

## Article

# “The Man of the Hour”: Hawthorn(e), *Nebraska* and Haunting

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**Abstract:** This paper provides a close reading and critical unfolding of central themes and motifs in Alexander Payne’s acclaimed 2013 comic ‘road movie’ *Nebraska*. It focuses on three key issues: (1) the symbolic significance of hawthorn as a threshold between different worlds (Hawthorne, Nebraska being the former hometown to which father and son make a detour); (2) the notion of ‘haunting’ in relation both to ‘importuning’ memories besetting the central characters and to particular sites of remembrance to which they return; and, (3) how the film’s pervasive mood of melancholy is subject to repeated interruption and punctuation by comic utterances and put-downs. In presenting us with a reluctant ‘gathering of ghosts’, a veritable *phantasmagoria*, the film articulates a particular sense of nostalgia, of a ‘homesickness’ understood here not in the conventional meaning of a longing to return to a forsaken ‘home’, but rather as a weariness and wariness at the prospect of revisiting familiar haunts and reviving old spirits.

**Keywords:** memory; film; dreamworlds; arcades; ghosts; haunting

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A memory is only a Prince Charming who stays just long enough to awaken the Sleeping Beauties of our wordless stories.

—De Certeau (1984, p. 108)

## 1. Departure

It begins with the woebegone. We are on the outskirts of some drab provincial town or other—somewhere in North America, somewhere wintry, somewhere cold. A distant figure trudges in ungainly manner (drunk perhaps?) along a snowy-slushy sidewalk next to a busy main road that has a long chain-link fence on one side, and squat out-of-town retail outlets strung out along the other. He (the figure is just recognizable as a ‘he’) makes his way awkwardly, doggedly, directly towards the static camera. He is the only person in sight, the sole pedestrian. Cut to a side angle of the same figure, clearly identifiable now as a rather disheveled old man shambling past railroad sidings and stationary tanker trucks as the traffic incessantly speeds back and forth. Dissolve to the same man, hat on, earflaps down, passing a sign announcing ‘Billing’s City Limits’. The sidewalk has run out, but undeterred, he continues his weary way on the tarmac of the road itself as the ramp ascends gradually to the highway intersection. He is alone, on foot, in the snow, unsteady. At this juncture, the sheriff’s patrol car pulls over. The officer gets out and hails him in a friendly fashion but the old man either does not—or chooses not to—hear. Seemingly oblivious, similar to a somnambulist, the old man just keeps plodding on. Catching up with him, the sheriff asks where he is going and where he has come from, questions to which wordless gestures substitute for answers—a raised finger points to the road stretching ahead, and a jerk of the thumb indicates the town left behind. He is leaving Billings, Montana. He is heading

for the interstate and the next-door state: Nebraska. Lincoln, Nebraska to be precise, the state capital, the small matter of a thousand miles away.<sup>1</sup> He might as well be hoping for Kansas.

Shot in black and white<sup>2</sup>—or more precisely in a palette of grey tones—and silent except for the sound of the traffic thundering by and then eventually the words of the sheriff, these opening moments of Alexander Payne’s wry comedy *Nebraska* (2013, 155 min) not only begin the story but also set the tone for what follows. It soon transpires that the old man—the ex-alcoholic, ever cantankerous and increasingly senile Woodrow T. Grant (‘Woody’, Bruce Dern in an award-winning role<sup>3</sup>)—has received notification that he is the lucky recipient of a million dollars in prize-money from a magazine subscription company, the Lincoln-based Mega Sweep Stake Marketing. Not that Woody’s expectations of becoming rich (and of buying a new pick-up truck, even though he is no longer licensed to drive) are ever to be realized. While he remains hopelessly hopeful that he has already won and only needs to pick up his winnings by the stipulated date, no one else is deceived by the promotional leaflet bearing the phony prize-draw number to which he clings. Since he cannot drive himself, and no one is willing to take him on such a fool’s errand, he has decided as a last resort to walk. This is not the first time. The police have already intercepted him once before and taken him home. Woody is nothing if not a trier. Collecting him from the police station and looking to make the best of things, his long-suffering younger son David (Will Forte) tries to lighten the mood with a chirpy “There’s the man of the hour”, a good-humored response in marked contrast to what awaits Woody at home, where his no-nonsense, sharp-tongued wife Kate—a “scene-stealing” performance by June Squibb<sup>4</sup>—upbraids him the moment he gets out of the car with the memorable opening line: “You dumb cluck!”

Nevertheless, Woody will eventually have his way and get to Lincoln. However, there are certain detours to be negotiated, and it is these detours that form the heart of Payne’s film. Based on an original script by Bob Nelson rather than one of Payne’s own adaptations, this is to be another unlikely road movie, as improbable and offbeat as Payne’s earlier *About Schmidt* (2002) and *Sideways* (2004), which together form an informal trilogy of films that trace the idiosyncratic journeys of men of a certain age (the eponymous Warren Schmidt is in his mid-60s, Miles and Jack are 30-something heading towards 40) and a particular soured, self-pitying disposition. These are men whose existential crises and/or failed relationships have led them to seek out various forms of consolation and self-indulgence: the bottle, their cars, the allure of the highway and getting away from it all—or, in Woody’s case, to pulling on his old ill-fitting boots, dressing up warm, and walking it.

Woody sets off, and so too does the narrative of the film. However, it is not only Woody’s painfully slow progress, his sense of bewilderment, and the absurdity of his intentions that are intimations of what is to come, but also the mood and tone of these images and settings: the bleakness of the wintry highway he follows; the utter banality of the ex-urban, ‘edge city’ architecture (Garreau 1991) in the background, that low-rise ‘ugly and ordinary’ American vernacular that Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and their students learned to appreciate on their Las Vegas fieldtrips back in the early 1970s;<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> To be precise, Billings, Montana to Lincoln, Nebraska is 905.6 miles by road according to <http://www.driving-distances.com/route-planner-mileage.php>.

