(Do Not) Overlook. *Room 237* and the Dismemberment of *The Shining*

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Abstract

Few movies in the history of cinema have been as enigmatic and thought-provoking as Kubrick's horror masterpiece *The Shining* (1980). The movie's maze structure and archetypical background of mythical reminiscence have challenged many film scholars and cinephiles to unravel the intricate pattern that Kubrick created. In 2012, the young filmmaker Rodney Ascher made *Room 237*, a documentary not so much about *The Shining* itself as about the many interpretations generated from Kubrick's movie. Assembled from movies' excerpts and archival materials, and with commentary by five people with different interests but united by an authentic obsession with *The Shining*, *Room 237* is an enlightening journey into the most obscure regions of cinephilia, where repeated viewings of movies and overlap between cinema and everyday life confuse different levels of reality, causing an interpretation of the world mediated by cinema. Furthermore, the fragmentary structure of *Room 237*, constituted by a wide variety of material (from found footage to the visual analysis of *The Shining*'s most compelling scenes), embodies and represents the progress of cinematographic spectatorship, from the movie theater to the home video years, and the Internet era with its digital streaming services. The article's main goal is to show how Kubrick's *The Shining* is particularly suitable for repeated compulsive viewing that encourages sensory overload and a potentially infinite cycle of interpretations. Furthermore, analysis of *Room 237* will highlight the distinctive traits of contemporary remix aesthetic, which Ascher seems to choose as a vehicle for a reflection on the different ways of modern cinephilia.

Keywords: Kubrick; Room 237; The Shining.

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> The idea of a house built so that people could become lost in it is perhaps more unusual than that of a man with a bull's head, but both ideas go well together and the image of the labyrinth fits with the image of the Minotaur. It is equally fitting that in the centre of a monstrous house there be a monstrous inhabitant.
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> – Jorge Luis Borges (1974: 10)

In one of the most memorable scenes from *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick 1980), we observe the main character, Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson), as he stares at a scale model of the hedge maze outside the Overlook Hotel, where he works as a winter caretaker and lives with his wife Wendy (Shelley Duvall) and his child Danny (Danny Lloyd) in almost complete isolation from the outside world. After having lingered on the psychotic face of Jack – who appears to be already on the brink of insanity –[1] Kubrick cuts to the object of his gaze. What we are presented with resembles the scale model of the maze; but inside it we see two moving figures as tiny as ants, who, in the next shot, are revealed to be Danny and Wendy. This eerie use of editing suggests that the two of them are simultaneously in the real labyrinth and in Jack's mind, secluded from the rest of the world and subjected to the psychopathic attentions of their deranged father-husband. Scenes like this, filled as they are with symbolism, contributed to the initial tepid reception of the movie. Despite the massive promotional campaign organized by Warner Bros.,[2] *The Shining* "was met in 1980 by confusion and rejection from mainstream reviewers and a lukewarm response from audiences".[3] They perhaps expected a more traditional horror movie,[4] in the vein of box office hits like *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin 1973), that was more faithful to Stephen King's source novel. With *The Shining* Kubrick created a movie so unique that it's difficult not to read it as a direct challenge to the viewer. Nonetheless, despite its complexity, the film has been redeemed over the years by critics and audiences. What at first intimidated spectators has gradually stimulated their imagination. Since its release *The Shining* has acquired a large and loyal fan base, dedicated to dissecting each frame in search of hidden meanings. Out of this phenomenon, filmmaker Rodney Ascher made a documentary, *Room 237* (2012), which aimed to be, as the subtitle reads, "an enquiry into *The Shining* in nine parts." *Room 237* tracks the influence of *The Shining* on several generations of moviegoers by focusing on the observations and theories of five people with different professions and interests who are linked by their genuine obsession with the movie. Thanks to a clever use of editing, which creates a visual complement to the theories discussed in the film, *Room 237* showcases five of the many possible deconstructions of *The Shining*. Numerous small details of scenes and dialogue are closely scrutinized and integrated into the interviewees' personal paranoid theories which, they claim, demonstrate that the puzzle of *The Shining* hides a world of secrets.

In the first part of this article I argue that *The Shining* is a perfect subject for the hermeneutic divertissements of contemporary cinephilia because its enigmatic structure makes it suitable for repeated viewings. In addition, the movie's aptness for close analysis tells us a lot about Kubrick's farsightedness: he created a film that became fully enjoyable and comprehensible only after the development of modern home video technologies. In the second part, I'll show how *Room 237* is more than a simple documentary on *The Shining*, as it offers an

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[1]   According to Luckhurst, in this scene Jack "is already tempted to regard himself as the master of his domain, his overlook the apparent perspective of power, an early identification with the forces of the hotel" (Luckhurst 2013: 52).

