (Victoria Pedretti), who took her life in the previous episode. The family members meet in Shirley’s funeral parlour, where the funeral will take place the following day. A long tracking shot through the funeral parlour introduces each family member encountering Nell’s open casket. Within minutes, the episode’s formal departure from others in the series becomes clear: the whole 50-minute episode (except for the final few minutes) is staged around a series of five long takes. The long takes alternate between the two settings of the funeral parlour (with the adult Crains) and Hill House (with the child Crains), in one instance physically tracking between the two time periods. The flashback portions of the episode depict a night when a storm raged outside the house, a chandelier fell from the ceiling, and both Nell and her mother, Olivia (Carla Gugino), physically disappeared for a brief period. Thus, the function of the narrative device becomes twofold: to explore memory and its effect on the present, and as a platform for formal innovation. As this paper reveals, these two functions work in tandem to strengthen the themes of haunting, trauma, and loss throughout the episode.

In the context of contemporary American television, “Two Storms” is formally progressive and was also a financial and logistical risk. This risk was generated by the complex choreography required to execute the episode’s five long takes. Such shots require longer rehearsal time, they increase the risk of error and the likelihood of reshoots, and they demand the construction of specialized sets. Via extensive discussion on social media, Flanagan has reported the immense stress this particular episode placed on crew, equipment, and budgetary allowances (n.p.). For this reason, long takes of the magnitude and complexity seen in “Two Storms” are a rarity in contemporary American television. The episode’s visual splendour and its apparent logistical risk, then, ensure it stands out as both visually and technically remarkable. Undoubtedly, the long takes allow the episode to operate as the series’ showpiece; a special episode used as marketing leverage that also asserts the legitimacy of horror television by employing typically cinematic techniques such as the long take. This asserted legitimacy is typical of the cycle of recent horror television, which Stacey Abbott labels prestige horror television (123). For Abbott, shows such as Hannibal and Bates Motel exemplify this cycle because they blur the generic lines of horror, and they promote a “rich and textured aesthetic vision” (123). Two further factors support this label of prestige, and thus the capacity for formal transgression. First, many of the cycle’s shows have a showrunner bestowed with an auteur status, owing to their background in film, which has historically perpetuated the perception of prestige (Jowett and Abbott; Wells-Lassagne 129-131). Flanagan established his auteur status, and his unique authorial distinction, with horror films Oculus (2013) and Hush (2016). Second, the proliferation of streaming services and changed viewing practices has created a “progressively competitive broadcast landscape,” in which the increasing popularity of horror has enabled a greater capacity for formal experimentation (Abbott 120). These factors substantially impact the formal transgression of film technique in place throughout The Haunting of Hill House.

“Two Storms” takes this transgression a step further by structuring the episode around five long takes. I argue the substantial formal shift adopted in this episode enables two key revelations pertinent to the show’s character development. First, the way the episode stages time shifts across long takes enables the flashbacks to be read as
memories originating from multiple family members. These are complex, combined memories that cannot be tied to one specific subjectivity, and which prompt the viewer to reconsider how subjectivity is constructed across the series more generally. Second, by weaving together the two time periods, the episode reveals a clear duality. “Two Storms” offers a way of thinking through Nell’s dual disappearance: her disappearance in the present as a result of her death (even though she is physically present), by reflecting on a time when she physically disappeared as a child (even though she was still alive). Both these revelations contribute to representing shared family traumatic memories through the form of the long take, narrated via the generic tropes of horror, such as disappearances and the exploitation of off-screen space. The key point of departure for this episode, then, is that it offers both narrative and formal means of considering its central theme of trauma and loss. Through formal innovation, the horror of the episode and the show in general is explored through means other than the mise-en-scène and narrative structure; rather, the horror is relocated to the staging of the camera itself.

**CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVE AS SHARED SUBJECTIVE MEMORY**

Towards the end of Shot One, fifteen minutes into “Two Storms”, Hugh (Timothy Hutton) declares to Shirley that he’s going to find a bathroom. He leaves the side of Nell’s coffin in the funeral parlour and walks down a hallway, passing a pile of empty coffins. After walking through a doorway at the end of the hall, the lighting suddenly darkens, the wallpaper changes, and thunder rumbles outside. Hugh has inexplicably travelled back in time from the funeral parlour to Hill House. This illusion of time travel is made possible by the long take, tracking along with Hugh down the hall, and seamlessly stitching the two time periods and two locations together. Hutton’s slowing in pace as he rounds the corner into the Hill House corridor evidences his character’s surprise at finding his new surroundings. He had been walking confidently up to that point, but as he wanders through the familiar hallway, he looks around, examining the curious time shift. Hugh enters the entrance hall and a large chandelier suddenly drops to the ground near him. The episode’s first cut occurs as the chandelier hits the ground. After this first cut, Hugh witnesses his younger self (Henry Thomas) standing at the top of the staircase, exclaiming, “Oh man!” as he surveys the damage to his house and proceeds to descend the stairs.

The formal strategy used to transition into a subjective flashback differs significantly from previous episodes of *The Haunting of Hill House*. In earlier episodes, flashbacks to the Crains’s time at Hill House are framed distinctly as memories originating from one specific character, which forms the focus of the episode. These memories are transitioned into via a cut, normally following the character seeing or hearing something that evidently reminds them of a moment from the past. The first five episodes of the series revolve around one Crain child each. The previous episode, “The Bent-Neck Lady,” for example, examines Nell’s life-long haunting by a female ghost with a deformed neck and, in the process, it exposes Nell’s resulting trauma from her individual experience of Hill House, which ultimately culminates in her death. Each flashback in that episode is framed as Nell’s memories,
placing her experience at the centre of the narrative. In the first shot of “Two Storms,” which transitions into a flashback via long take, the episode similarly narrates Hugh’s memories, this time to examine his trauma at the loss of his youngest daughter. The point of transition into flashback adheres to what Edward Branigan terms subjective memory. Branigan argues there must be some element of the shot that encourages an interpretation related to character memory, which ties the memory to a particular character as the point of origin (75). The viewer is encouraged to appoint Hugh as the memory’s point of origin: first, because of the unusual staging of his journey from the funeral parlour to Hill House. The gradual transition of décor marks a dream-like quality in the mise-en-scène, thus signalling an entrance into Hugh’s mind. Second, just after the chandelier drops from the ceiling, the camera begins a sideways track beginning with Hugh’s (Hutton) head in frame, then moving left to settle on his younger self (Thomas) (Fig. 1). This transition between two versions of the same character, staged alone in the same physical space, transparently frames this moment as subjective memory.

The intrusion of the present on the past as a form of flashback is frequently used to examine repressed memories and traumatic pasts in film and television. Notably, this technique is used extensively in Taylor Hackford’s Dolores Claiborne (1995), in which characters from the past appear in the present, signalling the transition into memory. Such flashbacks imply the substantial impact of memory on the present—a memory that cannot be easily recalled, but one that lies dormant in the subconscious of the character. Of all the episodes of The Haunting of Hill House, this form of flashback only occurs in “Two Storms,” and the transition between Shots One and Two is the only time in the series when two versions of the same character exist in the same physical space (Fig. 1). This role bestowed upon Hugh speaks to his particular position in the narrative. He is the only living character who is an adult in both past and present. Despite his evident instabilities in the present, his memories are framed as more reliable and more harrowing throughout the series; he is, for example, the only character who vividly remembers the loss of his wife and her attempted poisoning of their children, while his children’s memories are dominated by ghosts. While his children struggle to decipher their memories throughout the series, Hugh can recall his with clarity, albeit also with significant reluctance. Thus, it is important that it is Hugh who marks the initial transition into the past. The substantial weight of
his testimony in this episode is equated with the burden of his memories compared to his children. In other words, the particular night depicted in the episode is significant in his memory, and the method of transition into the flashback marks it as such.

