

**Semiotic of Colour and Lighting in Horror Movie *The Conjuring 2013*
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Abstract

This research explores the profound significance of visual semiotics in contemporary horror cinema, where atmospheric construction has become a primary tool for evoking psychological terror. Despite the success of elevated horror, a literature gap remains regarding the granular semiotic analysis of how specific technical elements specifically color and lighting function as a sign system to maintain sustained dread. This study aims to identify the dominant semiotic elements of color and lighting in James Wan's *The Conjuring* (2013) and analyze their effects in creating a harrowing atmosphere. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive design with a semiotic approach, the study examines 20 purposively selected scenes through Roland Barthes' three orders of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. Key findings reveal that the dominant semiotic markers include a desaturated color palette dominated by dark brown, greenish-grey, and black and low-key lighting techniques such as chiaroscuro and backlighting. Denotatively, these elements signify historical periodization and low visibility; connotatively, they signify spiritual corruption, isolation, and vulnerability. Furthermore, the research identifies that these visual signs coalesce into a cinematic "myth" of the domestic space as a predatory organism. The study concludes that the film's efficacy in inducing dread is a deliberate semiotic construction; the empirical data shows that 'visual uncertainty' produced by the strategic obscuring of shadows through chiaroscuro and negative space compels the audience to project internal fears into the frame's unlit areas. These findings imply that in atmospheric horror, the manipulation of the viewer's perception through chromatic and luminant signs is more critical for emotional impact than explicit narrative or physical violence.

Keywords: Semiotics, Cinematography, Horror Film, Color Psychology, Lighting, *The Conjuring***Citation:**

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INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the horror genre in the 21st century has witnessed a significant paradigm shift in how films convey fear to the audience. Following the early 2000s era, which was dominated by slasher tropes relying on explicit physical violence and the "torture porn" trend, contemporary horror cinema has now moved toward a more sophisticated form often referred to as "elevated horror" or atmospheric horror (Rodríguez, 2023; Sun, 2025). At the core of this transition is the deliberate and sustained construction of fear, known in film studies as "dread sustained." Unlike the jump scare, which merely provides a momentary neural shock, dread is a stifling, pervasive sense of impending doom (Hanich, 2017). While the term 'elevated horror' is frequently associated with auteur-driven, indie-leaning films such as *Hereditary* (2018) or *The Witch* (2015), James Wan's *The Conjuring* (2013) serves as a critical bridge between commercial success and the sophisticated visual language of atmospheric horror. Unlike its contemporary slashers, *The Conjuring* prioritizes the 'architecture of dread' over immediate gore. It is precisely this hybrid nature utilizing high-concept cinematographic techniques within a traditional supernatural framework that makes it a more representative model for studying how visual semiotics can be engineered to trigger mass psychological responses. James Wan's *The Conjuring* (2013) stands as a pivotal cinematic text within this movement. The film successfully revitalizes classic haunted house tropes through a meticulous mastery of *mise-en-scène*. While narrative and sound design are frequently regarded as key elements, this study argues that the semiotic manipulation of visual elements, particularly color and lighting, serves as the primary engine that constructs this atmosphere of dread.

From a semiotic perspective, filmic elements do not merely exist as passive aesthetic choices; rather, they function as complex systems of signs that actively communicate meaning to the audience (Devi et al., 2025; Oktaviana & Nugroho, 2025). Semiotics, as the study of signs and signifying processes, allows for an interrogation of how visual stimulation is subconsciously decoded by the audience. In the context of horror films, lighting and color operate as signifiers that not only represent physical reality on screen but also connote abstract psychological states such as vulnerability, isolation, and the presence of supernatural entities (Bordwell et al., 2017). As asserted by Brown (2021), lighting in cinematography is a fundamental tool for "painting with shadows," wherein the horror genre, the absence of light or the strategic use of shadows often carries higher communicative value than the presence of light itself.

The use of color in *The Conjuring* represents a meticulously planned visual strategy to manipulate audience emotion. James Wan employs a heavily desaturated color palette, dominated by earth tones, dark browns, ochres, and dull greenish-grays. Denotatively, these color choices serve to establish the historical period of the 1970s. However, semiotically, these colors carry deeper connotative meanings. According to Flueckiger (2017), color in film functions as a "chromatic affect" that triggers specific neuro-aesthetic responses in the viewer. This study finds that the grey-green hue in the scene of Carolyn's incipient possession (Timestamp 01:25:14) semiotically signifies spiritual corruption and the decay of humanity. The dominance of these dull tones consistently constructs an effect of "weathering" and stasis, implying that the Perron family's domestic environment had been tainted by evil forces long before the entity physically manifested (Plate, 2015).