[2]   Cfr. Bingham (1996: 290). Underlining the contrast between the film's experimental nature and its blockbuster's status, Richard T. Jameson called *The Shining* "the most expensive Underground movie ever made" (1980: 29).

[3]   Cfr. Bingham (1996: 286). A fate shared by other Kubrick's film, as noted by Giuliani (cfr. Giuliani 1996: 23). The disappointing reception the movie received is even more surprising if we consider that "*The Shining* combined a trascendent auteur, the period's most colorful star actor, and a novelist known for delivering the generic good" (Bingham 1996: 285). For an history of the reception of *The Shining* by the critics cfr. Bingham (1996: 285-306).

[4]   The reception of the film at its release was particularly cold because the audience and the critics could not understand the film's place within the horror genre. As Smith recalls: "Popular film critics in America tended to rake *The Shining* over the coals upon its release because it did not adequately fulfil expectations based on Hollywood convention (some critics complained that the film was too complicated and didn't make sense, others that it was too slow, still others that was not scary enough), while academic film critics apparently steered clear of it because it was a horror film and as such not worth paying attention to" (Smith 1995: 300). Kubrick's movie differed both from the political horror of the 1970s – which reached its peak with the monumental *Dawn of the Dead* (George Romero, 1978) – and the campy slasher movies that would dominate the genre in the 1980s – *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) was released simultaneously to *The Shining*. *The Shining*'s uniqueness within the horror genre was pointed at the time by Jameson: "(Kubrick) is so little interested in the genre for its own sake that he hasn't even systematically subverted it so much as displaced it with a genre all his own" (Jameson 1980: 29). For an historical reflection on the status of *The Shining* within the horror genre cfr. Smith 1995: 300-6 and Luckhurst 2013: 18-28.

enlightening insight into the film consumer of the Internet era – a consumer who is also a producer of new contents and who constructs new audiovisual material by remixing pre-existent footage.

1   Lost in Kubrick's maze

The maze is a recurring element in analyses of *The Shining* because of the enigmatic nature of mazes themselves and their mythological roots. Moreover, the maze was Kubrick's original contribution, for there are no references to it in the novel. In the movie, the maze plays a key role in two important sequences. The first is mentioned above,[5] while the second is the scene in which Jack pursues his own son through the maze and which ends with Jack, the Minotaur, dying in its centre. References to a maze, or labyrinth, are also present on a formal level in the many visual cues that evoke mazes, from the pattern of the rugs, to how Danny, followed by Garret Brown's Steadicam, rides his tricycle along the hallways of the hotel, which causes the viewer to lose all sense of space and time.[6] For the viewer, getting lost in the labyrinth of the film itself is very easy, and making sense of the film's enigmatic structure has given rise to many different interpretations. The five collected in *Room 237* range from formal and stylistic analysis to elaborate conspiracy theories. Divided into nine chapters, *Room 237* dedicates each chapter to a different element of the film and analyses its smallest details. The film is not a conventional visual film analysis, but rather shows how *The Shining* can incite viewers to look for hidden meanings. Of the five interviewees, playwright Julie Kearns emphases the maze itself, observing that it is mirrored in the architecture of the Overlook Hotel. Journalist Bill Blakemore, meanwhile, carries forward the observations made in his article "The Family of Men",[7] in which he claims that *The Shining* is an allegory of the massacre perpetrated by the white men against Native Americans. Historian Geoffrey Cocks interprets Kubrick's film as a reminder of the Holocaust, as he had argued in his book *The Wolf at the Door*,[8] while conspiracy theorist Jay Weidner argues that *The Shining* represents Kubrick's attempt to atone for his involvement in the alleged falsification of the 1969 Moon-landing (Weidner 2011, Weidner 2017). Finally, projectionist and video-artist John Fell Ryan illustrates the effects of superimposing the movie by projecting it forward and backward at the same time. All the contributions aim to discover Kubrick's supposed secret intentions and to expose the hidden meanings of the film. "Orientation" is the keyword: the five enthusiasts approach the film as if they were entering the Overlook's maze, guided to the heart of the film by the Ariadne's thread of their personal theory. But their theories are far from definitive and give rise to further enigmas rather than offering genuine answers. For example, Kearns appears too exuberant in wanting to reconnect all the elements of *The Shining* to the figure of the maze, to the extent of seeing, or purporting to see, a Minotaur in a poster that clearly portrays a skier. Nonetheless, her comments on the impossible geometry of the Overlook are persuasive.[9] Using accurate spatial references, Kearns shows how Kubrick transformed the set into an impenetrable maze. With the aid of digital graphics, she guides the viewer inside the maze and provides him with the tools to find a way out. Although as in a real maze, every turn in *The Shining* leads to a new path and new hypothesis, *The Shining* is an unsolvable puzzle, a maze with no true centre. If the viewer is seemingly granted, like Jack, a view from above, it is only an illusion. The role of the gaze is crucial here. As Ghezzi

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[5]   This scene, in which we see Jack absorbed in his thoughts while staring at the model of the maze, might have replaced a similar and crucial event of the novel. In the book, while repairing the roof of the hotel, Jack stumbles into a wasps' nest, and loses a good hour staring at it, thinking at the crucial events of his life. Cfr. King (2012: Part III, Chapter XIV).