The clear subjectivity from Hugh’s POV established in this first flashback is complicated, however, by subsequent stagings and shot transitions throughout the episode. While the second shot explicitly begins as Hugh’s memory, the end of the shot brings this reading into question when Hugh and Olivia run upstairs to search for Nell, who just disappeared. Shirley and Theo scatter into other rooms, also searching for their sister. Steven is left in the entrance hall with a distressed Luke, the former reassuring the latter that he learnt how to look after his siblings at “Big Brother School.” Steven proceeds to stare at Luke, saying, “Luke. Luke. Luke?” before the second cut occurs. The connection between Shots Two and Three is formed in a sound bridge as young Steven’s voice morphs into older Steven’s voice chanting Luke’s name, trying to get his attention in the funeral parlour. We realize at this point that the moment immediately preceding the last cut was adult Luke’s memory. This memory’s point of origin is marked by adult Luke’s glassy-eyed stare ahead and his ignorance of Steven’s provocations. This revelation provides a challenge to the original suggestion that this is Hugh’s memory, which is emphasized by the framing at the beginning of the shot. The entirety of the second shot clearly establishes the complexity of memory subjectivity throughout the episode.

In his doctoral thesis, Lawrence Luchoomun presents a taxonomy of various kinds of cinematic “representations of anteriority” that are useful for considering Flanagan’s flashback method. Luchoomun distinguishes between two forms of flashback: flashback-for-narrative and flashback-for-memory. The former can be subjectively motivated, but its key purpose is to elucidate narrative events that occurred in the past, rather than accurately represent subjective memory. He explains, “Flashback-for-narrative is neither reducible to the memory of the recounting subject, nor to the imagination of the listening subject. It is presented by an authorial hand for the benefit of the spectator” (57). As such, these kinds of flashbacks have focal inconsistencies, where the flashback narrative content “exceeds the possible knowledge of the recounting or remembering subject” (33). The flashbacks in “Two Storms,” on one hand, adhere to the flashback-for-narrative. Although the first flashback has a clear subjective point of origin in Hugh, the flashbacks offer narrative detail that thematically support the events occurring in the present. Additionally, they certainly have focal inconsistency, evidenced by Hugh’s frequent exiting of the room throughout the flashbacks, ensuring the events represented exceed his possible knowledge.

On the other hand, the moments examined so far evidence that this focal inconsistency is employed explicitly to subvert the flashback convention. Flanagan wants to encourage recognition of these flashbacks as subjective memories. This technique is further supported by the events of the middle of Shot Two. Olivia orders Shirley to take Theo and Luke into the kitchen to make cocoa to distract them from the storm. Olivia is left sitting on the stairs with Nell, centre frame (Fig. 2). This moment is curious because these two characters share a trait that negates the possibility for them to remember at all—they are both dead in the present time. This particular instant, then, cannot be a memory generated in the diegetic present; it exceeds the possible knowledge of all living characters. It might be assumed that this moment confirms the flashback as a flashback-for-narrative, since it is evidently detached from any possible subjective memory. The deliberate staging, however, suggests this moment is not intended to merely elucidate narrative detail as flashbacks-for-narrative normally are: all the children who leave are chosen arbitrarily and exit simultaneously, leaving only Olivia and Nell. (We might question, for example, why Olivia sent Luke to the kitchen when he was equally as scared as Nell). Rather, this moment is the director’s explicit expression of his concept of memory. Flanagan wants the viewer to either question the possibility of it still being a memory, or to deliberately distance it from the strictures of memory.

If we more specifically consider Shot Two’s narrative trajectory, the complexity of the subjective memory is revealed. What begins explicitly as Hugh’s memory transforms into the impossible subjectivity of either Olivia or
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Nell, and it ends as Luke’s memory. The subversion of subjective memory convention is made possible by the long take comprising the shot’s entirety. This formal choice makes it impossible to detect the ‘switch’ between subjectivities. The shot’s key revelation is that this confusion of subjectivities is deliberate. The long take is employed to blur the lines between subjectivities. The logic of Hugh’s memory is intended to be disrupted and diverted. Through the long take and staging, Flanagan establishes a non-conventional flashback style that operates as a combined memory for all the Crains simultaneously, such that Nell’s disappearance is recognised as an event that impacted the family members equally. In doing so, Flanagan allows these flashback sequences to operate not just as memories, in the conventional sense, but also as metaphors for and formal manifestations of the Crain family’s present grief over Nell’s death.

