

## The Horror of Loss: Reading Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* as a Trauma Narrative

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This article responds to the critical debate around Jennifer Kent's horror movie, *The Babadook* (2014), by offering an analysis that moves beyond its use of generic codes and its sociopolitical representation of maternity. It contends that reading the film as a trauma narrative allows us to better understand the horrifying experience suffered by Amelia Vanek (Essie Davis): her husband's premature death in a car accident. Taking Dominick LaCapra's concepts of *acting out* and *working through* as key interpretive tools, the analysis demonstrates how Kent conveys posttraumatic stress disorder as both a visceral and a material experience, inscribing absence and loss onto the cinematic texture of the film. The article offers the conclusion that, as *The Babadook* enacts Amelia's process of recuperation, figured as a psychosomatic struggle against her monstrous Other, she becomes able to express her trauma and, in doing so, is finally able to accept her husband's death.

Keywords: Babadook; horror; cinema; loss; posttraumatic stress disorder; monstrosity

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### El horror de la pérdida: *The Babadook*, de Jennifer Kent, como narrativa de trauma

Este artículo responde al debate crítico sobre la película de terror de Jennifer Kent, *El Babadook* (2014), ofreciendo un análisis que va más allá de su uso de códigos genéricos o la representación sociopolítica de la maternidad. El artículo argumenta que interpretar la película como una narrativa sobre el trauma nos permite entender mejor la horrible experiencia sufrida por Amelia Vanek (Essie Davis): el fallecimiento prematuro de su marido

en un accidente de tráfico. Tomando los conceptos de Dominick LaCapra de *acting out* y *working through* como herramientas interpretativas clave, el análisis muestra la manera en que Kent caracteriza el síndrome del estrés postraumático como una experiencia tanto visceral como material, imprimiendo los conceptos de ausencia y pérdida en la textura cinematográfica de la película. El artículo ofrece como conclusión que, a medida que *El Babadook* recrea su proceso de recuperación, presentado como una lucha psicosomática contra un “otro yo” monstruoso, Amelia es capaz de expresar su trauma y, al hacerlo, finalmente logra aceptar la muerte de su marido.

Palabras clave: Babadook; terror; cine; pérdida; síndrome del estrés postraumático; monstruosidad

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is noteworthy that, despite the remarkable consensus of critical approval that Jennifer Kent's debut feature *The Babadook* has received since its release in 2014, the film achieved only moderate success at the domestic Australian box office, where it opened on just thirteen screens and eventually recouped a meagre \$256,000 of its two million production budget (Tan 2014). One possible explanation for this is suggested by Joseph Earp (2017), who believes that *The Babadook*, described by Kim Newman as "one of the strongest, most effective horror movies of recent years" (2014), exposes the Australian film industry's endemic resistance to championing innovative horror cinema—a factor, it could be argued, that also condemned critically lauded works such as *The Loved Ones* (Byrne 2009), *Hounds of Love* (Young 2016) and *Killing Ground* (Power 2016) to similarly disappointing commercial performances. In fact, despite having much in common with *Cubbyhouse* (Fahey 2001) and *Family Demons* (Dabrowsky 2009), two recent Australian horror movies that explore the themes of female haunting, possession and child abuse, *The Babadook* was promoted by domestic distributor Umbrella Entertainment as a psychological thriller. Not only has Kent herself also downplayed the horror elements of her film by describing it as a "love story" (Entertainment One 2013, n.p.), but she has sought to deemphasise its geographical specificity, indicating that she "didn't want it to be particularly Australian. [...] it could have been [located] anywhere" (2014b). As a "placeless film" (Howell 2018, 185), *The Babadook* performed much better at the international box office, where it was marketed in terms of its most salient horror trope: the demonic Babadook. However, it is interesting to note that one of the key debates that has since been generated amongst critics, the manner in which *The Babadook* confounds our expectations about the type of movie that we are watching, is also foregrounded by the film itself. Thus, central to *The Babadook's* narrative is an uncertainty about what the eponymous monster actually signifies. As David Ehrlich suggests, this makes the film seem less like a "ridiculous creature feature" (in Kent 2014d), while A. A. Dowd has argued that "the *real* horror [of *The Babadook*] has almost nothing to do with the title fiend and everything to do with the unspoken, unspeakable impulses he represents" (2014; italics in the original).