[6]   As Luckhurst noted, while in the novel the turning points of the story happen on a vertical level (a New Year's party of ghosts in the elevator, a clipping book found in the cellar, Danny's ominous premonition about a monster – his father – on the third floor), "Kubrick moves in an entirely lateral way," so to catch the viewer off guard: "The controlling metaphor of the film is not what is buried beneath, but what waits around the corner in the maze" (Luckhurst 2013: 17).

[7]   Cfr. Blakemore (1987). In his article, Blakemore focuses on *The Shining*'s references to Native American culture, like the fact that the Overlook is built on an ancient Indian burial ground, or the presence of Indian artwork in the hallways and of cans of Calumet bake powder in the kitchen.

[8]   Cfr. Cocks (2004). In his book, Cocks identifies some elements in Kubrick's work that recall the Jews' persecution, also referring to the director's unrealized project on the Holocaust, *The Aryan Papers*. In *The Shining*, Cocks focuses on the recurrence of the number 42 – the year in which was launched the Final Solution –, on the presence of a German typewriter (an Adler), and on the presence in the film soundtrack of anti-Nazi composers like György Ligeti and Krzysztof Penderecki.

[9]   Kearns' maps of the Overlook can be found in her site *Idyllopus Press*. http://www.idylloppuspress.com/meanwhile/13834/updated-maps-of-the-shining/ (last accessed 18-07-17).

notes, the name of the hotel itself points to the importance of the gaze (2007: 129).[10] "Overlook" means both to observe from a privileged point of view, but also, conversely, to ignore. Things would perhaps make more sense if one could "overlook" the maze of the film from a definitive privileged perspective, which is that of Kubrick himself. In *The Shining* the only character who seems to benefit from this advantage is Jack when he looks down on the model in the hotel, but eventually he succumbs to the duplicities of the maze too, and freezes to death at its centre. Control is just an illusion.

The "over-look" is not a simple view from above: to be a definitive gaze, it must resemble a God-like vision of the whole. This reminds us that in both novel and film there's another, more powerful, type of gaze: the telepathic one, "the shining," possessed by little Danny and Dick Hallorann (Scatman Crothers), the Overlook's chef. Yet, this gaze is as much a curse as an advantage. Danny, traumatized by what he witnesses, loses his innocence, while Hallorann is killed, a victim of the hubris that makes him think he could save the Torrances by himself. Hubris also drives the interviewees in *Room 237*: each seems to believe to have solved the puzzle of *The Shining* and reached the centre of its maze. After all, the film "does to its viewers what the hotel does to its visitors – it makes them shine on things glimpsed that were perhaps never there, or were there all along, hiding in plain sight" (Luckhurst 2013: 11). Like Jack or Hallorann, the interviewees think they possess the "definitive gaze" that enables them to crack the film's code and venture inside its maze. But in the end, just like Jack, they get lost inside, too busy finding the centre to remember the way back.[11] Far from being Theseus, *The Shining*'s viewer resembles a mouse who must find food at the end of a trail. Relevant here is behaviourism, the American branch of psychology referenced in the "Ludovico Technique" in *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick 1971), which also manifests itself in the way Kubrick manipulates his films' viewers. In fact, *Room 237* presents Kubrick "as controlling the text as keenly as the hotel controls its unfortunate caretaker" (Hunter 2016: 46). The director presents the viewer with enough clues to make him believe that he can decode the movie. But what saves Danny from his father, the Minotaur, and the maze is not the "shining", but his previous experience of the track. Danny, unlike his father, "has traced out the escape routes over and over from the worm's-eye view, refusing to be seduced by the over-look" (Luckhurst 2013: 18). In the end, Jack "is left looping in a cycle of eternal return" (2013: 18), condemned to be forever the guardian of the hotel. The illusion of control is what frames both Jack and the contributors of *Room 237*: the "definitive gaze" is always, inevitably, that of the director.