HAUNTINGS OF THE PAST

The horror genre and representations of psychological states have long had a close connection. Linda Belau argues this is because most horror texts function on two core levels of meaning. First, “the surface level containing the horror elements themselves—aliens, supernatural beings, sadistic murderers etc.”, and second, “the more latent material embedded deeper in the text and presented more indirectly...[containing] the psychical material” (105). Classic horror films such as Rosemary’s Baby (1968) and Alien (1979), Belau argues, are driven by psychological malaise (105). For Belau, they exemplify two different kinds of dual-meaning narratives. Rosemary’s Baby examines “the internal workings of a single character,” charting Rosemary’s psychological unravelling (Belau 105). Alien “externalizes the psychic subplot as an allegorical commentary on the larger symbolic or social context,” through its use of sexual symbolism to explore human monstrosity and moral transgression (Belau 105; see Mulhall 17-23). Drawing on this tradition, several producers of horror television shows such as Bates Motel and Hannibal have adopted these psychological elements from the filmic conventions of the genre and reworked them into the episodic form. These elements often manifest within the formal techniques of the show. Belau describes the opening scene of the Bates Motel pilot (“First You Dream, Then You Die”), when Norman Bates (Freddie Highmore) arises from his bed, and his declining mental state is foreshadowed by “canted camera angles, distorted shallow focus, and manic handheld camera movement” (109). This pathologizing of characters via...
visual style, following the lead of horror film, has become a defining feature of contemporary horror television.

*The Haunting of Hill House* similarly embeds the examination of a character’s psychological state in the form and conventions of the horror genre. Its particular method of representing traumatic memory is through flashbacks. Aris Mousoutzanis argues that nonlinear temporality in the narrative is a common device for exploring psychological trauma in both horror and science fiction television (90). Drawing on a Freudian framework, he contends that nonlinear narratives are well-suited to the “rhythms of traumatic temporality: one common post-traumatic symptom is the constant re-enactment of the traumatic incident in patients’ nightmares and hallucinations” (Mousoutzanis 92). Largely, the two core levels of meaning defined by Belau emerge in *The Haunting of Hill House* in the past and present respectively: the past contains the ghosts and spirits haunting Hill House, which frequently intrude on the present in the form of repeated hallucinations. In the present, the older characters’ psychological instabilities can be read as a parallel narrative to their childhood hauntings. One time period produces meaning for the other. By considering the specific method used to mark the temporal transition, we can see how the Crain’s trauma is revealed not in one time period or another, but in the dialogue between them established by the flashback. In addition to Luchoomun’s discussion of flashback-for-narrative, he also proposes another form of flashback, which he calls flashback-for-memory. He explains, flashback-for-memory “is usually triggered by a material prompt” (26), or “sometimes a similarity between the present situation and some aspect of the past” (27). In the latter instance, the film itself establishes an association between two moments, not necessarily being actively remembered by the character. This technique is ideally suited to the examination of trauma, since it allows the narrative to introduce a past moment that is subjectively motivated by a character but has perhaps also been repressed in their memory. Thus, much like Belau describes, this technique offers a way of externalizing the internal workings of a character, producing a dual-meaning narrative.

“Two Storms” uses a similar form of flashback-for-memory. Memories are not so much triggered by an event or a material prompt, but more than that, they are brought into being by an event beyond the character’s control. When Hugh walks down the hallway into Hill House in Shot One, and through the door leading into the house between Shots Three and Four, a subjective memory is enacted by a specific character, but it is done unintentionally. In these two moments, Hugh is physically ‘discovering’ memories, rather than deliberately recalling them. A slightly different, but related, process occurs in the memory transition between Shots Four and Five. At the end of Shot Four, young Hugh and Olivia discover Nell has reappeared in the entrance hall. They walk towards Nell with a flickering, failing flashlight, shining it on her terrified face (Fig. 3). Hugh’s flashlight flickers for the last time, shrouding the scene in darkness. The darkness conceals the cut between Shots Four and Five. The latter shot begins with another light flickering as adult Luke lights a candle, illuminating his face, and Hugh is behind him (Fig. 4). By starting the final long take shot with a close up of Luke, Flanagan again assigns Luke’s subjectivity to the end of the last shot. But, much like Hugh’s unintentional journey into memory, we do not see Luke in an active state of recollection here. Each entrance into and emergence from the subjective flashbacks undoubtedly originate and terminate with specific characters, but they are not evoked through an active process of remembering where the past is framed as temporally distinct from the present. Rather, the editing
between the shots is performed to collapse time to create continuity between past and present. Staging them this way enables an exploration of the characters’ shared memories that have also been repressed. Mousoutzanis reads this form of flashback as aligned with the Freudian concept of deferred action, in which individuals appear unaffected (and perhaps unaware) of a traumatic incident (92). Exposure to a similar incident in the future, however, triggers a memory of that first incident in the past (Mousoutzanis 92). Used as a narrative device, this concept often determines the narrative temporal structure such that the characters’ trauma is examined through

Fig. 3 | “Two Storms” (The Haunting of Hill House). Nell is rediscovered before Hugh’s flashlight fails and the flashback ends, 46:38. Netflix, 2018.