<sup>2</sup> A “defiantly uncommercial choice” *Sight and Sound* reviewer Trevor Johnston observed. Interestingly, the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) notes that a colour version of the film, not intended for wider release, was screened by the Epix movie channel immediately after the premiere of the black-and-white one in August 2014. This colour version was intended to placate Paramount. For an extended discussion of the decision to make the film in monochrome using digital, see Bishop (2013) article at: <https://www.theverge.com/2013/11/22/5131598/creating-analog-with-digital-cinematography-of-nebraska-phedon-papamichael>.

<sup>3</sup> The 77-year-old Dern won the Cannes Film Festival award for Best Actor in a Leading Role. The film received six Academy Awards nominations, including Best Picture, Cinematography, Director, Original Screenplay, Best Actor in a Leading Role (Dern), and Best Actress in a Supporting Role (June Squibb).

<sup>4</sup> *New York Times* reviewer Scott (2013) observed that Kate “brings [a] jolt of tart comic energy—a dash of vinegar in the mashed potatoes. Kate’s blunt honesty is in many ways the key to *Nebraska*, balancing both Woody’s sad illusions and the smiling duplicity of almost everyone else”. Keller (2013), writing for the Australian *Urban Cinefile* website, observed that: “Kate is as outspoken as Woody is reticent. Squibb is a scene stealer”. Urban (2013), on the same website, added that “June Squibb steals every scene”. The choice of the name ‘Kate’ here may be an allusion to Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*.

<sup>5</sup> See (Venturi et al. 1977).

the cheerlessness of the solitary figure traipsing through the slush (not even pristine snow); the dreary chiaroscuro of grey shades; above all, the chilly, dismal futility of it all. Imbued with the melancholy of a “scuffed everyday corner of Middle America” and the laconic demeanor of its inhabitants, these opening shots introduce what Trevor Johnston rightly describes as “a scenario rich with both absurdly comic and ruminatively elegiac elements” in which “the black-and-white camerawork foregrounds the sadness, making everything look more serious and older” (Johnston 2013). While ‘serious’, to be sure, this is still a comedy and a funny one at that. True, Woody’s forlorn freeway *flânerie* leaves him wearied and worn out before the opening credits have even rolled, and his whole odyssey is mistaken and misbegotten from the outset. However, notwithstanding all that he will endure along the way, he will still have the last laugh as David’s heartening words prove prophetic: Woody will indeed become “the man of the hour”, if only in passing.

In what follows, I develop a close reading of Payne’s *Nebraska* and identify and focus on three of its leitmotifs: firstly, the mythological and metaphorical significance of hawthorn (as the fictional town of Hawthorne, Nebraska is Woody’s birthplace and the main location for the drama that unfolds); secondly, the fragmentary character and inevitable incompleteness of the past disclosed in memories that in some way interrupt or importune the present (a kind of haunting that I will term the *mémoire importune*); thirdly, the tension and interplay between moments of melancholy and of comedy as the uninvited past is subject to deliberate foreclosure and any lingering tendencies to sentimentality are mercilessly curtailed or short-circuited (invariably by Kate). True, the film envisions a sense of nostalgia, but it is of a particular kind: homesickness is understood here not so much as a longing to return to a much-loved and now lost home, but rather as exasperation and enervation born from *being at home*. Home is *not* where the heart is. Home—and the memories that go with it—is/are to be left behind, to be consigned to and contained within the past, to be over and done with. Appropriately, then, the film opens with these scenes of departure, of turning one’s back on home, even if this means shuffling a thousand miles on foot and on one’s own. We will rejoin Woody after a detour of our own, one that takes in not Payne’s native Midwest,<sup>6</sup> but rather a fragment of rural Alabama recalled through a sociological imagination.

## 2. Hawthorn(e)

It may be just coincidence—if so, it is indeed a fortuitous and felicitous one—that the fictitious town of Hawthorne, Nebraska (population: 1358) is the principal setting for Payne’s film. The highly suggestive name ‘Hawthorne’ points us in at least two directions: the literary and the botanical. The former certainly promises to be fruitful in terms of its intertextual and cross-media correspondences and connections: Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64) is, of course, one of the founding figures of American literature and an author with strong connections to—and sometimes an equally powerful antipathy for—his own hometown, the infamous Salem, Massachusetts.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Hawthorne’s ‘romances’ and short stories are filled with recurrent themes and motifs that might be of relevance for a reading of *Nebraska*: the enduring significance of the past for the present, especially regarding those unpardoned and unpardonable sins and misdeeds of forebears; the guilt of the dead, with which the living must live; the prevalence of supernatural phenomena such as ghosts, hauntings, witchcraft, and that key

<sup>6</sup> Payne himself is from Omaha, Nebraska.

<sup>7</sup> Turner (1961, p. 1), for example, opens his study of Hawthorne with: “Few authors have been as totally associated with one spot as Hawthorne was associated with his birthplace. His ties to Salem reached down to home through his ancestors and held him almost to the end of his life with such a grasp that more than once he cried out against them. The ties were both literal and spiritual, and they were never long out of his awareness”.