Kubrick's greatest trick consists of making a film that defies not only space, but also time. Inside the Overlook, spaces are impossible and liquid, as Kearns rightly notes, but time too is warped by an obscure logic. The ghostly inhabitants of the hotel are temporal traces that have become ectoplasms. The film itself is segmented with deliberately disjointed and meaningless captions that gives times and dates, reminiscent of those used by Luis Buñuel in *L'age d'or* (1930) and Alfred Hitchcock in *Psycho* (1960). Kubrick plays with time within the narrative, which gradually falls apart as it proceeds in an increasingly hectic pace, but also by including characters from different eras within the same scene. Particularly significant is the scene where Jack finds himself in the hotel's Golden Room during the New Year's party in 1921, and Grady (Philip Stone) spills drink on his clothes. Grady, a former caretaker, who should be dead, is portrayed as a ghost in the guise of a waiter. In this scene, Kubrick melds together at least three different timelines and in such an easy way as to evoke a strong feeling of uneasiness. As Luckhurst notes, the Overlook is like a "timeless world, in which there is no difference between life and death, or between present, past or future" (Luckhurst 2013: 67). But not only time is erased within the movie; *The Shining* itself is an object out of time. Its structure and technical innovations,[12] formal and aesthetic choices, and complex symbolism require a potentially infinite number of viewings in order for all its elements to be understood. As Luckhurst says: "Like the undead revenants of the Overlook,

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[10]   As highlighted by Giuliani, the theme of the look is central to Kubrick's film: "There are, in Kubrick's movies, images of eyes, shots of glances that constitute the most obvious signatures of the director, associated as they are, in close-up, to those forward tracking shots that dissect in front of the character the tangible reality of the world. Eye and gaze replicate in a mirroring effect the presence of the camera [...] These"themes" related to the eye and gaze weave a difficult syntax between who watch and who is watched. Since the camera has [...] the objective privilege to be both the eye that looks and the gaze that shows" (Giuliani 1996: 68, my translation).

[11]   As Nelson reminds us: "Mazes are highly artificial human contrivances whose orderly and complex sense of purpose involves a twofold conceptual game in which the player must not only search for the center but remember how to get out. Thus a maze embodies the reverse spatial idea of movement toward enclosure (self-contained, formal art uncontaminated by life) and movement toward freedom (chaos, infinity, contingency)" (2000: 204).

[12]   As Luckhurst reminds us, "Kubrick pushed for technical innovations wherever he could" (Luckhurst 2013: 15).

the viewer needs always to come back, to poke around in the corners of the frame and savour the charms of the corridor vistas" (2013: 9).[13] With *The Shining*, Kubrick takes the idea of exploration to an extreme. Ghezzi points out that "*The Shining* is a movie to watch rewatch and extrawatch, bringing the 'extrawatching' over the intransitivity of the 'extrawatch (for – someone or something –)' " (2007: 130, my translation). After all, one of the powers of the "shining" is the ability to see "things from both the past and the future" (Nelson 2000). *The Shining* might very well be a movie designed for the future, as it reminds us how far the cinema has come and how much it has stayed the same. It shines bits of an enigmatic film future which in the last image turns out to be a still from the past. There is no immutable order of experience when the past becomes a picture of what might have been (Mayersberg 1997: 291).

Just like *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick 1964), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick 1968) and *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick 1972), *The Shining* can be considered a science fiction movie: not because it presents us with possible scenarios, but because it is itself like an object from the future, a black monolith that made its appearance in the intersection of two eras of movie-watching: theatrical and domestic. Kubrick's ability to anticipate future time is inscribed in the very structure of *The Shining*, a movie entirely based on the concept of foreshadowing. This capacity to foresee the future isn't just a key element of the story, but it's expressed in the movie by means of visual clues to future events (for example, the shot in which we see a series of knives threateningly hanging above Danny's head, or the entire opening sequence in which the car journey is accompanied by the ominous synthesiser rendering of Berlioz's fifth movement of the *Symphonie Fantastique*). It's not a coincidence that in the movie coexist elements spanning different epochs: the Overlook ghosts are traces of time that refused oblivion. Guiding the actions of the people in the present, in this case Jack, they not only see the future, but, like Gods, they shape it. What is here now is important only as a means to control the future. As Giuliani points out:

> Kubrick doesn't follow neither trends or habits, and his movies are generally perceived as notably "dislocated" objects in regards to the continents of regular cinema. As if they took position towards a border, a limit, an external field. As if, to quote Roland Barthes, they were looking in the direction of an elsewhere. (Giuliani 1996: 10, my translation)

But what is this "elsewhere"? The future addressed by Kubrick is the present of the infinite possibilities of image consumption via domestic viewing. *The Shining* seems a film addressed to a future viewer, the compulsive cinephile of the Internet age whose playground is yet another maze – the Internet and the World Wide Web.