Fig. 4 | “Two Storms” (The Haunting of Hill House). The illumination of Luke and Hugh mirrors that of Nell’s face in Figure 3. 46:51. Netflix, 2018.
the flashback. This is a common technique used across *The Haunting of Hill House*, but the constant seamless transitions in “Two Storms” evoke this concept of deferred action more explicitly. The characters’ memories cannot be actively recalled, but have a substantial continuous impact on their lives.

The Crains’s trauma is additionally signalled through bestowing the camera with a particular role in the production of meaning. At various times throughout the episode, it projects the characters’ fears into the mise-en-scène. This is what Branigan calls character projection, which occurs when “a character’s mental state is made explicit—beyond mere presence and normal awareness” (132-133). Character projection is a central device used throughout *The Haunting of Hill House*, particularly in the frequent appearance of ghosts seen only by singular characters. In “The Twin Thing” Luke is pacing the sidewalk, waiting for Steve to pick him up by car. As Luke turns around to pace further, the ghost of a tall, thin man appears behind him, floating along at the same pace (Fig. 5). The figure’s identity is marked by the presence of a bowler hat on his head, which Luke owned as a child and which the man stole. Evidently, the man is not really a ghost, in the sense of a spectral figure of the afterlife that haunts a particular place, since this same ghost appeared to Luke as a child in Hill House—the house is haunted, but not the streets where Luke is standing. Thus, we can infer this is a character projection; the man is “the product not of a glance but of a gaze inward” to Luke’s traumas (Branigan 133).

Repetitions of this character projection device also occur in “Two Storms.” For example, when we see Olivia standing next to Hugh in the funeral parlour. Again, the projection is framed as a manifestation of trauma: Hugh admits later in the episode that Olivia’s ghostly presence is a coping mechanism for him, but the use of the long take enables this representation of trauma to also be expressed specifically through the camera work. One such instance is in the employment of a circling camera. This technique occurs twice in the episode—once in Shot One when Hugh first arrives at the funeral parlour, and the second in Shot Two when the family are gathered around a box of flashlights. In the first instance, the sequence begins as Shirley’s husband, Kevin (Anthony Ruivivar), opens the front door to Hugh. He steps forward, surveying his children, who he hasn’t seen grouped together for many years. The camera begins circling in an anti-clockwise direction around Hugh, revealing his children in their
childhood form sitting on the couch in front of him (Fig. 6). Evidently, this is not so much a memory as a paternal perspective of how Hugh sees the people assembled in front of him—as still his children. It does, however, mark a shift of narrator within the one shot from the unidentifiable point of narration earlier in the shot, to Hugh. As Hugh stumbles over his words the camera performs another circle around him, this time revealing his children in their adult form (Fig. 7). From here, until the end of the shot (marked by the appearance of young Hugh), the camera, and thus the narration, is tied to Hugh’s perspective. This is confirmed by his walking
up the aisle of the funeral parlour towards the casket, revealing Nell in her childhood form lying there.

The staging of this first circling camera evidences the crucial relationship between the logistical complexity of the episode’s production and its representation of traumatic memory. The circling camera allows for both real-world and diegetic disappearances to occur. As the camera turns away from the children while Kevin lets Hugh through the front door, the adult actors are replaced by their children counterparts such that when the camera circles around, they are revealed sitting on the couch. As the camera sweeps around again, the actors perform the same swap in reverse, revealing the adult actors when the camera returns for a second time. While this is occurring, adult Nell is being replaced by younger Nell in the casket in the adjoining room. While these actor swaps actually necessitate the circling camera for their success (they need to occur off-screen), both techniques mirror Hugh’s state of mind. The circling camera and the adults-replaced-by-children mark Hugh’s confusion in this scenario. This technique signals the beginning of Hugh’s triggered traumatic memories by visualising an alternating image of the people who really stand in front of him (in adult form), and their state when the traumatic event happened to Hugh (in their child form). These circling camera techniques also offer a way for both Hugh and the viewer to consider Nell’s disappearance. As the children appear and disappear when the camera circles, it fundamentally destabilizes both the time period of the episode and Hugh’s mental state. The revelation in this first shot of Nell as a child lying in the casket combined with her later disappearance from Hill House collapses and conflates these two time periods. Perhaps, for Hugh, the only way to process his youngest daughter’s death is to recall the last time she disappeared during that stormy night at Hill House.