figure of the Freudian uncanny, the double;<sup>8</sup> strong female characters<sup>9</sup> who suffer on account of their weak-willed menfolk; the hypocrisy and shameful secrets that lie just below the surface of seemingly upright and virtuous individuals and communities; and the insufferable oppressiveness and claustrophobia pervading small-town provincial life. Nathaniel Hawthorne is a writer of deep-rooted and complex psychological, emotional, and interpersonal/communal “entanglements”.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this material is all very promising. However, curiously, I have chosen the other path. True, I am no more a botanist than a Hawthorne scholar, but my interest here is not in ‘hawthorn’ as a type of plant species as such, but rather in its symbolic and mythological significance.<sup>11</sup> My inspiration is Allen Shelton’s (Shelton 2007) remarkable book *Dreamworlds of Alabama*. This opens with an account of the original arrival of wisteria in his hometown of Jacksonville, Alabama, as garlands borne upon the coffin of the young local war hero John Pelham in 1863, and the exotic species’ subsequent invasion and transformation of the entire region’s ecology. The wild proliferation and profusion of this parasitic plant—its vines, creepers, and tendrils crisscrossing, overlapping, and enveloping its hosts to form convoluted and constricting vegetal knots and lattice-works—then come to serve as key metaphors for Shelton’s own textual and memorial practice. He intricately and inextricably intertwines a plethora of diverse narrative strands—cultural and literary theory (Benjamin and Foucault); configurations of individual and collective memory (Freud, Proust); personal traumas and bereavements; anecdotes and tall tales; local and family histories—to form a profound and haunting meditation on a life marked by misfortune, melancholy, and the uncanny. So, if wisteria is the structuring principle and guiding metaphor for Shelton’s study of all these “ghostly matters” (Gordon 2008) in the rural South, the structuring principle of mine is that rather more benign, indigenous botanical specimen: the genus *Crataegus*.

The genus *Crataegus*: under the common name of ‘hawthorn’, this includes a large variety of shrubs and trees of the family *Rosaceae* that are found across the temperate regions of the northern hemisphere. What is of particular interest to me is hawthorn’s traditional symbolic and mythological significance: on the one hand, in ancient Greece, its branches were seen as signs of hope, and carried and borne aloft by celebrants and participants in wedding ceremonies wishing for a blessed future; on the other hand, in Gaelic mythology and folklore, hawthorn thickets were commonly regarded as forming thresholds of and entrances to another realm of existence altogether—the ‘Otherworld’. This ‘Otherworld’ was understood not so much as an ‘underworld’—the gloomy destination and final repository of the dead, filled with ghosts and haunting shades. Instead, in Irish mythology in particular, it is imagined more as a blessed, indeed a paradisiacal realm from whence death, sickness, and ageing are banished, and from which one may return after many extraordinary adventures and journeys (*immrama*) in the company of fair and fantastical beings—magical creatures, fairies, gods, and goddesses—to the mundane human world that has grown old in one’s absence, even though one seemed to spend but a few brief moments away. Elucidating hawthorn as both manifesting and marking a gateway or portal to another time and space, to an enchanted land, to a dreamworld—this is what is significant for me here. This returns us to Shelton. Drawing on the writings of Benjamin (1999a), for whom the shopping arcades of Paris during the Second Empire constituted both passageways dedicated to the fetishized commodity and a ‘home’ for the dawdling flaneur, Shelton identifies the flourishing thickets of wisteria in the rural Alabama landscape as ‘soft arcades’. These are thresholds

<sup>8</sup> Tharp (1967, p. 20) notes that “Hawthorne shows an interest in the double from the beginning of his work” and interestingly adds: “Ignorance in the search for the self creates the double, the shadow, the ancestor, the self of the dreams or the memories, the seeming, the other, what one was yesterday when he was simple and foolish, or what inconceivable personality he may have on another day when he had a moment of awareness”.

<sup>9</sup> Most famously, of course, Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s 1850 *The Scarlet Letter*. Significantly, a key part of Prynne’s defiance is her refusal to name the father of her illegitimate child. The past will not be spoken of.

<sup>10</sup> See (Coale 2011, pp. 1–4).

<sup>11</sup> Those who protest at the deletion of the ‘e’ should take note of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s addition of a ‘w’ to his birth name while in his early 20s for reasons that remain unclear. This may have been to distance himself from his forebears, most notably John Hathorne, one of the judges at the notorious Salem witch trials of 1692–1693.

not of iron and glass but of the soft earth and the organic profusion of undergrowth, thresholds that invite, ensnare, and entangle the incautious, daydreaming wanderer. Full of the promise of future happiness, it is within and beyond the hawthorn, hawthorn as a 'soft arcade', that one may come to lose oneself in the convolutions of time, preserving youthfulness amid the greying, ageing world.

### 3. Return

It is to his hometown of Hawthorne, Nebraska that Woody is destined to return en route to collect his 'prize money'. Exasperated by the old man's unshakable conviction that he has won, and his stubborn insistence on getting to Lincoln in time to make his claim come what may, David calls in sick and takes to the road with his father in the old Subaru. Working in a dead-end sales job,<sup>12</sup> living alone<sup>13</sup> and with more than enough troubles of his own, perhaps David hopes that the journey may provide some much-needed distraction. Perhaps he even hopes that some quality father-son time might just lead to a flowering of filial ties and affections, and that there may prove to be some kind of highway epiphany. If so, such hopes are as delusional as Woody's million dollars. Indeed, unsurprisingly, things do not go well. Woody is wholly unappreciative of David's sacrifice: "What else you got goin' on?" he asks rhetorically. Resistant to further father-son conversation, Woody silently stares out of the car window. However, he is not even taking in the sights—although this does provide the occasion for viewers of the film to marvel at the endlessly flat landscapes and clouds exquisitely rendered by Phedon Papamichael's cinematography. In an attempt to break the monotony of the drive, David takes a short detour to see Mount Rushmore. However, Woody remains undiverted, unimpressed. "Just a bunch of rocks", he observes, before adding for good measure: "Doesn't look finished to me". Then, an accidental fall in a motel room in Rapid City following too much booze leaves Woody with a few stitches in his head and orders to rest. Despite Woody's repeated protestations ("I don't wanna go to Hawthorne"), David decides on an impromptu visit to the family's former hometown and a stay-over with Woody's older brother Uncle Ray (Rance Howard), Aunt Martha (Mary Louise Wilson), and live-at-home cousins Bart and Cole (Tim Driscoll and Devin Ratray).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, there are kith and kin aplenty still living there to look up, say hello to, sit in silence with, antagonize, and engage in arguments. So, this small town nowhere-in-particular becomes the site of an excruciating weekend-long family reunion, with Kate arriving on the bus, and then the elder son Ross (Bob Odenkirk), a local TV news anchor for KTVQ, reluctantly putting in an appearance for the sake of appearances.