2   Caught up in the Net

The Internet is an eerie place. Omnipresent and familiar, it also embodies a dark side. There's no space and time on the Internet: chronological measure is melted into the activity of scrolling. The Internet is like the Overlook: its many rooms enclose the traces of History, and its labyrinthine structure – where every link can lead to new opportunities as well as to dead ends – is bound to make lose all sense of direction. Furthermore, just like in *The Shining*'s haunted hotel, the Internet houses "everything that exists" (Mee 2017: 161): past, present and future are the same, and time and space are redesigned at every turn, at each link. This virtual environment is now the favourite playfield of a new kind of cinephile critic who responds to what is commonly called "bottom up" logic: that of blogs, forums and YouTube videos. *Room 237* is not only a documentary about *The Shining*, but also gives us a glimpse of cinephilia in the Internet age. It dramatizes contemporary movie fandom.

What is the place of cinephilia in the digital age? According to Elsaesser, cinephilia can be divided into three phases, each characterized by technological advancements (cfr. Elsaesser 2005, Hagener and de Valck 2008). If the first cinephiles were somehow limited by a "movie theatre dimension," and the next generation expanded its boundaries with the advent of home video, "cinephilia 3.0" has grown out of social media and peer-to-peer

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[13]   This disposition to analysis appears not only in *The Shining*, but is a feature of the director's entire body of work, as noted by Hunter: "Kubrick's films are organized so as to force the viewer to interpret them holistically and conspiratorially by slowing time to enable meticulous scanning of the mise-en-scène, insisting on textual gaps and cruxes, and thereby encouraging self-reflexivity and intertextual exploration" (Hunter 2016: 51).

circuits. Cinephilia in the digital age uses the media to build new maps of meaning, using as a model the trajectory of the link, the reference *per antonomasia* of the virtual era. The Internet has profoundly changed the structure of the user's line of thought. We see this in *Room 237*, where the interviewees constantly start from a small detail to build a whole network of connections, just as if they were browsing through Internet links in their own mind. As Jullier and Leveratto have noticed, the systematic use of the Internet has facilitated the growth of film culture on a global scale by allowing the exchange of information, views and opinions between individual users (2012: 144). Thanks to the Internet and peer-to-peer exchange circuits, finding movies to watch has never been easier. For the digital cinephile, all that is needed to build a virtual film library is a basic understanding of file sharing applications such as eMule or BitTorrent; the fact that downloading copyrighted material is illegal is not a sufficient deterrent. Streaming services such as Netflix, or video-sharing websites like YouTube or DailyMotion do the rest: today anyone can watch a movie, anywhere and anytime. Furthermore, the Internet increases the number of cinephile communities by offering a "global" meeting space where users can suggest movies to each other, share opinions and reviews, and even compile custom lists by subject.[14] In the case of contemporary cinephilia the problem is choice: what to watch when everything is potentially available? As Jullier and Leveratto note:

> The Internet has prolonged and emphasized the diversification of different forms of film consumption. There are now many ways of regularly watching films outside theaters. Cinephilia may depend exclusively on the act of *home-viewing*. It flourishes in the opportunity to watch more films, and to be able to have easy access to rare films in their computerized version, on cable TV, DVDs or the Internet (p2p, streaming, pay-per-view). Screens of various sizes can be found everywhere: the film is re-localized. Information is easy to get: the problem is no longer to be unable to access it, but to have enough time to watch / read everything. (2012: 147)

The modern film buff can not only avoid purchasing home video packages, but also ignore the "authoritative" opinions of critics and rely on the advice of other users. Today "the web-surfing film enthusiast can compare, in written form, his judgment with that of a professional critic" (Jullier and Leveratto 2012: 150). Reviews and theories about movies are now shared between users, each of whom can choose what to agree with and what to change, in a game of Chinese whispers:

> Any web surfer giving his/her opinion is likely to be proved false by the next user and will thus be led, if s/he wants to discuss the issue, to specify his/her argument. Reading this verbal ping-pong game, we can have a better idea of the film, than when we read a single professional review, which leaves us no choice but to accept its literary interpretation. (Jullier and Leveratto 2012: 150)

The enthusiastic fan, with a do-it-yourself approach to film interpretation, can now compare shots of several films, find a *fil rouge* in the works of various directors, and trace the influences that lie behind the realization of a film. Needless to say, such behaviour can lead to magnifying every detail of a film beyond reason, even to confusing reality and fiction, as I.Q. Hunter notes in *Cult Film as a Guide to Life*.[15] The more a film presents itself as an enigma, the more the Internet cinephile is induced to trace conspiracies of some sort. One of the functions of *Room 237* is to show the excesses that an uncontrolled love for cinema can produce, and how the web can produce a "maze of opinions", a propagation of theories that can lead unaware users to lose their tracks. In *Room 237*, the interviewees' provenance from very different cultural backgrounds is a symptom of the extreme malleability and democratization of contemporary cinephilia, which is no longer the privilege of cinema experts and cineclub goers. As Reith points out: "*Room 237* celebrates the possibilities allowed by a trend in criticism where everyone is entitled to approach art with their own unique backgrounds and contexts" (2012).[16] Nevertheless, in *Room 237* this "celebration" appears to be more of a parody, especially

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14 One of the best example is the website *Taste of Cinema* http://www.tasteofcinema.com/ (last accessed 14-02-17), where the users can submit their personal lists of movies, sorted by all kinds of themes and argument.

