

Lost in the labyrinth: Understanding idiosyncratic interpretations of Kubrick's *The Shining*

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Abstract

Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* still generates intense interest nearly four decades after its release. There are numerous books, documentary films, websites, blogs, and YouTube videos dedicated to analyzing the film's content. Many of these analyses are wildly speculative. For example, the film is a coded confession by Kubrick that he faked the Apollo 11 moon landing footage. What about *The Shining*'s content may contribute to some viewers generating such unusual interpretations? The present article applies psychoanalytic theory, supported by findings from cognitive science, to answer this question. It is argued that *The Shining*'s ambiguity generates an "intolerance of uncertainty" for some viewers, which leads them to project their own beliefs and experiences onto the film's scenes and narrative. Additionally, the film's oedipally themed content evokes archaic associations that some viewers may struggle to integrate, which promotes cognitive regression to a less demanding mode of thought. Although this article focuses on a fictional film, its method and findings are potentially generalizable to other phenomena in which idiosyncratic interpretations are expressed.

KEYWORDS

film, interpretation, Kubrick, psychoanalytic, *The Shining*

1 | INTRODUCTION

Stanley Kubrick's (1980) film *The Shining* still generates intense interest nearly four decades after its release. There are numerous books, documentary films, websites, blogs, and YouTube videos dedicated to analyzing the film's content.

Although some of this commentary is theoretically informed and insightful, much of it is derived intuitively and is wildly speculative. Examples of the latter include *The Shining* is an elaborate confession by Kubrick that he faked the Apollo 11 moon landing footage for the U.S. government or *The Shining* is about the Holocaust and contains coded references to Nazi Germany. Given that *The Shining* elicits such peculiar reactions, it is reasonable to ask: how may the film's content produce certain psychological effects upon some viewers? Psychoanalytic theory, supported by findings from cognitive science, is used to answer this question.

The present article may interest scholars of Kubrick's films, aficionados of *The Shining*, and scholars from various disciplines (e.g., film studies, philosophy, and psychology) who study how the mind processes audiovisual stimuli. Film and literary theorists may also find the article's focus on interpretation relevant to their work. More broadly, the article's methods and findings are potentially generalizable to other phenomena in which idiosyncratic interpretations are expressed. For example, idiosyncratic interpretations manifest in everyday life and politics through folklore, superstitions, and conspiracy theories. Additionally, transference and countertransference reactions in clinical encounters may be conceptualized as idiosyncratic interpretations.

In the article's second section, *The Shining* is summarized extensively to orient readers to the film's characters/plot and provide data for subsequent analysis. In the third section, the psychological operations underlying the mind's interpretive ability are described, with emphasis on how idiosyncratic interpretations are derived. This provides a means for assessing an interpretation's conventionality and utility. In the fourth section, several idiosyncratic interpretations of *The Shining* are introduced. In the fifth section, it is argued that *The Shining*'s ambiguity and evocative content contribute to some viewers generating idiosyncratic interpretations. In the concluding section, limitations to idiosyncratic interpretations are discussed, and a recommendation is made for using theory-driven analytical frameworks, which are more likely to generate interpretations that are rooted in observable, nontrivial, evidence and are consistent with principles of logic.

2 | THE SHINING

Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) interviews for a job as the winter caretaker at the Overlook Hotel, a summer resort located in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Mr. Ullman (Barry Nelson), the hotel's general manager, states that the job is not demanding but warns Jack that a tremendous sense of isolation can occur. Ullman also shares a gruesome detail about the hotel's history that has led some applicants to reconsider the job: A previous caretaker named Charles Grady experienced a mental breakdown due to "cabin fever," murdered his wife and two daughters with an ax, and then committed suicide. Jack is not deterred, explaining that solitude is precisely what he seeks, as he hopes to use the time to write a book. Ullman asks Jack how his family will handle the conditions. "They'll love it!" he replies enthusiastically.