As a stop-over on the road elsewhere, Hawthorne is an in-between place, a *Zwischenraum* as Siegfried Kracauer might term it,<sup>15</sup> neither here nor there. It is also a threshold (*Schwelle*),<sup>16</sup> a cusp, possessing a double orientation or twin trajectory: forwards and backwards, future and past. Hawthorne is Janus-faced. It is a place of anticipation and expectation where Woody must pass just a couple of days before his bright new future is set to begin. Hawthorne is the last station of hope on Woody's pecuniary pilgrimage. As word spreads all too quickly of Woody's supposed winnings, the whole town celebrates the old man's good fortune and a few chancers—not just the egregious Ed Peagram (Stacy Keach), Woody's erstwhile partner and former co-owner of the local garage, but also unscrupulous family members too, such as the idiotic Cole and Bart, and Auntie Betty (Glendora Stitt) and her son—try to cash in themselves, supposedly settling old debts and old scores. Woody becomes a local celebrity in a town where, with its ageing population and few prospects for the young, hope

<sup>12</sup> David sells audio equipment in the local Mid City Super Store.

<sup>13</sup> His erstwhile girlfriend Noel has just moved out.

<sup>14</sup> Johnston (2013) sees these two "doltish cousins" as the "one misjudged concession to knockabout humour" in the film.

<sup>15</sup> (Kracauer 1987) *Strassen in Berlin* collection explores numerous such in-between spaces: labour exchanges, underpasses, railway bridges, and bars of various kinds. Perhaps his most celebrated analysis is his study of the hotel lobby as part of his pioneering essay on the detective novel (see Kracauer 1995, pp. 173–85).

<sup>16</sup> For the significance of this term in and for the writings of Benjamin, see (Menninghaus 1986).



of any kind has long been in short supply. Indeed, Hawthorne has been hopeless for more than 50 years, which is precisely why Woody and his brothers Ray and Albert (Ronald Vosta) went off to the Korean War, and then Woody and Kate upped and left for a new life in Montana when David was just a small child.

Most importantly, it is where the Grants once lived and grew up, and to which the natives now return after an absence of many years. Hawthorne is an unexpected revisiting of and an unwelcome re-acquaintance with the past. For them, it is their unhomely hometown which, imbued with memories at every juncture, around every corner, is strangely familiar in the way Freud designated as the uncanny. Hawthorne is not just a *Zwischenraum* and a *Schwelle*, it is *unheimlich*, too. It is to the exploration of this half-remembered townscape in the company of the Grant family that the central and most important part of the film is dedicated. Hawthorne is a space filled with reminders and remainders of the recent past: material mnemonics in the architectural fabric of the town itself; the faces of contemporaries that retain the quirks and still resemble somehow the countenances of those left behind long ago; names on the tip of one's tongue of former friends, half-forgotten loves, and lovers, by those who are no more. Hawthorne is haunted; it is a ghost town possessed by all manner of [Gordon \(2008\)](#) "ghostly matters".

#### 4. Haunts

Various notions of haunting, of some form of 'hauntology', have become increasingly common currency in cultural studies and especially memory studies, and given critical impetus since the mid-1990s by influential re-readings of the works of Karl Marx in terms of their spectral language and significance.<sup>17</sup> [Gordon \(2008\)](#) own formulation is especially useful in identifying some of the key dimensions of this. Hence, it is worthwhile quoting her at some length:

I used the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. The ghost, as I understand it, is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way ... we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed towards us. ([Gordon 2008](#), p. xvi)

There are three themes interwoven in this passage that deserve our attention in relation to Payne's film: trauma, time, and place.

Firstly, this notion of haunting bears some similarities or parallels to the concepts of trauma and traumatic memory as articulated by, for example, [Caruth \(1995, 1996\)](#). Writing in accord with and advancing the psychoanalytic understanding of these phenomena, Caruth defines trauma in terms of those intense—usually but not always catastrophic and/or violent—experiences with which the psyche is unable to deal or come to terms at the time, and which therefore remain somehow unprocessed and unresolved despite the passage of time.<sup>18</sup> Unlike, for example, the process of mourning, in which

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, not only [Derrida \(1994\)](#) *Spectres of Marx* but also the less well-known Margaret [Cohen \(1995\)](#) book *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*.

<sup>18</sup> In a key passage she states that trauma is: "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. ... [T]he pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself ... nor can it be defined in terms of a *distortion* of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of [the] distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced

the death of the loved one is gradually assimilated and assuaged, worked with and worked through, leading to inner reconciliation and consolation, trauma is that which, resisting all and any integration, persists in 'raw' form into the present. It is that which will not go away, and cannot be escaped. Traumatic experiences endure as scars, as wounds, as disturbances, as nightmares (trauma as *Albtraum*), as psychic poltergeists and phantasms that allow no respite, no peace of mind. The traumatic is not the repressed as such; it is rather that which is "ceaselessly" subject to, and defies, repression. Repression, "containment", is always ongoing and "incomplete". Caruth (1995, p. 9) emphasized "the central Freudian insight into trauma", namely "that the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time".

This notion of *return* is important. Indeed, the very act of remembering such experiences, of testifying and attesting to them, of bearing witness to past atrocity and suffering, may itself be experienced as either impossible or traumatic: trauma involves a form of doubling, of repetition. Painful pasts are painful to speak of, sometimes too painful to be spoken of at all. Such remembering may itself be something to be denied, avoided, skirted around, bypassed. This brings us to Woody, since his own memories are not free of traumatic elements; these include his experiences in the Korean War, the death of his baby brother at the old farmhouse, and the death of his teenage little sister in a car accident. His response is not atypical of traumatic memorial practices: disavowal, refusal, and denial. However, ultimately, it is that other fundamental countervailing impulse of traumatic survivors—the need to bear witness, to give testimony, to utter the truth that has been hidden, buried, and forgotten—that is so lacking in Woody. Woody is not an amnesiac, nor is he a figure of the Proustian *mémoire involontaire*, that form of involuntary memory that Benjamin considers more like forgetting.<sup>19</sup> Rather, he is a man beset by intimations of things and times past from which he would gladly be free. He wishes that these lost times were really *lost*. Such moments resemble what Caruth (1996) termed 'unclaimed experience',<sup>20</sup> I will term them *unreclaimed* experiences—ones that Woody would willingly leave to gather dust at the lost property office, to rack up infinite fines at left luggage. These are not exactly traumatic memories as such, but they are certainly burdensome or, better, *irksome* ones; not so much scars or wounds, but itches and irritations. These are elements of what I will term the *mémoire importune*, uninvited memory, the past that *importunes* the present, discomfits it. This is the haunting that Woody must endure.