15 In his book, a study on how cult movies influence the lives of their fans, Hunter devotes a chapter to *Room 237* and the obsessive and conspiracist readings of Kubrick's movies, in particular *The Shining* and *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999). Cfr. Hunter (2016: 41-57).

16 According to Mee: "In the digital age, everyone is a critic, and credentials are not essential for film analysis. It is this that *Room 237* simultaneously celebrates and gently mocks. On the one hand, it exemplifies the joy of looking below the surface, of searching

when Weidner speaks (Mee 2017: 164). Weidner argues that *The Shining* contains evidence that Kubrick was behind the alleged falsification of the Apollo Moon landing. Here cinemania truly seems to lose touch with reality, and searching for truth no longer matters. What matters instead is transforming one's own cranky opinion into a coherent belief system, a "conquest of the truth" that can be shared. Ascher plays with his guests, indulging them; as I. Q. Hunter points out: "The trick in *Room 237* [...] lies in refusing the distinction between the relevant and the accidental, and treating everything in *The Shining*, from wall decoration to fridge stickers and limps, as potential clues installed in plain site by The Master" (2016: 47). Every detail explained and connection made creates in the interviewees a sense of euphoria. And, in an era that allows almost unlimited access to movies – while also providing the tools for meticulous and obsessive analysis – details are all that count. Paradoxically, now that the audiences have the instruments to create their own movie interpretations, they tend to rely even more on opinions. Furthermore, details can be misleading if they are not subjected to objective analysis. As Ryan notes in *Room 237*: "When you see things over and over and again, their meanings change for you."[17] The Internet gives movie fans across the world this possibility: not only to see almost everything, but also to see the same things over and over again.

With *Room 237*, Ascher transfers on a formal level the main features of two eras of cinephilia, the home video and the digital eras, while simultaneously making the movie enthusiasts of the various "generations" the film's undisputed protagonists. A record of cinematic obsession, *Room 237* is also "the story of the technological shifts that gave rise to such attentions, specifically the way viewers' relations to movies changed when they became ownable objects" (Kite 2012). Technological changes are an integral part of cinema history, one that is continuously called into question in the documentary. History and the passage of time are essential elements in both Kubrick's and Ascher's movies. In *Room 237* history is called into question by Blakemore, Cocks and Weidner, who link Kubrick's vision to world historical events such as the colonization of North America, the Nazi persecution of the Jews and the Moon landing. But history heavily features in *Room 237* in both the visual choices that Ascher makes and in the tales of the interviewees. The past is represented by memories of the first screening of *The Shining* in a movie theatre, the "sacred temple" for "old school" movie buffs. The present is that of the interviews and talk of conspiracies. And then there is the future: that of all the possible interpretations yet to come of *The Shining*. It is this future which Kubrick himself may have foreshadowed in the film's maze. Just as in *The Shining*, time in *Room 237* is elusive and undefined. The past is shaped by hazy memories; the present has been serialized by the infinite possibilities of (re)viewing; and the future is essentially indefinable, as it can only be built upon conjectures. *Room 237* celebrates an ideal union of nostalgia and awareness of the present that it translates into visual terms. Nostalgia is denoted by an eclectic choice of movie clips commenting on the interviewees' voice-overs, drawing equally from B-movies and classic films and reflecting the taste of today's omnivorous cinephile. This pays homage to the transition from the VHS era to that of DVDs and finally of the Internet, which nostalgically considers the videotape era the golden age for film lovers.[18] The video recorder, depicted as a mythical object, is mentioned explicitly in *Room 237*'s trailer.[19] A parody of *The Shining*'s teaser, which showed blood pouring from the Overlook's elevator, the trailer shows blood pouring from a video recorder – a vision of the death of the bygone era of videotape cinephilia. If the past is represented by nostalgia for video rental and the VHS, the present is represented by constant references to the web. Thanks to a masterly use of split-screen and video-graphics, Internet sites are not only quoted as authoritative sources, but even shown inside the movie. On the formal level the documentary is composed with a montage of scenes from movies, newsreels, TV commercials, graphics and

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beyond the obvious for hidden meaning, and the fascination over other people's observations, attention to detail, and understanding of things that we might ourselves have missed. On the other, it highlights the potentially problematic or even entertaining results of subjective scrutiny, of interpretative textual (and what some may think of as over-) analysis" (Mee 2017: 155).