This article will argue that *The Babadook* uses the horror trope of supernatural possession by a monstrous Other to represent the psychosomatic effects of posttraumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) on the film's protagonist, Amelia Vanek (Essie Davis). By replacing the dominant critical lens of cinematic genre with a perspective that is informed by trauma theory, I will explore how the film charts Amelia's belated recovery from the car crash that killed her husband, an event that she frequently revisits in her dreams, by showing her coming to terms with that experience in all its ontological complexity. For Dominick LaCapra, the need to repeat, or *act out* (1996, 210), the originary trauma indicates a state of being in which the subject is "haunted or possessed by the past" (1996, 179) and which most commonly takes the form of reexperiencing the traumatic event in flashbacks and nightmares. In contrast, LaCapra's concept of *working through*

enables the individual to gain a critical distance from the historical traumatic event and, thereby, to overcome it. Unlike in other recent films that also explore the aftereffects of car accidents, such as *The Loved Ones*, *Trauma* (Evans 2004) and *Premonition* (Yapo 2007), *The Babadook* offers a complex exploration of the dynamic between the perpetrator and the victim of horror as a way to convey the visceral nature of Amelia's trauma. Trauma is understood here as a psychic wounding, or what Ulrich Baer refers to as "unresolved experience" (2000, 1) provoked by "the shocking and unexpected occurrence of an accident" (Caruth 2016, 6). Unlike Cathy Caruth's influential conceptualisation of the traumatic event as inherently unknowable or unrepresentable (2016)—an idea that conforms to the precepts of premillennium trauma theory, of which she is one of the principal exponents—this article will instead emphasise Amelia's emerging agency as she narrativises her experience as a trauma survivor.<sup>1</sup> Caruth's discussion of the reemergence of the traumatic event in "flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (2016, 94) will, consequently, be understood not so much as evidence of Amelia's repression but as an indication of how her acting out of the past prevents her from fully accepting her current reality.

To date, only passing references to trauma as an interpretive paradigm have been made in the critical debate about *The Babadook*.<sup>2</sup> However, by conveying both the emotional (internal) and physical (external) impact of trauma on her protagonist, Kent's film provides an interesting example of how cinematic horror is an apposite medium through which to communicate the visceral experience of PTSD. In line with Horvitz's observation that trauma does not exist as a "unidimensional phenomen[on] that [is] experienced identically by each victim" (2000, 5), it will be argued that, by locating the narrative in a very tangible diegetic space, *The Babadook* represents Amelia's PTSD as an idiosyncratic and embodied—rather than purely mental—event. In particular, it is the specific materiality of Amelia's physical environment, the interior of the home she shares with her young son Samuel (Noah Wiseman), that serves as a locus for the protagonist's acting out of her trauma, whilst also providing the context in which she can begin the process of her psychic recovery. In this sense, my reading of Amelia's experience moves away from the antitherapeutic bias of trauma theorists like Caruth to suggest the possibility of resistance and recovery. Unlike many previous interpretations of *The Babadook*, which foregrounded Amelia's grief (Covert 2014; Ehrlich in Kent 2014d; Kidd 2014, 8) or her fraught relationship with her son (Quigley 2016, 60; Buerger 2017, 34; Harrington 2018, 180), this article will argue for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between trauma and its representation in cinematic

<sup>1</sup> In the twenty-first century, the application of trauma theory to literary analysis has moved away from several of its foundational authors, such as Caruth (2016) and Shoshana Felman (1992). For example, Deborah M. Horvitz insists on narrative as a tool to understand and communicate personal traumas to others (2000), a notion echoed and elaborated upon by Laurie Vickroy (2002), E. Ann Kaplan (2005) and Jennifer L. Griffiths (2010), among others.

<sup>2</sup> Trauma is mentioned as a concept, but without much explication, in the analyses by Lenika Cruz (2014), Ryan Lamble (in Kent 2014b), Aoife M. Dempsey (2015, 130, 132) and Shelley Buerger (2017, 36)

language. Specifically, it will suggest that *The Babadook* can be read as a narrative that represents the personalised impact of a historical psychic wounding on Amelia's current life by performing the subjective experience of her traumatic state. Further, it will claim that it is here, in the spatial, visual and linguistic tension between the countervailing forces of acting out and working through this wounding, that Amelia's trauma narrative is created.

## 2. NARRATIVE FOCALISATION: AMELIA'S EXPERIENCE OF TRAUMA

The technique of narrative focalisation is crucial to our understanding of Amelia's trauma narrative as it allows us to become immersed in her world and, thereby, to participate in her story both visually and emotionally. Edward Branigan uses the term *focalisation* to refer to how a cinematic character "experienc[es] something through seeing or hearing" (1998, 101). In addition, he suggests that "external focalization" (1998, 103) is the specific technique through which the camera can depict what a character sees and hears, even if it is not always from his/her direct position in the frame. In doing so, this technique emphasises how spectators are dependent on the character for their understanding of what is occurring on screen. As well as making use of external focalisation, however, *The Babadook* makes us privy to Amelia's "internally focalized" (Branigan 1998, 103) perspective on her experiences, including her dreams, hallucinations and memories, which adds greater depth to our awareness of her emotional responses to them. In trauma theory terms, the effect is akin to what Elke Heckner refers to as "secondary witnessing" (2008, 62), a term synonymous with Marianne Hirsch's "retrospective witnessing" (2001, 6) but which will be preferred in this article for its suggestion that the spectator is a simultaneous participant in the filmic events, rather than being temporally dislocated from them. For Heckner, the consequence of secondary witnessing is that "viewers cannot remain in a distant, seemingly safe position of spectatorship. [...] It demands, in other words, that viewers partake in a traumatic affect" (2008, 63).