Beyond color, lighting strategy serves as a primary pillar in constructing atmospheric dread (Edensor, 2015; Sharizan & Juhan, 2025; Sun, 2025). James Wan, alongside cinematographer John R. Leonetti, extensively utilizes low-key lighting and sharp contrasts known as *chiaroscuro*. This technique aims to create "visual uncertainty," which is the psychological cornerstone of fear. When a film frame is dominated by deep shadows and vast dark areas, it creates "negative space" where the viewer's gaze loses orientation (Broomer, 2024). This negative space forces the audience's imagination to fill the void with projections of personal fears. For instance, in the "Hide-and-clap" sequence (Timestamp 00:18:30), the limitation of vision due to minimal lighting semiotically signifies a threat that is invisible yet physically present around the character. This visual void is a signifier for "the unseen," a concept that, according to Cawelti (2021) is far more terrifying than an explicitly displayed monster.

Furthermore, analysis of the research data indicates that lighting is frequently used to constrain the psychological maneuverability of the characters. In the basement scene (Timestamp 00:39:57), the use of a very narrow and directed light source semiotically symbolizes the character's limited knowledge of the situation, thereby heightening feelings of helplessness. Shadows in this film are not merely static backgrounds; they are active participants in the narrative that mark the boundary between the safe

domestic world and the threatening demonic realm (Khanna, 2020). The effect of utilizing these elements is the creation of an unstable atmosphere where the audience constantly feels watched, generating a sustained tension (suspense) even in the absence of overt horror action.

Despite numerous academic studies on James Wan's commercial success, most existing analyses tend to focus on narrative pacing techniques or religious aspects within The Conjuring universe (Heller-Nicholas, 2020). There remains a distinct research gap in granularly analyzing how technical cinematographic choices specifically the interaction between color degradation and high-contrast lighting work as a language of signs to sustain dread. Little research has successfully bridged the gap between pure semiotic theory and the technical application of light in "hauntological" cinema or films focused on past trauma (Fisher, 2014).

Based on this background, this research formulates two primary problems to be addressed through an in-depth analysis of the study object: (1) What are the dominant semiotic elements in color and lighting used to create a haunting atmosphere in The Conjuring? and (2) What are the psychological and narrative effects of these semiotic elements in building atmospheric dread? This study aims to fill this literary void by providing a rigorous semiotic interrogation. By applying Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to 20 identified key scenes ranging from the grey house exterior to the exorcism climax featuring extreme light contrasts this study will demonstrate how domestic space is transformed into a labyrinth of fear. Ultimately, this research argues that the haunting atmosphere in The Conjuring is not merely the result of the narrative, but a sophisticated semiotic construction where color and lighting act as the primary sign vehicles mediating the audience's experience of the uncanny.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative research design rooted in the interpretive paradigm. The application of a semiotic approach in this research extends beyond mere textual analysis; it serves as a method to deconstruct the mechanisms of how a film's visual structures operate as a language of non-verbal communication (Metz, 2016). This approach was selected to explore the dialectical relationship between the formal elements of cinematography (color and light) and the audience's psychological construction of fear or dread.

Source of Data

The primary data source for this research is the feature film *The Conjuring* (2013), directed by James Wan. The sampling technique employed is purposive sampling, wherein scenes were selected based on criteria of visual significance that directly contribute to the formation of a haunting atmosphere. Based on the collected data, 20 units of analysis (scenes) were identified, encompassing various lighting variations and color palettes, ranging from the opening scenes at the Perron family home to the climax of the exorcism.