Secondly, there is the issue of temporal convolution and the possibility of alterity. Ghosts are not just the shades of the past returned to bedevil the present. As the late Fisher (2014) recently argued, we are haunted not just by what happened in the past; we are haunted by what *did not* happen, what *did not* transpire, choices not chosen, paths not taken, hopes unfulfilled, by what he terms 'lost futures'. Each and every decision in life is both a leading *towards* this and *away* from that. What of these unexplored possibilities and alternatives? This is very much in accord with Benjamin's notion of the 'tradition of the oppressed' (as invoked in his 1940 'Theses on the Concept of History'<sup>21</sup>): the radical political energies of unrealized promises and latent potentialities, the transgressive and /or utopian aspirations that were thwarted or defeated in the past but which survive—albeit in precarious and endangered form—into and are redeemable only by the 'now' of present-day recognition. Ghosts are the persistence in time of the untimely, of the anachronistic whose moment did not come, is perhaps yet to come, but

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fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences" (Caruth 1995, p. 4). It is important to note that "haunting" and "possession" are embedded into this very definition of trauma.

<sup>19</sup> In his 1929 essay 'The Image of Proust', Benjamin muses: "Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory?" (Benjamin 1999b, p. 238). For a discussion of involuntary memories, which are not always pleasant ones, see (Whitehead 2009, pp. 84–122).

<sup>20</sup> This notion of 'unclaimed experiences' is rather ironic in the context of Payne's film: after all, Woody is in Hawthorne in pursuit of a claim: a claim to the million dollars in prize money.

<sup>21</sup> See (Benjamin 2003, p. 392).

may never come. As I will suggest, such shadows of what might have been—intimations of other, now lost, presents and futures—pose existential questions that come to preoccupy David more than Woody.

Finally, in her invocation of Freud's uncanny and the *unheimlich*, Gordon tethers the notion of haunting to specific locations and spaces (*pace* Caruth and trauma). This is particularly relevant for Payne's film. However non-descript, drab, and dreary, however much a nowhere in the middle of nowhere, Hawthorne is nevertheless emphatically *not* an example of a 'non-place' [*non lieu*], the designation that the French anthropologist Marc Augé used to describe those homogenous and meaningless spaces—shopping malls, service stations, car parks, airports, hotel lobbies, waiting rooms of all kinds—that now proliferate, similar to the wisteria in rural Alabama, in our age of 'supermodernity' (Augé 1995). Nor—perhaps more surprisingly given this—is the town a 'place of memory' [*lieu de mémoire*], a term famously coined by Augé's compatriot, the historian Nora (1989, 1996). True, despite his protestations, Woody does visit a number of mnemonic sites where disagreeable and/or disturbing memories must be kept in check, dismissed, and rebuffed. It is true moreover that among these are quintessential 'places of memory' such as the ruins of the old family farmhouse and the town's cemetery. However, Nora's concept has a more specific meaning: his *lieux de mémoire* are sites of shared, collective recollection, not conflicted individual remembering; indeed, they are loci of staged, formal commemoration that constitute 'hallowed' places rooted in the collective (un)conscious of the 'people', all serving the mythology of the nation-state and the (re)creation of a common yet distinctive national culture and history. For Nora, such *lieux de mémoire* are symptomatic of a culture in which the presence and circulation of memories as part of everyday life—in what he terms *milieux de mémoire*—has declined or become impoverished. Paradoxically, *lieux de mémoire* are indications of—indeed indexes for—a society of forgetting.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately for Woody, Hawthorne is much more a *milieu* than a *lieu de mémoire*. I would like to suggest another term for the sites where Woody encounters or teeters on the brink of the importuning past: *haunts*. For one should not forget that this word in English is both a verb and a noun. Back in his hometown, Woody visits the places he once frequented; he returns to his former *haunts*. It is there—or rather in these—that he finds himself haunted.

Hawthorne is a veritable ghost town. This is why Woody does not want to return there, still less remain there. However, it is not just that Woody is wary of the shades of his past that lie in wait for him. Rather—and herein lies the reversibility of hauntology—Woody will come to haunt *it*, the town, just as *it* haunts *him*. The places and residents of Hawthorne do not simply constitute and stand guard over the realm of the past, unwitting but vigilant keepers of the thresholds to that 'otherworld' of the what-has-been; rather, in the same moment, the Grants themselves are unexpected (and unwanted) visitors and visitations from yesteryear. They are awkward, meddling returnees, revenants from elsewhere who will stir up what seemed done and dusted, seek restitution on scores seemingly long-settled (such as reclaiming Woody's air compressor borrowed 40 years earlier by Peagram), and generally disturb the peace by their mere presence. They are apparitions, fleeting figures from the past just passing through, but inevitably upturning things as they go. So, at Ray and Martha's house on Sunday afternoon, the family reunion is nothing but a coming together of shades and shadows, a brief gathering of ghosts, a veritable *phantasmagoria* transposed to the living room, to a kitchen, to the two tables with chairs pulled up. This assembly is anything but spirited. So many absences do not add up to a presence. Perhaps too long has passed; perhaps there is little

<sup>22</sup> Nora (1989, p. 7; cf. also 1996, p. 1 for a different translation) writes:

We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left.