In the opening scene of *The Babadook*, the camera first focuses on Amelia's anguished face before switching to her internally focalised point-of-view shot which shows a man, later to be revealed as Amelia's husband, Oskar (Ben Winspear), in the driver's seat of the car in which they have just crashed (01:28). This, it soon becomes apparent, is the origin of her trauma: Oskar's death in a violent accident while they were on route to the hospital because she was in labour with Samuel. In fact, in the following scene (01:33) we realise that what we have just witnessed is a repetition, or an acting out, of the event as part of Amelia's dream. Thus, the shot of her falling backwards, away from the camera and onto her bed, provides a visual segue between her past (the dream) and present reality (her bedroom) that conveys her inability to inhabit the here and now fully. This experience typifies that of a trauma survivor, who lives "in durational rather than chronological time," and so "continue[s] to experience the horrors of the past

through internal shifts in time and space” (Vickroy 2002, 5). By positioning spectators in this way, as privy to the protagonist’s internally focalised thought process, the film intensifies our identification with her so that we participate simultaneously with her in the traumatic incident. As Vickroy has suggested, this “access” is crucial to Amelia’s trauma narrative as it provides an important participatory dimension that allows us, as spectators, to “confront [...] our own fears” (2002, 1-2). At many key moments throughout *The Babadook*, we are secondary witnesses to the unfolding narrative from Amelia’s externally or internally focalised perspective, an effect that induces in the spectator the same physical and psychological disorientation that Amelia feels. In fact, as Kent commented in conversation with Virginia Sélavy, “it always felt right to see it through [Amelia’s] eyes. [...] Even when she goes to some very dark places, I still tried to keep it within her point of view as much as possible, so that people would [...] actually travel through that experience with her” (2014c).

It may be tempting to view Amelia’s dream of the car crash that opens the film as an expression of her desire to see Oskar alive again in the moments before her traumatic separation from him. This would certainly seem to be the case during Amelia’s later hallucinatory reunion with her husband in the basement of the house (01:02:50). However, it could be argued that Amelia’s “need to sleep” (52:40), which Adam Joyce describes as her “almost liturgical lament” (2015), suggests that her wish is not so much for Oskar’s return to life (for him to wake up) as for her own unconsciousness through the oblivion that sleep brings. As Amelia reads in the text of the sinister storybook *Mister Babadook*, which mysteriously appears in her house and seems to verbalise her innermost thoughts, “You’re going to wish you were dead” (12:46). By interpreting Amelia’s suffering from the perspective of trauma, it becomes apparent that her psychic wounding, manifested by the acting out of the car crash in her dream, is constituted in part by an eruption of the death drive, her desire to “re-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the emergence of life” (Freud [1923] 2018, 34)—a statement that is given particular ironic poignancy in the film when we learn that Amelia gave birth to Samuel on the same day that her husband died.

Samuel is crucial to *The Babadook*’s exploration of trauma because, as the child of both Amelia and Oskar, he gives physical form to the symbiotic relation between life and death. That Samuel was born in the immediate aftermath of the fatal accident adds a key impediment to Amelia’s recovery from the psychic wound that Oskar’s loss has created. In fact, Samuel’s physical presence can be read as a key trigger that provokes Amelia to repeatedly, and seemingly inescapably, act out this traumatic event. Several critics, including Rand R. Cooper (2015, 19), Ehrlich (in Kent 2014d), Max Bledstein (2016), Paula Quigley (2016, 72) and Paul Risker (in Kent 2017, 13), have insisted on the importance of repression in *The Babadook*. However, I wish to argue that, in contrast to the trauma paradigm proposed by Caruth, Amelia’s memories of the car crash are not necessarily incomplete or inaccessible to her conscious recall. Rather, they seem to be in abeyance, a consequence of her reluctance to confront the origin of her trauma, given

that to do so would inevitably sever the past (her marriage to Oskar) from her present reality as a widowed single mother. For this reason, it is significant that, in her dream, Amelia acts out only the moment of the crash itself, not Oskar's subsequent death or Samuel's birth. LaCapra has written about how the ability to distinguish between absence (as a transhistorical lack) and specific, tangible loss is crucial to an individual's recovery from traumatic events. For him, the misrecognition of the latter for the former is one of the principal symptoms exhibited by trauma survivors: "When loss is converted into [...] absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past [...] is foreclosed" (1999, 698). This description suitably encapsulates Amelia's state of being at the beginning of *The Babadook*. As the protagonist is unwilling to acknowledge the specific loss of her husband, we become aware of a more all-consuming existential absence that is inscribed onto the material texture of the film. Given that the events in *The Babadook* occur around the date of Samuel's seventh birthday, the lack of flashbacks to specific moments in Amelia's life before her son was born, or to her life with him up to the time of the film's diegesis, cinematographically establishes a narrative lacuna that emphasises Amelia's traumatic stasis at the moment of the car crash.