Technique of Collecting Data

The data collection procedure in this study was conducted through a systematic-visual approach designed to capture the semiotic essence of *The Conjuring*. Each stage is interpreted as a process of deconstructing cinematic elements:

1. The researcher conducted repeated viewings of the film to establish sensitivity toward the visual rhythm. This stage is not merely viewing, but a process of "initial reading" to sense the atmospheric shift from a state of normalcy (safety) to a state of threat. The researcher noted points where audience emotions begin to be manipulated through changes in light intensity, such as the early nighttime scenes at the Perron residence.
2. From the film's total duration, the researcher performed a purposive selection of scenes representing peaks of tension. Selection criteria were based on the dominance of specific visual elements that trigger dread, such as the use of dense shadows in the "hide-and-clap" scene that simultaneously restrict the vision of both the character and the audience. This stage ensures that the retrieved data possesses rich semiotic content for analysis.
3. The researcher captured screenshots at identified timestamps to freeze these visual moments into static objects. This process is crucial so that color analysis (such as the "greenish-grey"

during Carolyn's possession) can be performed precisely without interference from camera movement. These images serve as empirical evidence of the "signs" to be dissected.

4. The collected data were organized into a classification matrix to facilitate the interpretation of patterns. Each scene was categorized based on technical and emotional variables.
5. The final step involved an in-depth literature review to support the interpretation of visual data. The researcher gathered literature on film color theory and horror lighting techniques to ensure that the interpretation of semiotic meanings (such as the use of dull yellow signifying an unsafe domestic space) has a rigorous theoretical foundation and is not merely subjective.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study is conducted through an interpretive qualitative approach by operating Roland Barthes' three orders of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. As illustrated in Figure 1, the conceptual framework of this research dissects the *mise-en-scène* elements of horror film into two primary technical variables: color and lighting. The analytical process commences with the identification and classification of visual signs across the 20 predetermined key scene units.

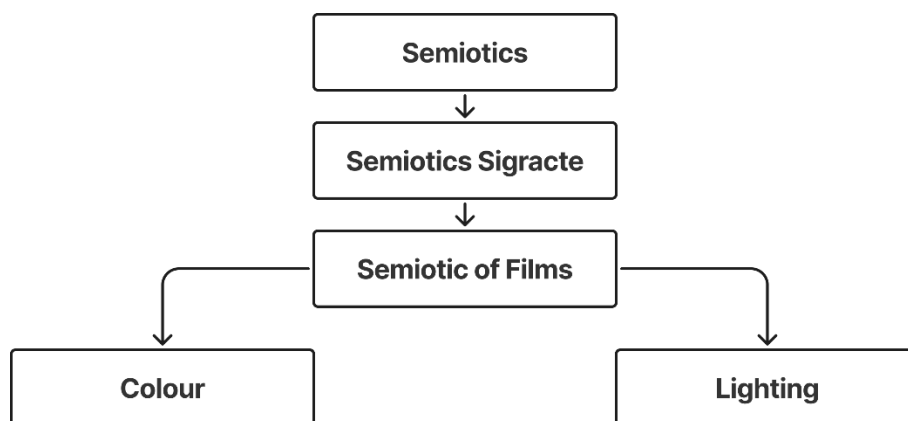


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Based on the aforementioned framework, the analytical process commences with the identification and classification of visual signs, wherein the researcher dissects each unit of analysis based on dominant *mise-en-scène* elements, specifically the variables of color and lighting techniques captured in the 20 key scenes. At the first level the denotative analysis the researcher describes the literal physical reality appearing on screen, such as the use of dark brown and black hues or the application of low-key lighting techniques in the house interior scenes (00:09:44), without including preliminary emotional interpretations. This step is vital to establish an objective technical database regarding how light and color are distributed within the film frame.

Once the denotative meanings are established, the analysis proceeds to the second level the connotative analysis to uncover the implicit meanings and ideologies behind these visual signs. At this stage, the researcher interprets how these technical elements trigger specific feelings; for instance, the use of a desaturated grey color palette in the house exterior (00:12:10) is connoted as a symbol of profound isolation and psychological neglect. Furthermore, this study reaches the stage of mythological analysis, where visual connotations are linked to broader cultural structures or conventions within the horror genre. In this context, the use of dense shadows and total darkness in the "hide-and-clap" scene (00:18:30) is treated as a "myth" concerning the existence of an invisible yet constantly present evil within the domestic space. Finally, the researcher performs a synthesis of visual patterns to draw comprehensive conclusions on how the integration of dull colors and contrast lighting consistently produces an effect of atmospheric dread that manipulates audience perception throughout the film's duration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Atmosphere Dread

The category of "dread" in this study represents the emotional foundation constructed by James Wan to create a sustained sense of anticipatory fear. Distinct from momentary shocks, dread functions as a psychological instrument that places the audience in a state of alertness regarding an impending doom that remains unseen yet feels profoundly imminent. Through the manipulation of dull earth tones and low-key lighting, the film constructs visual signs that connote the infiltration of the domestic space by a malignant, ancient force. The six scenes classified within this category demonstrate how visual elements are utilized to envelop the audience in a stifling sense of entrapment before the primary conflict physically manifests.