Meanwhile, Jack's wife Wendy (Shelley Duvall) and young son Danny (Danny Lloyd) are back at the family's apartment in Boulder, Colorado. Danny is ambivalent about going to the hotel. Wendy asks what "Tony" thinks about it. ("Tony" is an imaginary friend who Danny describes as the "little boy who lives inside my mouth.") Tony does not want to go but refuses to elaborate when Wendy asks him why. Later, Danny presses Tony about why he does not want to go to the hotel. Danny sees images of blood gushing from an elevator and then twin girls; he then loses consciousness. Upon waking, he is being examined by a pediatrician (Anne Jackson). Following the exam, the doctor asks Wendy about the family's life in Boulder and Danny's medical history. Wendy reveals that the family has lived in Boulder for only a few months and that Jack is a recovering alcoholic who became sober after dislocating Danny's shoulder in a drunken rage several years earlier.

Jack is hired for the caretaker position, and the family moves to the hotel, arriving on closing day. Ullman gives Jack and Wendy a tour, including the immense Colorado Lounge, the Gold Room (the hotel's lavishly decorated ballroom), the family's living quarters, and the hotel's outdoor labyrinth (a giant hedge maze). Ullman tells Jack and Wendy that according to folklore, the hotel was built on a Native American burial ground. Meanwhile, Danny throws

darts by himself in the game room when he sees the twin girls from his earlier vision in the doorway; they stare at him, look at each other and smile, and then exit the room. Danny appears frightened.

Danny joins his parents on the tour, where they are introduced to Dick Hallorann (Scatman Crothers), the hotel's chef. Hallorann shows Wendy and Danny the kitchen, while simultaneously communicating telepathically with Danny. Hallorann invites Danny to share ice cream while his mother continues the tour and talks to him about seeing things (visions of the past and future) and communicating telepathically; Hallorann refers to these abilities as "shining." Danny asks Hallorann if he is afraid of the hotel. Hallorann states hesitantly that there is nothing to fear, but also explains that the hotel can "shine," and describes how when bad things happen a kind of psychic residue can remain and compares it to the acrid smell that lingers after toast burns. Hallorann states that bad things have happened in the hotel and sternly warns Danny to never enter room 237.

A title card read "A month later." Jack suffers from writer's block; he tells Wendy that he has "lots of ideas, but no good ones." Jack often isolates himself in the Colorado Lounge, wandering aimlessly and bouncing a tennis ball against the walls, while Wendy and Danny spend most of their time together. Jack's behavior becomes increasingly erratic and, at times, hostile. Wendy visits Jack while he is trying to work; he is agitated and lashes out profanely and cruelly. At one point, Danny asks his father if he feels bad and if he would ever hurt him and his mother. Jack, suspicious, asks Danny if his mother told him to say that.

Danny has a series of supernatural encounters. As Danny rides his tricycle through the hotel, he stops at room 237, gets off his tricycle, approaches the door, and tries to open the door, but it is locked. The twin girls flash in his mind, and he runs back to his tricycle and pedals away. Another time while riding his tricycle, he sees the twin girls in a hallway, beckoning him: "Come play with us ... forever, and ever, and ever." Danny, frightened, covers his eyes; when he opens them, he sees a more gruesome image: The girls are dead, with blood sprayed everywhere. When Danny plays with toy cars on the second floor, a tennis ball rolls down the hallway. Danny asks whether his mother is there, tentatively walks down the corridor, and sees that the door to room 237 is open, with a key in the lock. Danny approaches the door and asks if his mother is inside. There is no reply, and he enters the room. The scene fades out.