17 John Fell Ryan in *Room 237*.

18 Kearns, for example, observes how the analysis of *The Shining* was made possible for her only after the advent of VHS, and the consequential possibility to rent movies for home viewing: "I did not look at it again for a number of years until it came out in rental. And then I picked it up a couple of times. And, what, you had three days in order to watch a rental? And so, I can remember watching it over and over during those three days and really taking a good look at it then. And I was able to think 'Oh, yes, this is what I remember. This is what I thought I saw', and then catching more things. But it wasn't, of course, until DVD came out that I was really able to sit down and take a good look at it as far as just running through it over and over and over again." (Kearns in *Room 237*).

19 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHE5YUNkssQ (last accessed 21-03-17). For *The Shining*'s original trailer https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEew7zvpAWE (last accessed 21-03-17).

inserts, with the aim of remixing this material to comment on and ironise the theories of the people interviewed. By mashing together different audiovisual sources, Ascher composes an organic whole that tells us more about the possibilities within the digital age than about *The Shining* itself, and celebrates the do-it-yourself culture that characterizes contemporary cinephilia.

3   To Create one's own path

Today, thanks to the possibilities disclosed by the Internet and new digital technologies, cinephiles can be both critics and filmmakers. For the first time since the Nouvelle Vague, movie buffs are equipped with the tools that allow them to create content.[20] The boundary between consumption and direct participation in the artistic process has never been so thin. *Room 237*, though made by professional filmmakers, expresses this trend because it focuses on the phenomenon of cinephilia rather than on Kubrick's movie. Throughout *Room 237* we hear people talking about and see scenes from *The Shining*, but in the end we are trapped within the respondents' personal ideas. Each of the interviewees starts from a detail, an arbitrary point inside Kubrick's maze, and from that builds his own personal experience. This urgency to communicate one's viewing experience is not limited to contributing to forum comments and blogs, but often leads to the creation of new content. This is the case with Jay Weidner who, prior to *Room 237*, had already made a couple of video-essays to offer alleged evidence of Kubrick's involvement in the faking of the Moon landing, mostly using clips from the director's movies, *The Shining* included. But it is also the case with Ryan, who represents the digital age cinephile who wants to explore every detail of a work and even interact with it. In *Room 237*, Ryan talks about how he played with the chronological order of *The Shining*, simultaneously overlaying the regular projection of the film with the same projection in reverse in order to obtain new images and insights from the sum of two "ontologically" equal products. Both Weidner's and Ryan's works can be considered "self-media:" the result of an active approach of the fan towards the object of his love. *Room 237*, despite sharing many features of self-media, does not fit into this category, as it benefits from professional production and regular distribution, while self-media are usually produced and promoted by the author who makes them. Self-media materialize in different forms: home-movies, video-essays, fan films, parodies, and so on. As Jullier and Leveratto point out, the practice of paying homage to a loved movie is characterized by re-appropriation. By using stills from their favourite movies, fans create new works, commonly known as "User-Generated Contents" (UGCs).[21] UGCs are usually short or feature films inspired by a single feature or a series of movies, made by fans who are not legitimate rights holders. They therefore differ from making-of documentaries and promotional featurettes. Another feature of UGCs is their collective character. They are often produced by a group of people rather than a single person, which leads to the creation of "collaborative remix zones" that "move away from immobilized and apolitical fetishistic image worship into the construction of collaborative communities where new knowledges and new connections can be actualized within a radical historiographic practice" (Hudson and Zimmerman 2009). The method of choice is the assembling of archival footage, the technique used by Ascher himself. Editing allows the creative reuse of materials, and shows how, in the 21st century, movies have become extremely malleable objects.[22] Movies are not thought of as stand-alone objects anymore: their meanings *have* to lie in something else. The film's ability to bind itself to something profoundly different is expressed in *Room 237* in the connections that the interviewees create between *The Shining* and the factual world. Every detail of Kubrick's movie is thought of in relation to elements of the outside world. In a film it is the director's task to make sense of the potential chaos of images and Ascher does this by drawing on the body of cinema itself. In this case, the director acts as a bricoleur: he builds the film from heterogeneous materials,

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[20]   Malte Hagener wrote about this phenomenon in the first number of *Aniki*, where he quotes as an example the channel *Audiovisualcy* of the portal Vimeo https://vimeo.com/groups/audiovisualcy, an aggregator of video-essays created and shared by the users (Hagener 2014: 73-85).

[21]   "For the contemporary cinephile, a potential form of activity consists of producing and publishing on-line User-Generated Content (UGC) 'about' a film, whether to prolong its existence, mock/pay homage to/or criticize it" (Jullier and Leveratto 2012: 150).