Table 1. Dread Atmosphere Category Tabulation

No.	Scene Description	Timestamp	Dominant Colour	Lighting Type	Semiotic Meaning
1	Perron family house at night	00:09:44	Dark Brown, Black	Low-Key Lighting	Darkness signifies hidden danger
2	Basement entrance	00:22:05	Black, Dark Brown	Low-Key Lighting	Descent into the unknown
3	Carolyn in the basement	00:25:14	Greenish Grey	Low Saturation	Spiritual corruption
4	Basement investigation	00:39:57	Dark Brown, Black	Narrow Light Source	Knowledge is restricted
5	Dark stairway scene	00:52:40	Black, Brown	High Contrast Lighting	Vertical space as danger
6	Exorcism preparation	01:40:05	Dark Red, Black	Dramatic Lighting	Ritual and violence

Data 1. Perron family house at night (00:09:44)

In this scene, the dominant use of dark brown and black, combined with low-key lighting, creates visual signifiers of hidden danger. Denotatively, the darkness represents the absence of light within the domestic space; however, connotatively, this darkness functions as a threatening "negative space." According to (Broomer, 2024), deep shadows in residential areas are not merely aesthetic elements but instruments to trigger anxiety through the loss of the viewer's spatial orientation. This darkness connotes that the home, which should serve as a sanctuary, has been infiltrated by something "other" (Khanna, 2020). The effect of dread arises because the audience instinctively associates darkness with human vulnerability to unseen predators (Clasen, 2017). The use of dull dark brown here also refers to the "aesthetic of weathering," which, according to (Plate, 2015) signifies that the house's dark history is beginning to "resurface" and envelop its inhabitants.

Data 2. Basement entrance (00:22:05)

The combination of black and dark brown with low-key lighting in this scene signifies a descent into the unknown. Semiotically, the basement threshold acts as a liminal space a boundary between the controlled real world and the chaotic underworld. Sikov (2020) states that low-key lighting in stairwells or basement entrances in horror often represents a journey into a subconscious filled with fear. The sharpness of the shadows around the entrance creates an oppressive visual effect, reinforcing a sense of anticipation regarding threats emerging from the depths (Brown, 2021). According to Fisher (2014), spaces such as basements in hauntological cinema often symbolize the accumulation of unresolved past traumas, visually communicated through dense darkness impenetrable to the human eye.

Data 3. Carolyn in the basement (00:25:14)

The use of a low-saturation, greenish-grey color palette in this scene signifies spiritual corruption. This unnatural, dull green hue deviates from healthy human skin tones, creating an

"uncanny" effect. Bleicher (2023) in contemporary color theory, notes that dull and desaturated greens are frequently associated with decay, disease, and mental instability. In the context of horror semiotics, this color serves as a connotative sign that the character Carolyn is losing her autonomy and is becoming exposed to a malevolent influence (Heller-Nicholas, 2020). The effect of this low saturation is the creation of a "sickly" and oppressive atmosphere which, according to Flueckiger (2017), neuro-aesthetically discomforts the viewer due to the loss of color vitality within the frame.

Data 4. Basement investigation (00:39:57)

This scene highlights the use of a narrow light source amidst a dominance of dark brown and black, which semiotically implies that the character's knowledge of the threat is severely limited. This fragmented lighting creates visual isolation for the character within a vast darkness. Bordwell et al. (2017) explain that the use of narrow lighting in large spaces serves to concentrate fear on what remains unilluminated. This produces a powerful dread effect as viewers are forced to focus on a small area while their imaginations are triggered by the surrounding darkness. According to Cawelti (2021), the restriction of visual information is key to maintaining tension in mystery-horror, where limited light symbolizes fragile human rational efforts in the face of immeasurable supernatural forces.