In the next scene, Wendy hears Jack screaming and finds him asleep at his desk in the Colorado Lounge, having a nightmare. She wakes him, and he says that in his dream, he killed her and Danny with an ax. Danny then wanders into the Colorado Lounge; he is sucking his thumb and does not respond to his mother's request that he go to his room. Wendy approaches him and sees that his clothes are unkempt and that he has bruises/scratches on his neck. Wendy accuses Jack of harming Danny and flees with her son to the family's living quarters. Jack seeks refuge in the Gold Room, where he encounters Lloyd (Joe Turkel) the bartender. Lloyd serves Jack bourbon as he complains that Wendy will never let him forget the time he hurt Danny. Wendy, carrying a baseball bat, runs into the Gold Room; Jack is shown sitting by himself. She informs Jack that someone else is in the hotel, as Danny said a "crazy woman in one of the rooms" tried to strangle him. Jack is cruelly dismissive but says he will investigate. In the next scene, Hallorann is resting in his Miami apartment. His eyes widen in fear, as if seeing something dreadful. Danny, terrified, is apparently reaching out to Hallorann using his telepathic ability.

When Jack enters room 237, he sees a young woman, naked in the bathroom. The woman walks toward him, they embrace and kiss. As Jack looks in a mirror, the reflected image shows an old woman covered in lesions. Repulsed, Jack backs away as the old woman cackles and lurches toward him; he then flees. However, Jack tells Wendy that he saw nothing in room 237 and that maybe Danny's injuries were self-inflicted or that he had an episode like the one in Boulder. Wendy wants them to leave the hotel. Jack is outraged and accuses Wendy of trying to sabotage his writing and ruining his life. He storms out of the apartment and returns to the Gold Room, now filled with guests dressed in 1920s attire. Jack orders a drink and walks away from the bar when a waiter (Phillip Stone) spills a drink on Jack, then brings him to the washroom to clean it. Jack learns the waiter's name is Delbert Grady. Jack asks if Grady was once the hotel's caretaker, but the waiter denies it. Jack insists that Grady is the caretaker who murdered his family and then killed himself. Grady replies that Jack is, and always has been, the caretaker. Grady then informs Jack that his son is attempting to bring an outside party (Hallorann) to the hotel. Grady says that Danny

has a “very great talent” and uses it to go against Jack; Danny is a “very willful” and “naughty” boy. Grady recommends that Jack give Danny a “good talking-to” or perhaps something “a bit more.” Grady notes how he “corrected” his own wife and children for their misbehaviors.

Wendy is in their room contemplating how to leave the hotel. Danny, in a trance-like state, repeatedly says “redrum” in Tony’s voice. Wendy tries to wake him, but Tony tells her that Danny is not here and that he cannot wake up. Wendy searches for Jack in the Colorado Lounge and finds his manuscript. A horrified expression appears on her face as she sees that hundreds of pages contain the same phrase: “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” Jack emerges from the shadows and asks ominously: “Do you like it?” Wendy is gravely concerned about Danny and wants to leave the hotel and take him to a doctor. An indignant Jack mocks Wendy, threatens to kill her, and then moves menacingly toward her. Wendy, still carrying the baseball bat, swings it in self-defense and knocks Jack unconscious. She drags him into the kitchen and locks him in the pantry. When Jack awakens, he tells her that he sabotaged the radio and snow mobile and that she is not going anywhere. After Wendy leaves, Jack converses through the pantry door with Grady, who chastises Jack for not being able to deal with his “resourceful” wife. A humiliated Jack states that he can do the job. Grady unlocks the pantry door (although he is never shown).

Wendy and Danny are asleep in their quarters. Danny, in a somnambulant state, climbs out of bed, picks up a chef’s knife, and writes REDRUM in red lipstick on a door. He shouts “redrum” louder and louder. Wendy awakens and sees the word Danny wrote on the door reflected and reversed in a mirror: MURDER. Jack suddenly hacks through the front door with an ax. Wendy locks herself and Danny in the bathroom then sends Danny through the window to escape, but she is unable to fit through it. In one of the film’s most infamous scenes, Jack breaks through the bathroom door, shouting “Here’s Johnny!” Wendy slashes his hand with the knife, and Jack retreats. Jack exits the apartment when he hears Hallorann arriving in a snow mobile. As Hallorann walks through the lobby, Jack emerges from the shadows and attacks him with the ax, killing him.