As an important trigger for his mother's acting out, it is particularly significant that Samuel wakes Amelia from her dream at the beginning of the film because he represents the current reality that her dependence on the past threatens to negate. Samuel, who functions throughout the story in parallel with his mother, also experiences disturbed sleep. In fact, his first words in the film—"Mum, I had the dream again" (01:44)—immediately establish the symptomology of trauma, including nightmares and hallucinations, that will be repeated throughout *The Babadook*. Amelia's wish to sedate Samuel by giving him sleeping pills gains another dimension when we consider that, in doing so, she seeks to induce in him the very unconsciousness that she herself craves. In fact, when Amelia later crashes her car with Samuel in the back seat (52:15), her physical acting out of the incident that killed Oskar also repeats her own and her son's survival, in spite of her unconscious wish for their nonexistence. As the man (John Maurice) into whose vehicle she crashes complains, "You could have killed someone" (52:38). Yet this incident is crucial to our understanding of *The Babadook* as a trauma narrative because it can be read as one of the moments when Amelia demonstrates her emerging ability to actively confront and, thereby, ultimately work through the traumatic event that has taken such a toll on her.

Throughout *The Babadook*, Amelia's frustration at "not having slept in weeks" (32:32) seems to be compounded by either her disturbing dreams or tooth pain, a narrative trope that is conspicuously repeated throughout the film (07:43, 48:06, 51:51, 01:00:58). In fact, despite stating otherwise, Amelia sleeps a good deal, though the use of time-lapse photography reduces the prominence of these moments (16:28, 27:12, 35:21). Indeed, one of *The Babadook*'s most effective—and affective—technical achievements is its blend of externally and internally focalised narration, which blurs the boundaries

between sleeping and waking to such an extent that it induces in the spectator the same existential disorientation that Amelia suffers from, which is particularly well illustrated by Amelia's somnambulist encounter with Oskar in the basement. The fact that, in this scene, the monstrous Babadook appropriates her husband's physical appearance, asking that she give him "the boy" (01:03:24), is indicative of Amelia's dissociative merging of the past and the present into an atemporal state of absence. Amelia is frequently seen staring blankly off screen or into space, a motif that Kent retains from her earlier short film, *Monster* (2005), which serves as the urtext for *The Babadook*. In fact, when Amelia's traumatised mind-set becomes more apparent to the spectator, her disordered thought process is inscribed onto the materiality of the film by the deliberate use of unconventional framing. As Kent explains, "people's heads start to drift to other sides of the frames, and things start to become more discordant visually" (2014c).

### 3. DIEGETIC SPACES: THE MATERIALITY OF AMELIA'S TRAUMA

The house in which Amelia and Samuel live is an important aspect of *The Babadook's* visual dynamic and one of the key elements through which the notion of trauma becomes embodied in the film. As the director herself has stated, "gradually the film becomes just the house. But the house is alive" (2014c). Several critics have commented on how this location helps to enhance the horror element of *The Babadook* by concretising the anxiety that the characters and spectators feel (Dempsey 2015, 131; Cooper 2015, 20; Quigley 2016, 68). For Amanda Howell, "the memory of that rainy night which ended in blood has somehow seeped into the skin of the house itself" (2018, 189). While this viewpoint certainly makes sense, reading *The Babadook* from a perspective that is informed by Daniel Libeskind's work on how trauma can be represented by architecture allows for an interpretation of the Vanek family home in relation to the material spatialisation of Amelia's PTSD. Specifically, by acknowledging Libeskind's insistence on "being [physically] in" a trauma space (2003, 45), it can be argued that the house manifests the dialectic between absence and loss that is symptomatic of her traumatic state.