Data 5. Dark stairway scene (00:52:40)

In this scene, the use of black and brown combined with high-contrast lighting creates semiotic signifiers of vertical space as a zone of danger. Denotatively, this lighting emphasizes the lines of the stairs leading into darkness; however, connotatively, the sharp contrast symbolizes the uncertainty between safe space and invaded space. According to Broomer (2024), the use of high contrast on architectural elements (such as stairs) serves to distort the audience's spatial perception, creating a sense of being trapped within one's own home. This high-contrast lighting psychologically triggers an instinct of alertness toward the visual "blind spots" created by the stairway's shadows (Khanna, 2020). Furthermore, Brown (2021) asserts that vertical shadows produced by contrast lighting are often used to intimidate characters, giving the impression that the supernatural entity possesses structural dominance over human movement. The dread in this scene arises from the audience's anticipation of what might emerge from the darkness at the top of the stairs, which Hanich (2017) considers an essential technique in sustaining atmospheric horror tension.

Data 6. Exorcism preparation (01:40:05)

The exorcism preparation scene utilizes a dominance of deep red and black with dramatic lighting, semiotically signifying ritual and violence. The use of deep red within a dark color scheme is not merely a ritualistic aesthetic choice but a connotative signifier of blood, sacrifice, and life-threatening danger (Bleicher, 2023). Plate (2015) argues that in religious horror cinema, the transition toward intense red signifies the climax where domestic space has been fully transformed into a dangerous sacred space. The dramatic lighting that emphasizes harsh shadows on the characters' faces reinforces the sense of urgency and heavy psychological burden (Sikov, 2020). According to Flueckiger (2017), the combination of deep red and black under dramatic lighting creates an "alarm" response in the viewer's brain, effectively building a harrowing atmosphere before the physical conflict (the exorcism) truly peaks. This aligns with Clasen (2017) view that visual stimulation associating rituals with dense darkness evolutionarily triggers a fear of death and suffering.

Atmosphere Suspense

The atmosphere of suspense in *The Conjuring* is operationalized through a strategy of deliberate concealment of visual information to create uncertainty. Within this category, visual semiotics functions by utilizing "negative space" and absolute darkness as signifiers of a watchful entity that remains beyond the reach of direct sight. The use of minimal lighting and shadows that distort reality aims to trigger the audience's cognitive processes in projecting their personal fears into the film frame. Four key scenes in this category demonstrate how the limitation of vision becomes the primary driver that propels narrative tension toward its climax.

Table 2. Suspense Atmosphere Category Tabulation

No.	Scene Description	Timestamp	Dominant Colour	Lighting Type	Semiotic Meaning
1	Hide-and-clap game begins	00:18:30	Black, Shadow Tones	Minimal Lighting	Limited vision implies threat
2	Mirror reflection scene	00:30:20	Black, Pale White	Shadow Lighting	Distorted reality
3	Lorraine alone in darkness	00:37:50	Black	Low-Key Lighting	Fear of the unseen
4	Hands clapping behind character	00:48:10	Black	Directional Lighting	Invisible presence

Data 1. Hide-and-clap game begins (00:18:30)

In this scene, the use of black and shadow tones with minimal lighting semiotically signifies that visual limitation is the primary signifier of a threat. Denotatively, this extremely low lighting conceals spatial details; however, connotatively, it creates a condition of extreme visual uncertainty. According to Bordwell et al. (2017), the technique of concealing visual information through dense shadows is the most effective way to build suspense, as it forces the audience to rely on auditory senses and mental anticipation. Brown (2021) adds that the use of shadow tones dominating the film frame serves to visually constrict the character's maneuverability, as if the darkness itself were an encompassing entity. The psychological effect of this scene is the emergence of anxiety because the "danger" is not visually displayed but implied through impenetrable darkness, forcing the audience to remain prepared for an eruption of action that could occur at any moment (Clasen, 2017).

Data 2. Mirror reflection scene (00:30:20)

The use of contrasting black and pale white through shadow lighting techniques in the mirror scene semiotically represents a distorted reality. Denotatively, the mirror displays the character's reflection; however, connotatively, this reflection signifies another dimension or the presence of an "outsider" occupying private space. According to Sikov (2020), mirrors in horror films are often used as semiotic media to split a character's identity or to indicate the presence of the uncanny. The use of pale white in the reflection amidst black darkness creates an unstable focal point, which, according to Broome (2024) serves to create visual disorientation. The suspense in this scene arises from the manipulation of audience perception regarding what is real and what is merely an optical illusion, supported by Metz (2016) theory that distorted visual signs are key to undermining the viewer's sense of security.