As Wendy runs through the hotel seeking Danny, she sees bizarre and frightening images, including someone dressed in a dog costume apparently performing fellatio, a smiling man with a bloody head wound, a room full of skeletons dressed in fancy attire, and a river of blood gushing from the elevator (the vision that Danny had in Boulder). She also finds Hallorann’s body in the lobby. Meanwhile, Danny enters the labyrinth. Jack follows Danny by tracking his footprints in the snow. When Danny is deep into the maze, he creates a false trail by backtracking in his own footprints and then hiding behind a hedge row. Jack becomes confused when the trail stops, wanders deeper into the labyrinth, and becomes lost. Danny escapes, reunites with his mother, and they leave in Hallorann’s snow mobile. The next morning, Jack’s dead body is in the maze; his face frozen into a sardonic rictus. In the film’s final scene, the camera pans across the Colorado Lounge and then zooms slowly on a wall-hanging photograph of a much younger Jack, dressed in a tuxedo, standing amidst a crowd of revelers; the picture is dated July 4, 1921.

3 | THE INTERPRETIVE PROCESS

Any visual stimulus field, including every scene in a film, presents both a perceptual organizing task and a meaning generating associational situation. An individual registers visual sensations, organizes the stimuli into images, and then assigns meaning to the images through associations to past knowledge and experiences. For the purpose of this article, this meaning is defined as an interpretation. The interpretive process typically occurs automatically, without any conscious awareness (O’Brien & Opie, 2006). Additionally, the process can be influenced by neurophysiological, neuropsychological, and psychodynamic factors (Pincus, Freeman, & Modell, 2007).

When an individual observes a stimulus field, distal properties are scanned (Epstein, Hughes, Schneider, & Bach-y-Rita, 1986; Loomis, 1992). Distal properties are the actual attributes of objects/events in the stimulus field. Facilitating the perceptual process are critical distal bits, also known as principal components (Diamantaras & Kung, 1996). These are an object’s essential properties that permit an observer to differentiate it from any other object,

including those that may have similar properties. The brain/mind organizes these critical bits to create distinct images.

As perceptual organization occurs, the mind spontaneously assigns meaning to perceived images through an associative process rooted in an individual's memory systems (Rosner, 1973). What does an object/event in the stimulus field mean? The answer is predicated on implicit associations between any images and the perceiving individual's knowledge (semantic memory) and experiences (episodic memory, procedural memory) (Bucci, 1997). The associative process typically operates outside of conscious awareness (Bucci, 1997). Although the associative process can be self-observed and reflected upon, most people do not think deliberately about their mind's implicit associations. Such "metacognitive" awareness is an acquired skill (Flavell, 1979).

3.1 | Idiosyncratic interpretations

Any interpretation may be categorized based on its conventionality. A conventional interpretation corresponds to the stimulus field's *obvious* distal properties and provides *ordinary* meaning for these objects/events. If a stimulus field is clear, structured, and contains prosaic content, then observers typically perceive it accurately and generate conventional interpretations.

Various psychological and situational factors may influence how someone interprets objects/events in the stimulus field. Individuals who can think more abstractly and/or creatively may make novel connections; in contrast, individuals who think more concretely and/or lack imagination may make rudimentary connections. If a stimulus field is ambiguous, lacks structure, and/or its content is evocative, then these situational factors may make observers' perceptions less accurate and/or their associations more idiographic.

For this article, an interpretation that provides *unique* or *unusual* meaning for objects/events in the stimulus field is defined as an idiosyncratic interpretation. Such interpretations are not necessarily inaccurate, inappropriate, or pathological. Idiosyncratic interpretations can provide fresh perspectives and new insights. Idiosyncrasy is best understood as a marker that an interpretation reflects something about the interpreter's beliefs and experiences. The more an interpretation diverges from obvious distal properties and ordinary associations, the more it reflects personally meaningful (i.e., idiographic) aspects of the interpreter's psychology.