Our interest in *lieux-de-mémoire* where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux-de-mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux-de-mémoire*, real environments of memory.



that needs saying, still less that is *allowed to be said*. Standing at the sink preparing food, Kate puts Martha straight on matters (Bart and Cole are not out “volunteering”, picking up litter on the highway, but doing “community service on account of Cole’s rape”) only to be pointedly corrected in turn by Martha (“sexual assault not rape” and “Bart doesn’t even have to be there”). Meanwhile, in the room next door, all male eyes are fixed determinedly on the Bears versus the Lions game on TV, the painfully funny silence punctured only by mumblings and mis-rememberings about trucks. These men are no loud, quarrelsome poltergeists. They are specters with nothing to say for themselves. In an exquisite moment of understatement, Martha says: “You Grant brothers sure are men of few words”. Most of these “few words” are: “not much”, “nothin’”, and “nope”. It is as if negation were the local dialect. Hawthorne, Laconia.

My particular interest here though is not so much the inarticulacy of the Hawthorne menfolk but another form of inexpression or absence: that of forgetfulness. This involves both the amnesia accompanying old age and, more importantly, the deliberate determination to erase or repress certain unpalatable aspects of the past, to keep quiet about them. For me, among the many scenes of visits and visitations portrayed in the film wherein different spaces of remembrance are encountered, four are particularly noteworthy. In each case, there is some denial or diversionary tactic that seeks to ward off potential unease or embarrassment (principally for Woody of course) which, at the same time, ensures that the film avoids and/or punctures sugary sentimentality. For me, this is where the most original and profound insights of the filmmakers are to be found: in their depiction of how recollections of and reflections upon the painful past are deliberately truncated, circumvented, or sabotaged in various ways, most especially through bitter comedy. *Nebraska* is most definitely *not* an exercise in dewy-eyed nostalgia. What is most significant in the film is not simply the mere fallibility of memory (things are forgotten; things are misremembered) but rather the willful *refusal to remember*, resisting invitations to speak of what was, minimizing the significance of former attachments. Nope. Nothin’. Not much. The Grants do not enter into or explore the ‘otherworld’ of memories just as they are seemingly unable to enter into conversations with each other. Instead, they silently and obstinately remain stuck and dumbstruck on the verge of what has been; they are stuck in the ‘soft arcade’. Such thresholds remain untraversed both literally and figuratively. We, the viewers, are witnesses to the attenuation of anamnesis, its continual cutting back or pruning to prevent proliferation and spread. The problem is: such lopping only encourages and invigorates renewed growth. The past will not go quietly into that quiet earth. The woebegone will not be gone.

## 5. Slumbers

*Nebraska* is a film about things best left unsaid, spaces and places best left undisturbed, the sites of so many sleeping dogs, indeed a veritable pack of dormant hounds.

Sleeping Dog 1: Following a short montage of still shots of the town’s architecture, proof (were it needed) that Hawthorne is truly both the quintessential midwestern Americana and the back of beyond, Woody and David are shown going for a walk around the streets, visiting the old garage that once belonged to Woody and Ed Peagram. Hovering uneasily at the entrance to the workshop, they ask the new Hispanic owners what they know of the place’s past, and if they know of Ed’s present whereabouts. The new owners disclaim any knowledge whatsoever. Nope. Never heard of him. Nothing to say; nothing doing. They may be newcomers to the town, but they already speak fluent Hawthorne. David steers Woody away as he starts instructing the mechanics on the correct wrench needed for the car they are fixing. From there, they go to a nearby bar. Empty. No familiar faces. David turns to leave, but Woody heads for the counter and the two men end up drinking a few beers together. The bar holds few memories and less conversation. David tries to gain some insight into his parents’ lives, but to little avail: “Do you regret marrying Mom?” he asks tentatively. “All the time”, Woody answers, and then qualifies this disarming disclosure with the following damage-limitation expression: “Could have been worse”. Poor David tries again: and love? “Never came up”. And kids? “Nope”. Woody communicates only his irritable incommunicativeness. David is left none the wiser, or

rather, wise only to the fact that he will never be any wiser on such matters. His filial dreams are as unreal as Woody's monetary ones.

**Sleeping Dog 2:** After Woody has had his picture taken by a kid on a bike for the local newspaper, the *Hawthorne Republican*, David goes to the editorial office to put a stop to the story that has now made his father the talk of the town. There he meets the editor, Peggy Nagy, née Bender (Angela McEwan), a widow who, it transpires, once loved Woody and who has, for some obscure reason, retained an affection for him even to this day. Absence has kept the heart fond perhaps. Here, David learns that, far from being just an engineer providing logistical support for the military during the Korean War, his father was feted for his heroism after the transport plane he was on was shot down. However, we learn no more—neither of the onetime romance between Peggy and Woody many years before, nor of Woody's traumatic experiences of the war, although this might just be a clue to explaining Woody's later alcoholism. When David later asks Woody about his former sweetheart Peggy, he is told pointedly and dismissively: "It was a long time ago . . . what are you bringing that up for now?" Subject matter closed. Old news.