Data 3. Lorraine alone in darkness (00:37:50)

The dominant deep black hues combined with low-key lighting in this scene connote a fear of "the unseen." Semiotically, total darkness is not merely the absence of light but a sign of a watchful threat. Cawelti (2021) argues that suspense in horror often reaches its peak when the audience knows something is in the darkness, yet the character remains unaware. The use of absolute black severs the visual connection between the character and their surroundings, creating a sense of extreme isolation (Khanna, 2020). According to Hanich (2017), the effect of this extreme low-key lighting is the creation of sustained anticipatory tension, where every second in the darkness feels like a psychological burden demanding a visual resolution that remains elusive.

Data 4. Hands clapping behind character (00:48:10)

The use of black and directional lighting in this scene semiotically signifies an invisible presence within immediate proximity. Denotatively, the light only illuminates specific parts of the character, leaving a vast dark space behind them. Connotatively, this dark space becomes the source of an immediate threat. According to Brown (2021), directional lighting creates a sharp contrast between the illuminated subject and the surrounding darkness, emphasizing the character's vulnerability to an

attack from behind. This visual sign works in tandem with auditory elements to amplify the suspense effect. Fisher (2014) states that the presence of "the unseen" in domestic spaces is often communicated through light manipulation that deliberately leaves critical parts of the frame in shadow, making the audience feel trapped in the position of a helpless observer.

Atmosphere Horror

The horror atmosphere in this study focuses on pivotal moments involving physical terror, psychological suffering, and the loss of human agency due to demonic invasion. The dominant semiotic elements in this category are the use of a "sickly" color palette (such as greenish-grey) and dramatic high-contrast lighting to depict the existential struggle between good and evil. Two representative scenes, including the possession and the exorcism, demonstrate how the human body is transformed into an object of horror through the manipulation of color saturation and harsh shadowing, signaling the dissolution of self-integrity.

Table 3. Horror Atmosphere Category Tabulation

No.	Scene Description	Timestamp	Dominant Colour	Lighting Type	Semiotic Meaning
1	Carolyn possessed	01:25:14	Grey-Green	Low Saturation	Loss of humanity
2	Climactic exorcism scene	01:46:10	Black, White	High Contrast Lighting	Struggle between good and evil

Data 1. Carolyn Possessed (01:25:14)

In this scene, the use of greenish-grey hues with extremely low saturation semiotically signifies the loss of humanity and the total dominance of a malevolent entity. Denotatively, the character's skin appears pale and unhealthy; however, connotatively, this "sickly" color marks the death of biological and spiritual functions. According to Bleicher (2023), extremely desaturated color palettes are frequently used in cinema to communicate pathological conditions or spiritual alienation. Within the horror context, the dull green tone that deviates from natural skin hues creates an uncanny effect which, according to Heller-Nicholas (2020) serves as a visual signifier that the subject's body has become a vessel for an external force. The horror effect here is generated by the audience's neuro-aesthetic response to the distortion of the human body ordinarily a familiar sight which, as Flueckiger (2017), suggests, instinctively triggers disgust and a fear of decay or contamination.

Data 2. Adegan Puncak Eksorsisme (01:46:10)

This climatic scene utilizes extreme contrast between black and white through high-contrast lighting techniques to visually represent the struggle between forces of good and evil. Semiotically, the use of sharp white light amidst dense darkness acts as a symbol of the spiritual fight to expel the dark. Bordwell et al. (2017) explain that high-contrast techniques in pivotal scenes serve to dramatize the conflict, where every illuminated area becomes a narrative battleground. The harsh shadows and blinding lights create a visual instability that, according to Broome (2024) is effective in heightening the intensity of physical horror. Furthermore, Prince (2021) asserts that the use of sharp black-and-white contrast in supernatural scenes often refers to the "myth" of duality in classic horror, which in *The Conjuring* is reinterpreted by James Wan to create a climax that triggers an adrenaline surge and the fear of the human soul's destruction.

Atmosphere Terror

The category of "terror" marks the transition from internal fear toward tangible external pressure through the manifestation of supernatural presence within the film frame. Semiotically, this atmosphere is constructed using more aggressive lighting techniques, such as backlighting and sharp contrasts, to emphasize the dominance of the supernatural entity over the vulnerable human subject. Pale white hues, contrasted against dense darkness, serve as signifiers of death and urgent physical threat. The three scenes analyzed within this category reveal how the visualization of threats is designed

to frontally undermine the audience's sense of security through distorted forms and intimidating camera placements.