4 | IDIOSYNCRATIC INTERPRETATIONS OF *THE SHINING*

In this section, several idiosyncratic interpretations are introduced. As mentioned previously, there is copious commentary on *The Shining*. There was no formal selection methodology; instead, an informal qualitative review identified interpretations that deviated significantly from ordinary meanings of the film.

4.1 | Apollo 11 confession

In *Room 237* (Ascher, 2012), a documentary film about interpretations of *The Shining*, Weidner argued that *The Shining* was Kubrick's coded confession that he faked the Apollo 11 lunar landing footage on behalf of the U.S. government. According to Weidner, the United States needed a propaganda victory in the Cold War-era "Space Race" against the Soviet Union, and Kubrick was the only American filmmaker with the necessary technical expertise to create the footage. Kubrick was wracked by guilt for complying and seeded *The Shining* with oblique confessional clues. Why Kubrick used this particular film for his confession was not explained.

What is Weidner's evidence for this interpretation? Danny, while playing with toy cars on the floor, wears a sweater emblazoned with a rocket that has "Apollo 11" embroidered on it. Danny is drawn to room 237; the Moon is about 237,000 miles from Earth. A key for room 237 reads "ROOM No. 237"; the capital letters contain an anagram for MOON, conveying that room 237 is the "Moon Room" (i.e., the sound stage on which Kubrick shot his fake footage). The carpet looks like a rocket launch pad. The "All" in Jack's manic mantra "All work and no play

makes Jack a dull boy” can be read as “A11” for Apollo 11. The twin Grady girls allude to the NASA Gemini missions (one of which ended in the death of three astronauts in 1967). There are cans of Tang in the kitchen pantry; Tang is a powdered fruit-flavored drink touted by its manufacturer for its use by astronauts. Several scenes are filmed using front projection; Kubrick (1969) used this technique to create images of humans on the Moon in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Jack’s emotional turmoil supposedly mirrors Kubrick’s own angst about his deal with the government, for example, Jack’s rant about contractual obligations to his employer.

4.2 | The Holocaust

Cocks (1991) argued that *The Shining* was “a unique contribution to the body of film on the Holocaust” (p. 104). According to Cocks, Kubrick recognized that any film about the Holocaust would be exploitative, cheapen the actual horror that occurred, and numb viewers to the tragedy’s immense scope. Thus, the Holocaust had to be approached indirectly and symbolically.

What is Cocks’ evidence for this interpretation? According to Cocks, various personal characteristics of Kubrick are integral facts, including his being Jewish, a supposed interest in violence, and a supposed fondness for mathematics. Building upon this foundation, Cocks suggested that Kubrick sprinkled numerous “tiny clues” throughout *The Shining*. The film’s main character drives a yellow Volkswagen; yellow symbolizes the yellow Star of David armband that the Nazis forced Jews to wear, whereas a Volkswagen is the Nazi “people’s car.” The film contains Native American references and motifs, which symbolize the White American genocide of Native Americans, which in turn symbolize the Aryan Nazi extermination of Jews. The film’s opening tracking shots are supposedly similar to scenes from Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*. There is a brief reference to Wolf Creek; “Wolf” was Hitler’s nickname, and the town of Wolfsburg was where Nazis manufactured Volkswagens. There are images of eagles, and Jack uses an Adler (German for “eagle”) typewriter; eagles were an important emblem for Nazi Germany, and a typewriter symbolizes the Nazi bureaucratic system of extermination. Finally, Cocks finds great relevance in various numbers, particularly seven and 42. The hotel was built in 1907, Charles Grady killed his family in 1970, and Jack’s whiskey is “Jack Daniel’s Old No. 7”; meanwhile, references to the number 42 symbolize the 1942 Wannsee Conference, where the Nazis coordinated the deportation and murder of European Jews (i.e., the “Final Solution”). According to Cocks, these numbers also “unavoidably” recall the Nazis tattooing of their victims.