As the house is implied to be the place where Amelia lived with her husband before his death, his "being and nonbeing" (Libeskind 2003, 44) is palpably transcribed onto the physical space of the film's diegesis. Near the beginning of *The Babadook*, a two-shot shows Amelia and Samuel sleeping at opposite sides of her bed (02:54). For Quigley, the fact that she lies with her back to her son symbolises "the distance she has put between them," which "foreshadow[s] her increasingly violent desire to escape her child as the film progresses" (2016, 62). Yet, despite Quigley's insistence that Amelia's relationship with Samuel has an unsettling Oedipal dimension, a Freudian interpretation of the film that is also echoed by Peter Bradshaw (2014) and Briony Kidd (2014, 9), it is the loss of Oskar—more than Samuel's ersatz presence—that is particularly significant in this scene. Indeed, Amelia's bed serves as a trope for the physical discontinuity of her



marital relationship. Rather than acknowledge how her home now inscribes Oskar's death as a material reality, Amelia's inability to accept his loss instead transforms the house into a void, an idea that is reflected by the uniformity of *The Babadook*'s sombre blue-grey set design. In conversation with Lambie, Kent spoke about the house as a "shell [for] a life that evaporated very quickly" (2014b). Thus, it is not just that the Vanek home becomes "a metaphor for Amelia's psyche" (Kidd 2014, 10), but that it gives material form to Amelia's experience of traumatic loss, which is transformed into a nullifying ontological absence.

The dynamic tension between absence and loss is most concretely embodied in the house's basement. Several critics have commented on the importance of this stereotypical horror trope, with Shelley Buerger suggesting that it could be interpreted as "a somewhat heavy-handed symbol of [Amelia's] repressed grief" (2017, 41). Beyond its symbolic meaning, however, Amelia uses the basement as a literal repository for Oskar's personal belongings—that is to say, those objects that concretise her specific loss. As such, the basement serves as a key physical trauma space within *The Babadook*. When Amelia chastises Samuel for playing there, she does so by reminding him that it contains "all your father's things" (21:35). Two artefacts are given particular significance by virtue of their repetition during the narrative. The first, Oskar's clothes, is seen from Amelia's externally focalised point of view when she descends into the basement for the first time (22:59) and then later when she thinks that she sees them hanging on the wall at the police station (39:45), where she has gone to report her harassment by an unknown telephone caller. Many critics have suggested that, by dressing in Oskar's clothes and adopting his physical appearance, the Babadook comes to exemplify Freud's concept of the *uncanny* (Barker 2014; Covert 2014; O'Sullivan 2014; Cooper 2015, 20; Quigley 2016, 69). While this may be true, it is also apparent that the presence in the basement of the clothes that Oskar was wearing on the day that he died—the black jacket and grey shirt that we glimpse in the opening scene, unaware at this point of their significance—serves to posit his disrupted continuity within the family home. Amelia usually refuses to enter the basement, so when she does so following Samuel's theatrical performance, seeing these items serves to catalyse the process of her working through her traumatised state. This, ultimately, allows her to transfigure absence into loss and, thus, move beyond the ontological stasis that her acting out of the past has engendered. At the end of the film, Amelia returns to the basement but Oskar's clothes are now absent, presumably because she has removed them. This implies that Amelia has come to acknowledge how these articles do not embody her husband's physical being and, thus, that she no longer needs to fetishise their relation to Oskar's past existence.

The second artefact, a photograph of Oskar and Amelia embracing, is shown three times in quick succession during *The Babadook*: first, when it is used by Samuel as part of his theatrical performance in the basement (20:50); then, when Amelia tidies up after her son's performance has finished (22:30); and, finally, when a close-up, again filmed from Amelia's externally focalised perspective, shows it on her bed, now out of its frame

and defaced (24:35). The use of this image is as an example of what Hirsch refers to as “meta-photographic textuality” (2012, 8)—the placement of a family photograph in a narrative context—which seemingly captures a moment of personal happiness in Amelia’s life before the birth of Samuel. However, its incidental discovery by Amelia also inevitably triggers her to act out Oskar’s death once again. In fact, the “indexical nature of the photograph, its status as relic, or trace” (Hirsch 2012, 19) has the potential to provoke a similar emotional response from the film’s spectators, whose second witnessing of Amelia’s grief connects with their own. In conversation with Ehrlich, Kent commented that: “I’ve lost people, I’ve lost my dad, I know what it feels like, and you think it’s never going to end. So I think it’s important to have stories that can help you through” (2014d). By working within the horror genre, *The Babadook* transforms its exploration of Amelia’s loss into a visceral experience. Indeed, as Kent points out when recounting her satisfaction at being given feedback from spectators, “this one guy who had lost both his parents before the age of 15 [...] said, ‘That was the most moving study of grief for me.’ I’ve had people in tears after the film and that means so much to me” (2014c). For Hirsch, a photograph of the dead, as well as provoking retraumatisation, also has the potential to be cathartically transformative, a “vehicle for working through a traumatic past” so that its repetitious viewing does not necessarily indicate psychic “fixity or paralysis” (2001, 9). In *The Babadook*, the person who is responsible for defacing the photograph of Amelia and her husband remains, crucially, an open-ended enigma. Although we are invited to adopt Amelia’s interpretation that Samuel is the culprit, in anger at her refusal to “let [him] have a dad” (22:10), it could equally be Amelia who has vandalised it during the fugal state of absence into which she retreats. By accepting this latter scenario, it can be argued that the destruction of Oskar’s image is crucial for Amelia’s psychic transformation in the film because it represents an empowering attack on the no longer existent reality of her marriage. As such, it suggests an important turning point in her belatedly coming to accept her loss.