**RETHINKING OFFSCREEN SPACE**

The thematic and narrative element of disappearances is explored, in a formal sense, through staging and framing. One of the key strategies for staging disappearances in “Two Storms” is by making use of offscreen space and the edges of the frame. By formulating particular choices about framing, Flanagan both pre-empts and stages Nell’s and Olivia’s disappearances during the episode not just for the other characters in the diegesis, but for the viewer as well. This episode marks a departure from other episodes of *Haunting* in its use of offscreen space, which requires us, initially, to examine how offscreen space has been theorized in horror film and in cinema more generally.

In André Bazin’s essay, “Painting and Cinema,” he theorises the edges of the cinematic frame through comparison with the frame of a painting. He argues,

The outer edges of the frame are not, as the technical jargon would seem to imply, the frame of the film image. They are the edges of a piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality. The picture frame polarizes space inwards. On the contrary, what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe (Bazin 168).

Bazin’s final sentence, indicating the infiniteness of the film’s world beyond the edges of the frame, lies at the core of many filmmakers’ staging practices. By staging glances offscreen—a primary example of which is a shot/reverse-shot—or characters entering from the lateral edges of the frame, the filmmaker establishes a palpable sense of realism. A well-established film convention is the affirmation, through staging, that the viewer is presented with only a “portion of reality”. The edges of the frame do not mark the edges of the film’s world.

In horror, this convention is employed to create realism and also to conceal the source of terror threatening the characters on screen. Scholar Adam Charles Hart traces this generic trope to the slasher films in the 1980s, arguing filmmakers deliberately kept the ‘monsters’ offscreen “until a climactic confrontation with the protagonist” occurred (337). Cecilia Sayad further notes this confrontation often comes from “the abrupt intrusion of figures” from the edges of the frame, confirming the immediate offscreen space as potentially concealing the film’s threats (55). Both scholars contend the found footage subgenre has perpetuated the importance of
offscreen space in horror over the past couple of decades. Whereas in the slasher film, the viewer could rely on the monster eventually emerging from the edges of the frame, in found footage, “the display of the monster is even further marginalized” (Hart 337), sometimes never appearing onscreen at all. “It is a relatively recent development,” Hart continues, “to make the victim the privileged horrific spectacle while keeping the monster almost totally offscreen” (337). Despite the increasing centrality of the onscreen victim, the offscreen monster is no less important, even if not visualized. For Hart, this space in contemporary horror film is less the site of a specific monster than it is the site of a potential threat. He explains, “the scenographic space outside the frame is best understood less as one inhabited by material objects than it is a space of threats, a paranoid space constantly sending signals of anxiety to the audience and, seemingly, the characters as well” (339). This ensures the offscreen space—the indefiniteness beyond the edges of the frame—remains a vital component of staging in horror film, despite the decreasing specificity with which the ‘monsters’ are characterized.

“Two Storms” maintains this tendency of marginalizing the monster and using the offscreen space as a site of potential threat. Unlike the found footage films described by Hart, however, this episode of Haunting positions the edges of the frame as posing a very different threat. I want to argue here the threat posed by the offscreen space in “Two Storms” is not the potential for a monster to move onscreen, but rather the threat of the characters disappearing off the edges of the frame. Nell’s and Olivia’s disappearances during the flashback sequences occur as they are expelled from the edges of the frame, and simultaneously disappear from the diegesis, too. Nell’s disappearance occurs during another instance of a circling camera, this time towards the end of the second shot. Hugh, Olivia, Steven, Luke, and Shirley are sitting in the middle of the entrance hall around a box of flashlights. Nell and Theo stand holding hands near the staircase. The camera circles around the family three times as they discuss the storm, each time revealing Nell’s and Theo’s feet at the edge of the frame (Fig. 8). On the last circle, Olivia directly addresses Nell and the camera dollies back to reveal Theo with her outreached empty hand (Fig. 9). In this instance, the circling camera operates as a build up to the climax of the shot. As Theo and Nell’s feet are so carefully included in each circle of the camera, the viewer is prepared for Nell’s disappearance. Each time the camera circles, moving Theo and Nell out of frame, it rehearses Nell’s