**Sleeping Dog 3:** After getting off the bus that has brought her the 750 miles from Billings to Hawthorne, Kate berates both Woody and David for their folly, and then insists on being taken to the local cemetery to pay her familial respects there. However, it is not *her* family's graves that they then visit; instead, they visit those of the Grants. What's more, "paying her respects" is not to be understood too literally. Kate does not mince her words even when standing before the headstones and grave markers of the dearly departed. It is true that in a moment of sorrow, we learn that back in 1939, Woody's baby brother, David, died of scarlet fever when he was just two years old, and that Woody's little sister Rose was killed in a car crash aged just nineteen. However, before the pathos that such young deaths might elicit can truly take hold, Kate cuts it down with her straight talking. To David's utter consternation, she announces in the same breath: "What a whore! I liked Rose but my god she was a slut!" Woody's mother, Sarah, is given equally short shrift for her ugly, mannish looks (and later for her domestic untidiness). The nearby graves of two would-be suitors are the occasion for further caustic comments: Delmar was a drunk who "felt me up", Kate declares, and as for Keith White, well, "He wanted in my pants too, he was so boring!" Contemptuously, Kate flashes her underwear at him where he now lies at rest. This is what he missed out on. So, the cemetery, this quintessential *lieu de mémoire*, is unceremoniously transformed from a site of dignified, doleful remembrance and dutiful commemoration into a space of ribald and raucous laughter. All solemnity and sympathy is shot down in a hail of hard-hitting home truths. Having paid her disrespects, Kate heads back to the car. What about *her* family? *They* are in the Catholic cemetery. *They* would not be seen dead among all these Lutheran drunks, lechers, and whores. We will learn a fraction more about the poor innocent infant David: we will see where he died. However, we learn not another word about Rose. Killed in a car crash. Aged nineteen. "A slut". As epitaphs go, it has the one merit of brevity. Pure Hawthorne.

**Sleeping Dog 4:** Finally, there is what I regard as the most remarkable scene in the film, one in which affective intensity is heightened precisely by the contrast with the early cemetery visit and the explicit erasure of pathos and sentiment in the rest of the film. As the Sunday family reunion becomes increasingly unbearable, David and Ross suggest a trip out to visit the former family home, the Grant farmhouse where Woody grew up and that was built by his father. The response of their parents is typical: "Why would you want to waste your time seeing that?" asks Kate. "What for?" is Woody's characteristically terser rejoinder. However, as the relatives one by one start to stake their claims to some of the prize money as recompense for past loans and favors, Kate decides it is time for a quick exit, and the four of them finally drive out to the ruined house and start to explore what is left. Together, the four of them pick their way tentatively through the wooden shell of the building, carefully sidestepping the clutter of broken furniture and other debris littering the floor. Upstairs, they enter what once was a small bedroom ("This was my room", Woody recalls), and then Kate observes: "That's where Woody's brother David died". "Do you remember that, Dad?" asks David. "I was there", the old man answers. In another room, there is a broken up cot, in which the infant David slept

no doubt. Perched by an upstairs window, Woody looks out over the adjacent fields that were once owned by the Grants, but have long since been sold off.

Outside, David asks his father: “Seen enough?”

“I suppose. Just back to old wood and to weeds”.

“Did you ever want to farm like your Dad?”

“I don’t remember and it doesn’t matter”.

The family get back into the car and head back to town.

In certain respects, this episode seems to be very much of a piece with the other scenes outlined above: a sleeping dog doggedly left to lie. However, I would suggest that this excursion is significantly different in mood and tone. True, it is curtailed by Woody’s now familiar refusal to engage with the past, but there is also little attempt here to debunk or discredit the sense of melancholy and mournfulness attached to the ruined edifice.<sup>23</sup> As the camera makes its way patiently and silently through the ruined spaces room by room, one shot dissolves into another in a brief and highly distinctive stylistic shift. For me, this sudden use of the dissolve serves to blur shots and spaces; it creates and conveys a sense of indistinction, feelings of drifting in and out of rooms, stairways, and corridors. The dissolve equates to the erasure of determinate boundaries and fixed limits, and enables a flowing across and over thresholds, in and out of different states of consciousness. It is as if one were dreaming.

There is more. The camera faithfully follows the family as they venture through the remains of the house. Importantly, they do not remain outside it, nor do they hover on the thresholds of the rooms, respecting its divisions and compartments. Rather, they enter fully into its various spaces, moving through doorways, investigating cupboards, looking out of windows. So, while the dissolve breaks down the distinctiveness and structural integrity of the images as discrete units and moments, the repetitive depiction of architectural frames—indeed, of figures occupying and looking through these frames, of figures framed in the frames—acts as a potential counterpoint to any dreamy dissolution of divisions. Perhaps. For there are two equally plausible possibilities here. Firstly, there is the possibility that the camerawork in this key scene is itself Janus-faced: there is a merging and conflation of one element with another, of past and present, thus evoking temporal and spatial confusion and, at the same time, an insistence on the resilience and persistence of structures retaining their rectilinear/orthogonal form and function. Here, we as viewers are witness to the very dialectics of ruination itself: namely, the continuation of the constructed amid the processes of decomposition and disintegration. Secondly, alternatively, one might see these frames and thresholds less as counterpoint and more as corollary, indeed as an intensification of this dreamlike quality, since doorways and windows, frames within frames within frames, circling silently through and between them in an abandoned and derelict house, are themselves common motifs and fixations in dreaming. For me, as a decaying vestige of the recent past, seen at last sight, on the point of oblivion, the Grant’s farmhouse is indeed a ‘dreamhouse’:<sup>24</sup> a dreamhouse for these ghosts who have returned, who have gathered together here to see it one final time, a dreamhouse for phantasmagoria, a haunt for our haunted haunters.

## 6. Closure

The foreclosure or curtailment of the past is for me the central theme of *Nebraska*. What is more, this itself is never complete or perfect. The present stands guard against any unwanted, unwarranted return of the past, patrolling its borders and securing its boundaries. Hence, the reluctance of the

<sup>23</sup> Kate cannot resist one barbed comment: the messy condition of the house is just as Sarah would have kept it.

<sup>24</sup> The term is from Benjamin, of course: in *The Arcades Project*, he describes the characteristic architectural features of the 19th-century city—arcades, railway stations, museums, wintergardens, the World Exhibitions, and so forth—as so many ‘dream houses’ [*Traumhäuser*], the fantastic emanations, edifices, and repositories of the dreaming collective. See (Benjamin 1999a).

characters—Woody in particular—to open up the past to the prying eyes of the present, and allow the various narratives and stories that are hinted at and suggested to unfold and be told, for the various sites and possibilities of the past to be explored. Woody is the non-storyteller, or perhaps the teller only of wordless stories. His unwillingness to remember and recall the past, to summon up and reckon with its ghosts, means that we, as viewers, are repeatedly offered momentary glimpses into and gestures towards what was and what could have been: indeed, what could have been otherwise. Stories and narratives are repeatedly begun but go unelaborated: the Korean War; the dead siblings, David and Rose; the affair “down at the reservation” that Ed Peagram cruelly mentions to David in front of Woody; Peggy Bender, that other love. Tales tail off. And then . . . ? Nothin’.