The basement of the Vaneks’ family home is a remembrance space, a personal museum that physically performs the duality of Oskar’s presence/absence. For Libeskind, the architecture of the museum must materially embody what it exhibits so as to render visible, rather than erase, the historical reality of annihilation (2003, 46). In accordance with this view, we can interpret the detritus of Oskar’s previous life—the music scores and vinyl records that are scattered on the floor of the basement, as well as his clothes and photographs—as mourning objects that, having become sacred totems to Amelia, reflect her stifling inability to let go of the past. In contrast, Samuel’s casual verbal interaction with the photograph of his father—“Don’t worry, dad, I’ll save mum” (21:08)—seems much less childlike and naïve on reflection, indicating instead a more positive, participatory attitude towards Oskar’s memorial space that liberates rather than restricts. It is apparent that, despite sharing the experience of loss, Amelia and Samuel have very different approaches to dealing with the artefacts that Oskar has left behind. To some extent, the character of the son can be understood in terms of

Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" (2012, 22), as his lived reality is highly mediated by the traumatic event that preceded his birth. Samuel's father is constituted for his son by his nonbeing, his photograph an affirmation of "the past's existence" that "in [its] flat two-dimensionality, signal[s] its unbridgeable distance" (Hirsch 2012, 23). By encountering her husband's personal belongings in the basement, Amelia's material encounter with Oskar's death—which, as discussed above, she initially experiences as an existential absence—also represents a point of engagement for her that provokes the belated working through of her grief. In (perhaps) destroying Oskar's photographic image, Amelia enacts the specific loss that she has previously suffered, an indication of her increased ability to resist, and move on from, this traumatic event in her past.

#### 4. MISTER BABADOOK: AMELIA'S TRAUMA AS A MONSTROUS OTHER

The concept of the monster is "integral" (Kent 2017, 15) to any understanding of *The Babadook*. The film deploys a well-used horror trope with the gradual emergence of the sinister, eponymous monster (Tim Purcell)—a character that was visually inspired by the director's love of Expressionist cinema (Kent 2014c)—who, at the same time, conveys the psychosomatic ramifications of Amelia's PTSD. Several critics have suggested that *The Babadook* explores the consequences of Amelia's maternal ambivalence (Quigley 2016, 57; Buerger 2017, 33; Harrington 2018, 180), her negativity towards Samuel being a response to the fact that his birth coincided with Oskar's death. It is for this reason that Samuel has never celebrated his actual birthday, and also why Amelia recoils at having any physical contact with him (02:46, 04:27)—both clear examples of how she avoids, rather than confronts, these key trauma triggers within her everyday life. Given this, the choice of Samuel's name seems to be deliberately ironic, as Amelia's resentment at his birth stands in noteworthy contrast to his Biblical namesake, whose mother prayed to God to be given a child (1 Samuel 1.2; Carroll and Prickett 1998, 331). Buerger has read the film in terms of Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject and concludes that Kent's reimagining of abjection involves a woman who, instead of refusing to give up the comforting intimacy of the mother-child dyad, "is made monstrous by the absence of maternal feeling" (2017, 34). *The Babadook* can certainly be read in terms of the abject—in particular, the notion that its "vortex of summons and repulsion" (Kristeva 1982, 1) seems to encapsulate Amelia's conflicted feelings about her son. It is also noticeable that, as Amelia's behaviour becomes increasingly erratic, her home is tangibly transformed into an abject space, with the kitchen turning into a mess of unwashed dishes, discarded food items and an infestation of (hallucinated) cockroaches. This is important because, as a single mother, Amelia's failure to maintain the socially mandated maternal role that is expected of her is here manifested by the physical degeneration of her domestic space. Howell has convincingly argued that *The Babadook* critiques the economic vulnerability of single mothers (2018, 194) and, in support of this view, the film offers the suggestion that,

following Oskar's death, Amelia has had to abandon her previous career as a writer in favour of the more stable income that working in a care home for the elderly provides.

Reading the film as a trauma narrative helps to orientate our interpretation by taking account of the specific behaviours that are associated with PTSD. Indeed, Kent herself has indicated that *The Babadook* addresses the protagonist's inability to confront what has happened to her in the past (2014a), a typical behaviour displayed by the victims of catastrophic events. With this in mind, Amelia's ambivalence towards Samuel can be understood as a trauma survivor's "cessation of feeling" (Lifton 1995, 136), an emotional detachment that is not only a consequence of her confrontation with death but also, in some sense, a necessary self-protective response to what she has witnessed. Borrowing from Robert J. Lifton's ideas about survivor guilt, we can understand the Babadook, therefore, as being Amelia's "second self," which is "a form of doubling in the traumatized person" (Lifton 1995, 137). In consequence, it can be argued that the protagonist's dissociation (her existential absence), a reaction to her inability to address the premature death of her husband, leads her to hallucinate a monstrous Other who embodies those aspects of her trauma that she is unable to process. As a result, Amelia's ultimate recovery becomes dependent on her ability to reintegrate this traumatised self through the act of spoken and written narration.