[22]   According to Hagener, this phenomenon is related to the fluidity with which the film appears in the new media context: "Films are not anymore bound and self-contained works whose borders are clearly delineated and stable, but they are textual nodes, instable and dynamic which can transform into different forms – from film to computer game, amusement park ride or installation art" (Hagener 2014: 81).

such as movie clips, newsreels, photographs and archival footage. This is both a commentary on the contributors' theories, but also, as Laura Mee observes, a celebration of the cinephile's pleasure in recognising the sources of the numerous clips.[23] Images are so important that Ascher chooses not to show the usual "talking heads" during the movie. We simply hear the contributors' voices, as they guide us through their personal interpretation of *The Shining*. The model here seems to be that of DVD commentary tracks, where cast and crew members share their stories about the filmmaking process, much to the joy of the film buff who purchased the DVD. The difference is that in *Room 237* we don't hear from the filmmakers involved in the movie, but from the movie fans themselves. According to Mee, the fact that "the contributors remain unseen [...] is testament to *Room 237*'s apparent love of both *The Shining* and of cinema itself" (2017: 156). By keeping the interviewees offscreen and acousmatic, Ascher can build a visual counterpart of their contributions, employing clips from films of various eras and genres, including – obviously – those from Kubrick's movies. While the interviewees' contributions don't seem to follow a particular order, they are actually "governed" by a creative use of editing. Ascher often comments on the interviews by using an irreverent montage of images, including also some 'down times' in order to build a dimension of "chat" between fans. For example, while Ryan is commenting on a shot of *The Shining*, we hear the cry of a baby in the background, probably the son of the interviewee. Ryan apologizes as we hear him go to comfort the child and then come back to interpreting the film. This would be cut out in other circumstances, but Ascher includes it to undermine the seriousness of the interview and to communicate to the viewer that this is just a "game." Ascher's respondents often digress and get lost in their observations, and he offers us the visual corresponding of their wandering. For instance, in one scene Kearns starts talking about the incorrect positioning of a window within the film, but then digresses into discussing *The Shining*'s status within the horror genre. Ascher includes the entire recording without cutting it. He accompanies the voiceover of Kearns wandering from topic to topic with images, first of the window, then of Wendy surrounded by ghosts, and then finally of the window again. Without the commentary images, the theories exposed in *Room 237* would appear empty and vain. There's a kind of resistance of the image to the theory: cinema, despite the digital revolution that makes it fragmented and highly manipulable, continues undaunted to dictate its terms.

4　Conclusion

> To take *The Shining* at its face value is a mistake. It has no face, only masks, and it has no value, only implications.
>
> – Paul Mayersberg (1997: 288)

The maze is a puzzle that made itself a world, a reality with its own rules. This is true both of the Internet and of Kubrick's movie. Logic and theory can't be applied to the maze: one needs to forget what one used to know and learn how to play, and, above all, to forget about meaning. As Ghezzi points out:

> Kubrick finally seems to suggest that the search for meaning is vain; it is not in the 'solutions', in the keys available from time to time, in the single puzzles that may result; if a meaning is given in *The Shining*, it's only in the same figure of the enigma, and in the way it set itself. (2007: 130, my translation)

It's easy to venture into Kubrick's maze – less easy is getting out. Every path, every turn, every choice leads to a different result. This is because *The Shining*'s maze is dynamic and constantly adapts to the observer and his illusion of omnipotence. Movies like *The Shining* lend themselves to potentially infinite interpretations by virtue of their fragmented and deeply allegorical nature. As Kite explains:

> *The Shining* seems engineered for these new modes of viewing, the abilities to pause, to slow, to rewind and perpetually rewatch. [...] The film seems to offer continual teasing hints that all the answers are there if we could only see more clearly, move closer, finally enter in. And through DVD to Blu-ray, each evolution in technology renews the invitation. (2012: 39)

23　"[T]he opportunity for the knowing audience member to identify its numerous cinematic sources are but one pleasure that Ascher's documentary offers" (Mee 2017: 155).

Each of the interviewees in *Room 237*, aided by the possibilities offered by home video and digital technologies such as freeze frame, zoom, rewind and fast-forward, dismember Kubrick's film, reordering the fragments thereby obtained at will. *The Shining*, with its complex patterns and labyrinthine structure, will continue to stimulate research by fans and scholars. One reason why the movie was rejected on its release was that the audience was facing a transition from a theatrical to a domestic dimension; today we see how Kubrick's film was meant to be viewed more than just once and at one time. As Nelson rightly observes: "*The Shining* requires several viewings before its secrets are released, and even though like a maze puzzle it can be assembled into one or more interpretive designs, mysteries remain which intimate that there is still more" (2000). Properly exploring *The Shining*'s maze became possible only with the arrival of home-video technologies and the infinite viewing possibilities made available by the Web. *The Shining* was meant to encourage all kinds of interpretations, and, now as then, it keep asking us to watch it again. *Forever and ever and ever...*

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