Fig. 8 | “Two Storms” (The Haunting of Hill House). Nell’s feet are kept in frame (top left) to confirm her presence, 21:31. Netflix, 2018.
disappearance until it occurs for real out of view. Nell’s disappearance is a carefully staged trick played on the viewer: the long take promises the viewer a prolonged, privileged access to the episode’s diegesis, and yet we still miss the moment of her disappearance. As with the previous shot in the funeral parlour, in which the children are swapped off-screen, the trickery of the staging now has more significant consequences. Just like the family, who are also constantly present through the shot, the viewer’s presence does not guarantee their witnessing the source of horror in the shot.

The way Nell’s disappearance is staged requires a reconsideration of the role played by the edges of the frame. Despite the continuity offered by the long take, it is not possible for the viewer to witness the various disappearances and reappearances enacted in the episode. This is because the edges of the frame themselves enact the characters’ disappearances. By establishing this possibility early in the episode, Flanagan signals to the viewer a need to rethink the potential threats to the characters. Hart points to a similar tendency in other contemporary horror narratives, arguing, “The viewer’s understanding of the narrative must include a conscious acknowledgement of the limits of the frame as a semi-diegetic device... Such a structure requires that characters as well as audiences adopt a paranoid style of viewing in reaction to the constant but uncertain signals of danger coming from unseen or offscreen space” (339). The key distinction between what Hart describes and what occurs in “Two Storms” is, in the latter, the characters are uninvolved in this process. Although they are aware of the other characters’ disappearances, they do not know how they occur and thus cannot adopt this same kind of paranoia. The conscious acknowledgement of the frame adopted by the viewer, however, is a crucial component of understanding the episode’s staging of disappearances as the episode’s primary source of horror. In other episodes of *Haunting*, Flanagan’s staging demands the viewer adopt a paranoid style of viewing relating to other aspects of the mise-en-scène, concealing the bodies and faces of ghosts behind furniture and in the shadows of deep space. Conversely, in “Two Storms,” the threat no longer lingers in the mise-en-scène. The protracted use of the long take allows for different formal strategies of horror to be implemented: the length of the shot offers a kind of stability and safety to the onscreen mise-en-scène, placing the potential threat at the edges of the frame, exploiting the camera’s capacity to both include and discard characters from the shot.

![Fig. 9 | “Two Storms” (The Haunting of Hill House). The camera tracks back to reveal Nell has disappeared, 21:42. Netflix, 2018.](image)
Five Shots, Twice Disappeared

Flanagan’s strategy of using offscreen space finds its most effective employment in Shot Four, when Olivia disappears. The camera follows Olivia and Hugh upstairs to search for the missing Nell in the bedrooms. Hugh departs from Olivia, walking around the corner out of shot, and thus, from here, the camera is aligned with Olivia’s subjectivity. It follows her through each bedroom, never allowing her out of shot. The only departure from Olivia’s subjectivity is when the ghost of an old lady appears on the bed, of which Olivia is oblivious, and it is evidently staged for the viewer. The climax of this sequence occurs as Olivia sees the door handle of a closed door rattling. She opens the door to the ghost of a boy in a wheelchair. Olivia leaves the shot just as the young boy wheels himself out of the bedroom, and the camera pans left to reveal Hugh returning to the corridor. The camera effectively performs a shot/reverse shot here—from Olivia looking down the hallway (Fig. 10), to Hugh looking back in her direction (Fig. 11). This is a conventional technique, albeit performed by a long take instead of through continuity editing. But the conventionality of this technique is disrupted when it is revealed, a second later, that neither spouse saw the other. Olivia has disappeared as Nell did earlier. At this precise moment, two key affirmations are made for the viewer, which illuminate two separate discussions developed in this paper: first, another switch of subjectivity (or focal inconsistency) occurs; and second, another (dis)appearance is enacted, this time by Olivia.