Amelia's refusal to speak about the loss of her husband is a repeated element of *The Babadook's* plot. On the few occasions that other characters do so (07:19, 28:16), they are met with either hostility or silent resentment from Amelia. In fact, when her elderly neighbour, Gracie Roach (Barbara West), mentions that "Oskar [...] always spoke his mind" (40:31), Amelia's angry response, "Do you have to keep on bringing him up?" (40:33), serves only to emphasise the lack of dialogue about her husband rather than its excess. The scene in which this exchange occurs is particularly significant, as it follows on from Samuel telling his mother that Mrs Roach has Parkinson's disease. Amelia's dismissive, "You don't have to say everything that goes through your head" (40:17), is countered by Gracie telling her, "It's alright, love. He wanted to know, so we talked about it" (40:20). Amelia's refusal to similarly give voice to her experience is indicative of the traumatic loss that manifests itself in the figure of the Babadook, and which, through the progression of the film's narrative, she is eventually able to acknowledge. For Buerger, the moment when Amelia becomes visually transformed into the Babadook—whilst watching a TV news report about a woman who has stabbed her son to death (01:01:28)—is pivotal, as it marks the "re-emergence of her agency" (2017, 38).

With this in mind, Kent's choice of name for her titular monster seems to be worthy of comment. The director has told Ehrlich that it was derived from the Serbian word *babaroga* (meaning "bogeyman"), but that "it's stupid, it's just a made up thing" (2014d). However, Dempsey considers "Babadook" to be "evocative of Aboriginal etymology" and, thus, that the character's (black) Otherness has a specifically racial dimension that reflects a "collective cultural trauma, a legacy of colonialism" (2015, 131-32). Whilst acknowledging the cogency of this reading, the

name “Babadook” also suggests a verbal stasis, the collapse of spoken language into repetitive syllabic fragments—“ba-BA-ba, DOOK! DOOK! DOOK!” (11:08)—which conveys Amelia’s failure to coherently vocalise her traumatic experience. From a Kristevan point of view, the name of the monster can also be said to juxtapose the modalities of the Semiotic—the nonsensical “Babadook”—against the unified phallic signifier of the Symbolic—the “Mister” that is specified in the storybook’s title—as a way of representing the fundamental tension between articulation and its negation, being and nonbeing, that underpins the film’s narrative. From this point of view, the monster seems to be more than just a manifestation of Amelia’s maternal ambivalence or of her repressed grief. Instead, it can be understood as a psychological projection of the hostility she feels towards Oskar for abandoning her and her own self-loathing guilt, which is discharged onto Samuel—the character who physically embodies them both. In this sense, the Babadook is the locus through which Amelia’s PTSD is perpetuated by the traumatising of her son. Ironically, we are initially encouraged to view Samuel as a monstrous character, with the school principal (Tony Mack) describing him as a boy who has “significant behavioural problems” (06:06). Yet, as the film progresses, it becomes apparent that Samuel’s disturbed fantasies are generated in response to his mother’s shockingly aggressive behaviour, her physical possession by the Babadook an indication of what Griffiths describes as the bodily level encoding of a traumatic memory (2010, 1).

Amelia’s violent assault on Samuel, when she drags him up the stairs and throws him against the bedroom wall (01:15:15), is importantly represented via her externally focalised viewpoint which, because of her dissociation, appears to be enacted by the Babadook. For this reason, Amelia’s angry confession to her son, “you don’t know how many times I wished it was you not him that died” (01:09:05), is a crucial moment in the film as it marks the first time that she is able to vocalise her hostility and, thus, to begin to resist the compulsion to act out that is the mechanism of her trauma. When, at the end of the film, Amelia is finally able to declare, “my husband died the day that Sam was born” (01:22:20), her acknowledgement of this psychic wounding signals how she is finally able to transform her sense of existential absence, manifested by her previous silence, into a specific, verbal narrative about her loss.