4.3 | Gold bug

“Gold bug” is a term used to describe someone who is bullish on gold as an investment and/or supports a return to the gold standard. In *Kubrick’s Gold Story*, Ager (2014) argued that *The Shining* is Kubrick’s commentary on the role of gold in American banking history. Why Kubrick supposedly did this was not explained by Ager.

What is Ager’s evidence for this interpretation? Similar to Cocks, Ager uses alleged personal characteristics of Kubrick to build his interpretive foundation. In this instance, Kubrick was supposedly an investor in, and advocate for, gold bullion. Moving on to the film, a room within the Overlook Hotel is referred to as the “Gold Room.” According to Ager, the Gold Room was originally decorated with silver tiles and then redecorated in gold tiles. Furthermore, the gold tiles supposedly look like stacked gold bars. In one scene, there is a scrapbook next to Jack’s typewriter; Ager examined the scrapbook in the Kubrick Archives and found newspaper clippings regarding the creation of the U.S. Federal Reserve in 1913, and the role of gold in the American banking system. When Jack is in the Gold Room and tries to pay for his drink with a twenty-dollar bill, Lloyd the bartender refuses to accept it; Ager claimed this occurred because it was not backed by gold. Finally, Ager argued that the photograph at the end of the film contains political figures from the Woodrow Wilson administration, as well as Wilson family members. This is significant because Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Act into law, which created the Federal Reserve Note, a new, national currency for the United States. Ager claimed that the presence of these individuals in the photo is “indisputable.”

5 | UNDERSTANDING IDIOSYNCRATIC INTERPRETATIONS OF *THE SHINING*

5.1 | Ambiguity, intolerance of uncertainty, and pattern completion

The film contains perceptual, temporal, spatial, and narrative ambiguities. Although Kubrick seldom commented on his own work, Jan Harlen, *The Shining's* producer, noted how Kubrick deliberately infused uncertainty into the film (Brooks, 2012). Perceptually, the viewer can never be confident that what is observed is real, even within the film's own ontology. In *The Shining's* opening image, the sky and mountains are mirrored in a lake's still surface. What is real and what is a reflection? This perceptual ambiguity is repeated several times throughout the film when an establishing image is revealed to be its mirror image. Next, temporal ambiguity is also evident. Gaps in time occur within the film's chronology, with no indication of events that transpired during the intervening time. A title card reads "one month later"; other title cards pop up, seemingly randomly: "Tuesday"; "Thursday"; "Monday"; "Wednesday"; "Saturday"; and "4 pm." Next, there are inconsistencies and anomalies in the hotel's layout, leading to spatial ambiguity. For example, during Jack's initial interview, there is an exterior-facing window at the back of the hotel manager's office; however, later in the film Danny rides his tricycle through the hotel and drives behind the office, there is only an interior hallway with no windows. Furthermore, it is often unclear where one character is in relation to other characters, or other parts of the hotel. Finally, there are numerous instances of narrative ambiguity. What happens to Danny in room 237? Why does Charles Grady call himself Delbert Grady? Who unlocks the pantry door? A noteworthy example occurs at the film's end. In the penultimate scene, Jack is shown frozen to death in the labyrinth. In the final scene, a photograph of a much younger Jack is shown; it is dated July 4, 1921.