Regarding both affirmations, the technique used earlier in the episode to make Nell disappear by expelling her from the edges of the frame prepares the viewer for what occurs here. Olivia is deliberately kept in shot for the full duration of Hugh’s absence, deliberately staging her as present. This ensures that when she finally leaves the shot for the first time it signals to the viewer a meaningful disappearance—a disappearance not just from the shot, but from the diegesis as well. Unlike Nell’s disappearance, however, this sequence promotes a more conventional haunted house aesthetic, including the appearance of ghosts out of sight of the characters, darkly-lit hallways, and rattling door handles. But the horror in this sequence is neither in the ghosts that appear, nor in the jump scares elicited by the window breakages, but by a fundamental disruption of our sense of horror convention in both the use of offscreen space and cinematic subjectivity. The curiosity and shock for Hugh of his daughter’s and wife’s disappearances is staged for us in cinematic form using the fundamental
principles of assigning and then disrupting subjectivity as it is aligned with particular characters. Just as the presence of the characters both onscreen and in the diegesis are slippery and unstable, so too is the viewer’s sense of subjectivity.

**CONCLUSION**

The long take is perfectly suited to enacting disappearances in horror films and television. An awkward disjuncture exists between the constant presence of the camera and the threat of driving a character off-screen. It offers an apparent contradiction in the sense it provides both greater freedom and limitations. On one hand, the long take allows Flanagan to expand the Crains’s world and the possibilities of the flashback; it creates temporal continuity, a physical expansion of the set created for the show, and greater potential for rethinking cinematic subjectivity. But on the other hand, Flanagan’s specific employment of the technique promotes retheorization of the edges of the frame. The edges of the frame operate as the apparent limits of the Crains’s world. Once the characters are explicitly cast out of the frame, they disappear from the diegesis too. This subverts the conventions of horror films that make use of off-screen space in the opposite way: in countless examples, the monsters lurk offscreen, ready to make their appearance in the frame. We can return here to Bazin’s proposal that the film screen shows us “something prolonged indefinitely into the universe” (168). Despite the continuity implied by the travelling long take, the edges of the frame, which make characters disappear, problematize Bazin’s conception of the frame. In “Two Storms,” characters are intentionally staged to remain onscreen, whether in the present or in memory; what is onscreen provides a defence against the horror of disappearing. If much of *Haunting’s* horror is derived from what lurks in the mise-en-scène—an apparition we might not consciously see—the horror in “Two Storms” emerges from what might be cast out of shot and disappear without our witnessing it.

“Two Storms” is a compelling case study of contemporary “prestige” horror television. True to the cycle, the episode’s formal transgressions allow both a breaking down of generic boundaries and a use of stylistic elements to express a character’s inner turmoil. The use of time shifts in conjunction with horror elements such as ghosts allows a psychological element to be appended to the core horror themes. This is certainly true of all
The protracted use of the long take allows for different formal strategies of horror to be implemented: the length of the shot offers a kind of stability and safety to the onscreen mise-en-scène, placing the potential threat at the edges of the frame, exploiting the camera’s capacity to both include and discard characters from the shot.

episodes in The Haunting of Hill House, but what sets this episode apart from others in the series is that its formal departure in the form of five long takes enables not just aesthetic differences and an authorial distinction, but also different connections to be made between characters and parallel narratives not possible through other formal means. We have seen how its unique form of flashback—shifting between subjectivities and subverting the concept of memory—as well as its playing with the convention of offscreen space draws on the essence of the long take. Crucially, it allows for a new layer of complexity in the construction of the Crains’s memories to be revealed.

WORKS CITED


Flanagan, Mike (@flanaganfilm). “I’ve gotten a lot of questions about ep 106 of @haunting. Netflix released an awesome little BTS video, but for those that want more information, here’s a little thread: Episode 6 was part of the very first pitch for the show, promising an episode that would look like one shot.” 5 November 2018, 2:30AM. Tweet.


Scream: The TV Series. Created by Jay Beattie, Jill E. Blotevogel and Dan Dworkin. MTV, Netflix, 2015-.


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