Central to Amelia’s transformative working through of her trauma is the presence of the cryptic pop-up book, titled *Mister Babadook* (perhaps in ironic reference to children’s stories like the *Mr Men* series). Appearing on Samuel’s bookshelf one night, apparently out of nowhere, it is Amelia’s reading of this book that seems to provoke the invasion of the monstrous titular character into the Vanek family home. Yet the film script’s seemingly offhand reference to the fact that Amelia was a “writer” who “did some kids’ stuff” (28:09) in the past raises the intriguing possibility that she is, in fact, the author of *Mister Babadook*. As a result, we can interpret the text as Amelia’s physically existent, or literal, trauma narrative. It is, in essence, the imaginary monster to which she metaphorically has given birth and which, as Buerger points out, “comes to

signify both destruction and redemption” (2017, 35). From this, it becomes clear that repetition is used in *The Babadook* as a structural device to emphasise the metafictional nature of a film in which the spectators watch a narrative that parallels the story that is both written and read by Amelia. Although one possible objection to such a reading would be to point out the supernatural properties of the book—Amelia destroys it on two occasions (26:13, 37:32) and, yet, it still mysteriously reappears “sticky-taped back together” (Kidd 2014, 39)—this would be to ignore Amelia’s characterisation as a sufferer of a profound dissociative disorder throughout the film. Indeed, the scene in which the storybook returns for the first time after Amelia has torn it to pieces begins with the suggestion that she is in a somnambulist state (35:26). *The Babadook*’s repeated and highly effective visual blurring of the boundaries between sleep and wakefulness is, therefore, an important mechanism through which the spectator also experiences the disorientating effect of Amelia’s PTSD.

The text of *Mister Babadook* contains a number of coded illustrations of Amelia’s asocial fantasies, such as the mother figure’s murder of her child and her later self-destruction by suicide. Perhaps more importantly, the book also stresses the seemingly inescapable process of acting out that keeps Amelia in a state of traumatised stasis: “If it’s in a word, or it’s in a look / You can’t get rid of the Babadook” (12:30). The protagonist’s gradual recognition of the truth of this statement—that is, that she has been profoundly and irrevocably affected by the consequences of the car crash—is the means by which a partial resolution is reached at the close of the film. Amelia’s final confrontation with the Babadook returns us to the beginning of the narrative, the journey to the hospital that precipitated the onset of her trauma, with the monster in the guise of Oskar telling her to “keep breathing. Put your seat back, ten more minutes and we’re there” (01:17:00). But Amelia, wearing a nightdress that seems to be identical to the one that she wore on the fateful night nearly seven years previously, is now able to negate its malevolent influence with a powerfully vocalised dismissal: “You are nothing! You’re nothing!” (01:18:09). By interpreting these words from the perspective of trauma theory, it can be concluded that Amelia here finally gives spoken recognition to Oskar’s loss and, by extension, to the impotence of the Babadook, as the manifestation of her PTSD, to further control her behaviour.

## 5. CONCLUSION

When Kent has discussed *The Babadook*’s ending, she has insisted that it was a “non-negotiable” element of the story (2014c), despite the offer of financial assistance if changes were made. Several critics have expressed reservations about its apparently positive conclusion, with Eve Tushnet describing the closing scenes as “strange” (2014) and Tyler Sage wondering if a “better horror film [might] have started where *The Babadook* ends” (2015). In spite of these comments, the film’s finale—in which Amelia descends once again into the basement to feed the now apparently subjugated

monster (01:23:50), an echo of an earlier scene in which she is physically restrained by Samuel (01:12:30)—offers the important suggestion that Amelia has finally come to acknowledge that her traumatic loss needs to be nurtured, rather than denied or forgotten. As noted earlier, Oskar's personal belongings are now absent, a detail that suggests Amelia has come to recognise them as triggers to her previous acting out of the traumatic crash. The use of low-key lighting serves to exaggerate the basement's appearance as a void, its spatial emptiness and darkness invoking Oskar's nonexistence. As a result, this subterranean space becomes transformed at the end of the film into a paradigmatic location that embodies the visceral materiality of Amelia's loss. The fact that the Babadook is represented here as an intangible presence, no longer the visually horrific creature that previously haunted Amelia's dreams, adds weight to the idea that the basement is now a locus of memory that is transformative rather than traumatic. Amelia has accepted Oskar's death—as symbolised by the worms she feeds to the invisible monster—and, more importantly, her own survival, even though she will always be affected by both.

By reading *The Babadook* from a perspective that is informed by various aspects of modern trauma theory—in particular, Heckner's notion of secondary witnessing, the link that Libeskind makes between trauma and materiality, as well as LaCapra's work on acting out and working through—we can better understand the impact that PTSD has on its protagonist. Using narrative focalisation as a crucial technique, the film conveys Amelia's psychosomatic experience of traumatic loss in terms of her possession by a monstrous Other, a trope that harnesses the affective potential of the horror genre to express her dissociative state. In her analysis of traffic accidents on screen, Karen Beckman has written about how the car crash embodies the “tension between stasis and motion [...] self and other” (2010, 1), a notion that seems to be particularly apt in relation to Amelia. By vocalising her experience through the storybook text of *Mister Babadook*, Amelia is finally able to work through her compulsive acting out of the fatal accident and, in this way, move beyond the stifling and pernicious effect that this past traumatic event has had upon her.

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