An idiosyncratic interpretation is more likely to occur when a stimulus field contains ambiguity. The human mind seems to prefer clearly defined, well-structured stimulus fields. This makes sense from an evolutionary perspective, as predators can hide more easily within a murky, confusing, and/or chaotic stimulus field. Thus, ambiguity can generate "intolerance of uncertainty" (Byrne, Hunt, & Chang, 2015), also described as a "need for cognitive closure" (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), in some individuals. To alleviate this tension, the observer's mind quickly "fills in the blanks" to create a complete, coherent gestalt. Pattern completion occurs when internal (i.e., idiographic) characteristics are projected onto ambiguous external objects/events (Javanbakht & Ragan, 2008; Samuri & Hattori, 2005). Thus, vague aspects of the stimulus field are completed with properties drawn from the observer's own knowledge and experiences. Additionally, as ambiguity in the stimulus field increases, the more intolerance of uncertainty is generated. It is known that stress/anxiety can be a precipitating factor for belief in conspiracy theories (Swami et al., 2016). A conspiracy theory provides a way to comprehend a novel, indeterminate, and/or threatening situation, particularly when there is no obvious explanation (Goertzel, 1994).

Viewers of *The Shining* experience numerous ambiguities. For some viewers, this leads to intolerance of uncertainty, which they seek implicitly to alleviate by completing the stimulus field. These viewers then project elements of their own psychology onto the film's scenes and narrative through pattern completion: A carpet design looks like a rocket launch pad; twin girls symbolize the Gemini space program; the opening scenes are reminiscent of *Triumph of the Will*; gold tiles look like stacked gold bars; figures in a photo look like members of Woodrow Wilson's family. In a textbook example, the author of the Apollo 11 interpretation claimed to see Kubrick's face in a cloud during the opening credits. Furthermore, the idiosyncratic interpretations are conspiratorial: Kubrick had a deliberate, covert agenda, about which he conveniently "planted" clues within the film. It is rarely explained why Kubrick chose *The Shining* to pursue any of the agendas that are attributed to him.

5.2 | Evocative content, cognitive regression, and preoperational information processing

The film is suffused with highly evocative oedipal content. This is not a coincidence. According to Diane Johnson, the screenplay's co-writer, she and Kubrick studied Freud's writings and decided that *The Shining* "was really about the conflict between the little boy and his father or the resentment by the father of the threatening little boy for the love

of the mother" (McAvoy, 2015, p. 540). Additionally, Blum (2000) argued that the Oedipus complex also contains jealousy, competitiveness, and hostility toward the mother/wife, including matricidal fantasies. Thus, "the horror in *The Shining* does not lie in the ghosts but the inescapability of the oedipal tensions in the family of which they are an expression" (Hoile, 1984, p. 7). Jack's oedipal conflicts are described explicitly and actualized vividly through his behaviors. Grady tells Jack that Danny has a "very great talent" and uses it to go against Jack; Grady also says Danny is very "willful" and "naughty," and in need of "correction" (a euphemism for murder in the film). Behaviorally, Jack's interactions with his family become increasingly tense and menacing throughout the film, culminating in his overt resentment, hostility and violence toward his wife and son. He accuses Wendy of undermining him and profanely blames her for his failures: "I've let you fuck up my life so far, but I'm not going to let you fuck this up." When Wendy wants to bring Danny to a doctor, Jack clearly feels excluded from her affections, bellowing "Are you concerned about me?" In the film's most disturbing scenes, Jack attacks Wendy, murders Hallorann, and then chases Danny with an ax. These scenes are emotionally intense and convey tremendous physicality as Jack hacks through doors with an ax, lunges out of the shadows to bury the ax in Hallorann's chest, and then lumbers through the labyrinth stalking his son. Danny's oedipal conflicts are also portrayed: he expresses fear that his father will hurt him, and he awakens from a nightmare shouting "redrum" ("murder") while holding a knife.