What distinguishes Payne’s film is how we, the viewers, are repeatedly granted fleeting intimations of the past that are then closed off or shut down almost immediately. The fan of memory, as Benjamin once memorably described it, is fleetingly unfurled only for it to be snapped shut once more.<sup>25</sup> What do we get to see? Not much. Woody Grant grants us very little. However, not much is not nothin’; it is something albeit meagre. Similar to David, we are allowed to see just enough: a peek into how things might have been then, and perhaps could be so very different, if chance had suggested this path here rather than that there, this person rather than that one, her not her, him not him. For a sensitive soul such as David, all of these ghostly matters have genuine existential significance. What if Woody had married Peggy? What if poor old Keith White had been a little less boring? What if Woody had left Kate after the birth of Ross? Where would David be? Would he *be* at all? What if . . . ? This is what haunts David. Indeed, the question haunts us all. So, as a haunting comedy about haunting, *Nebraska* is an elegiac envisioning of contingency and alterity, of the happenstances that mean that *this world* just happens to be. However, what of those other possibilities and potentialities that happen *not to be*? These infinite alternatives, these ‘otherworlds’ of the past and of variant presents and futures form the multitudinous ghostly doubles or doppelgangers, the unconscious realms, the bad consciences and utopian ‘elsewheres’, so to speak, of what is. We should never forget: it could have been otherwise. This recognition of ‘lost futures’ haunts us all.

In *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon writes:

The willingness to follow ghosts, neither to memorialize nor to slay, but to follow where they lead, in the present, head turned backwards and forwards at the same time. To be haunted in the name of a will to heal is to allow the ghost to help you imagine what was lost that never existed, really. That is its utopian grace: to encourage a steely sorrow laced with delight for what we lost that we never had; to long for the insight of that moment in which we recognize, as in Benjamin’s profane illumination, that it could have been and can be otherwise. I think Freud was afraid of what he saw. Sometimes this is necessary in the face of ghosts. But he gave up too quickly. If you let it, the ghost can lead you toward what has been missing, which is sometimes everything. (Gordon 2008, pp. 57–58)

Woody has chosen the drinking cure over the talking one, but similar to Freud, he is fearful of ghostly matters and ghost towns. Fortunately for the viewers of Payne’s film, his son is made of sterner stuff. We, like David, are privileged to spy something of these ‘otherworlds’ just as we are compelled to remain on their thresholds. Hawthorne stands before us, dreamworlds lie just beyond: the dreamworlds of Nebraska.

<sup>25</sup> In his 1932 ‘Berlin Chronicle’, Benjamin wrote: “What Proust began so playfully became awesomely serious. He who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments. No image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside – that image, that taste, that touch for whose sake all this has been unfurled and dissected; and now remembrance progresses from small to smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while that which it encounters in these microcosms grows ever mightier. Such is the deadly game that Proust began so dilettantishly, in which he will hardly find more successors than he needed companions” (Benjamin 1999b, p. 597). Woody is no ‘successor’ to Proust; in fact, he is an anti-Proust incarnation!

## 7. So Long

“So long, Woody”, calls Uncle Albert from his chair perched by the roadside as Woody drives ever so slowly, similar to an automotive flaneur, through Hawthorne in his newish red truck, bought for him not with any prize winnings—even though a cap emblazoned with ‘Prize Winner’ sits proudly on his head—but by David, who has traded in his Subaru. Woody has made sure that the residents of the town get a good look at his bright shiny vehicle during his triumphant passage along the main street. Ed Peagram stands astonished. Did Woody really win the million dollars? Was it all a cunning double bluff? Emerging from a store, Peggy looks on wistfully, the camera dwelling on her face as the viewer tries to read or imagine her thoughts, her memories, her sense of what-might-have-been-if-only. Of all the memories that have beset Woody in Hawthorne, all those that have sought to pester him, all those instances—times and places—of the *mémoire importune*, these few fleeting moments of smugly sitting in the driving seat, with David ducked down out of sight to perfect the illusion, will surely be the ones he will willingly take back home with him to Billings. He is, *en passante*, “the man of the hour”.

Outside of the town, where the road runs straight ahead through the flat expanse of cornfields, Woody stops the truck, and he and David resume their customary seats. With David driving, they head off into the distance. Order is restored. Business as usual. However, is it really business as usual? By the end of Payne’s film, Woody has left no ghosts behind, laid no ghosts to rest. He has claimed his prize, but not his experiences. And David, at the wheel of a truck he didn’t want and can ill afford, has learned precious little about the curmudgeonly old man he calls father. However, what he has learned en route, what he has had fleeting intimations of and insights into in Hawthorne, will not be easily forgotten: tantalizing fragments of an unseen, unknowable picture puzzle of the past that will never be made whole. These shards will persist, and they will haunt David with their very incompleteness and opacity. These have now become part of *his mémoire importune*. These are so many more itches to be scratched. So, what Payne’s road movie ultimately shows us is how one person’s ghosts become passed onto another, not as a virus but rather as an unforeseen inheritance. *Nebraska* envisions a family tree (or undergrowth) of phantoms, a genealogy of haunting. It reminds us that since none of us can live without specters,<sup>26</sup> then the trick is how best to live with and among them.<sup>27</sup> It proves that, if nothing else, ghosts are good to think with; furthermore, with their woody thickets and thorns, so too are the soft arcades of hawthorn wherein they haunt.

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<sup>26</sup> As (De Certeau 1984, p. 108) reminds us.

<sup>27</sup> See (Derrida 1994, pp. xvii–xviii).



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