Evocative content in the stimulus field can make idiosyncratic interpretations more likely. Affect and cognition are intertwined inextricably, and interact continuously and dynamically. Every cognitive process, including the interpretive process, can be influenced by arousal in the nervous and limbic systems (Izard, 2009), as well as the dynamic unconscious (Westen & Gabbard, 2002). It is argued that *The Shining's* oedipal content generates potent archaic associations within viewers; these associations are latent and not available for conscious reflection. Although oedipal thoughts and feelings emerge in childhood, they form a mental template that endures throughout the lifespan, always interacting with day-to-day experiences (Brenner, 1982; Poland, 2007). Contemporary events for an adult can trigger childhood oedipal associations that implicitly influence the individual's present psychological functioning (e.g., perception, memory, reality testing, defenses, and thought processes) (Arlow, 1969a, 1969b).

Viewers of *The Shining* see a father determined to murder his son. This is a principal childhood danger/terror (Brenner, 1982; Rangell, 1991), and its recrudescence through the film's content evokes archaic associations. Some viewers cope with these associations by regressing to preoperational information processing, which is a less demanding mode of cognitive functioning. Developmentally earlier modes of mental functioning are not lost with maturation, and exist as potential end points of regression (Brenner, 1968). Preoperational processing is characterized by difficulty differentiating essential from nonessential distal bits in the stimulus field and inductive, tangential reasoning (Piaget, 1962). Additionally, preoperational thinkers have difficulty imagining other perspectives; they also tend to be narrow-minded and possess a sense of certitude about their beliefs (Piaget, 1966).

This is not "regression in the service of the ego" (Kris, 1952) in which the mind actively controls less mature processes for adaptive purposes (e.g., creating artwork). Rather, it is regression in the service of defense, as preoperational processing transforms *The Shining's* actualized oedipal violence into something much less threatening. Affected viewers select minor objects/events, use incidental occurrences (e.g., a continuity error), make tangential causal connections, and create sweeping interpretations to tame the film's true horror. It is notable that the idiosyncratic interpretations focus almost exclusively on emotionally neutral, background objects; there is little analysis of the main characters and their highly evocative, and provocative, interactions. Furthermore, these viewers are also often convinced of their own inerrancy (e.g., their conclusions are "unavoidable" and "indisputable"), which provides another layer of protection. Their certitude circumvents the film's oedipal content.

6 | CONCLUSION

Authors of idiosyncratic interpretations for *The Shining* demonstrate considerable ingenuity in trying to make their cases. However, they are rarely guided by any theory that exists outside of their data. Lacking a reliable framework

with which to organize, describe, and explain their observations in a coherent way, they proceed intuitively and inductively. Typically, they see some detail in the film that interests them, develop a hypothesis, and then accumulate additional “evidence” to confirm it. This process rarely leads to convincing interpretations; instead, one is left with tangentially connected suppositions, and not much more. Such intuitive and inductive processing lacks analytical oversight, and the resulting interpretations are subject to numerous limitations, including cognitive biases; logical fallacies; magical thinking; and probability misjudgments. Empirical evidence indicates that belief in conspiracy theories is significantly associated with both intuitive thinking and close-mindedness (Swami, Voracek, Stieger, Tran, & Furnham, 2014). Believers neither think analytically, nor do they consider alternative perspectives.

Anything in a stimulus field could have meaning, but much of it has very little meaning. It is easy to make something out of nothing by assigning too much meaning to a random object or inconsequential event. The interpretive task is best approached with an analytical framework that exists outside the data. This typically involves using a formal theory that provides methods for organizing data in a coherent way, identifying salient factors, and specifying possible explanatory or causal relations among these factors. The goal is to create a parsimonious, plausible, persuasive interpretation that is built on firm evidentiary and logical foundations. The interpretation should also be open to refutation and be capable of replication by someone else using the same data and methods. A theory-based analytical framework offers an effective antidote for countering the impressionistic, intuitive, speculative, and inductive tendencies that underlie idiosyncratic interpretations. *The Shining* is open to many theoretically derived interpretations, including psychoanalytic, Jungian, Marxist, feminist, postmodern, and family systems. Although the present article focuses on a fictional film, its methods and findings may be applied to other phenomena in which idiosyncratic interpretations are observed.

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