Table 4. Terror Atmosphere Category Tabulation

No.	Scene Description	Timestamp	Dominant Colour	Lighting Type	Semiotic Meaning
1	First appearance of Bathsheba	00:32:05	Pale White, Black	Backlighting	Death and supernatural presence
2	Child standing near wardrobe	00:41:15	Black, Pale Skin Tone	Low-Key Lighting	Innocence under threat
3	Bathsheba on wardrobe	01:01:20	Pale white, black	Backlighting & shadow	Supernatural dominance

Data 1. First appearance of Bathsheba (00:32:05)

In this scene, the use of pale white hues contrasting with deep black through backlighting techniques semiotically signifies death and a tangible supernatural presence. Denotatively, the backlighting renders the entity's silhouette larger and more intimidating; however, connotatively, this symbolizes a power emanating from the darkness (Sikov, 2020). According to Prince (2021), the use of pale white for an entity amidst a dark environment functions as a visual "shock point" that forces the viewer's eyes to immediately recognize the threat. The effect of terror is generated from the visual certainty that the threat has now manifested, transforming anticipatory feelings (dread) into urgent physical fear. Bordwell et al. (2017) add that backlighting creates an uncanny halo effect, emphasizing the entity's identity as a being that does not belong to the material world.

Data 2. Child standing near wardrobe (00:41:15)

The dominant use of black with accents of extremely pale skin tones within a low-key lighting technique connotes the myth of "innocence under threat." Semiotically, the contrast between the child's physical fragility and the darkness of the wardrobe behind them signifies the invasion of evil forces into the most private and secure space of a child. Cawelti (2021) argues that terror reaches its zenith when the most vulnerable subjects are placed within a visual composition that suggests absolute danger. The low-key lighting, which illuminates only a portion of the child's face, creates an unstable visual effect that, according to Broomer (2024) aims to trigger both protective instincts and fear in the audience. Connotatively, the use of pale skin tones also refers to the socio-psychological impact of paralyzing fear (Clasen, 2017).

Data 3. Bathsheba on wardrobe (01:01:20)

This iconic scene utilizes a blend of pale white and black with backlighting and shadow techniques to demonstrate supernatural dominance over domestic space. Semiotically, the placement of the entity in a higher position (atop the wardrobe), combined with backlighting, signifies a hierarchy of power where humans occupy a weakened, subordinate position. According to Brown (2021), lighting that illuminates an entity from unnatural angles creates a distortion of form that reinforces the "monstrous" impression. The long shadows falling toward the characters below act as a signifier of tangible visual oppression. Hanich (2017) states that the terror effect in such scenes arises from the combination of visual shock and the recognition of the supernatural entity's superiority, where Bathsheba's pale white color acts as a signifier of inevitable death.

Atmosphere Unease

The category of "unease" refers to the cultivation of a vague yet persistent sense of discomfort through the depiction of environments that feel "wrong" or isolated. This atmosphere is constructed through the use of desaturated cool tones, such as blue-grey, to signify the characters' alienation and psychic vulnerability. Visual signifiers within this category serve as an early warning to the audience that the depicted space has lost its vitality and is exposed to a disruptive external influence. Two scenes

in this category demonstrate how restlessness is subtly built through exterior landscapes and the primary characters' sensory perceptions.

Table 5. Unease Atmosphere Category Tabulation

No.	Scene Description	Timestamp	Dominant Colour	Lighting Type	Semiotic Meaning
1	Exterior of the farmhouse	00:12:10	Grey, Desaturated Blue	Natural Low Light	Isolation and abandonment
2	Lorraine sensing a presence	00:34:40	Blue-Grey	Soft Spotlight	Psychic vulnerability

Data 1. Exterior of the farmhouse (00:12:10)

In this scene, the use of heavily desaturated grey and blue tones combined with low natural lighting semiotically signifies isolation and neglect. Denotatively, this color palette depicts a cloudy morning or late afternoon in a rural setting; however, connotatively, the absence of warm colors creates a sense of emotional distance and environmental coldness. According to Flueckiger (2017), the use of desaturated blue-grey tones in horror landscapes serves to suppress life vitality and trigger melancholic responses as well as a sense of unease in the audience. This visual signifier of "isolation" is crucial in domestic horror because it psychologically reinforces the fact that the characters are far removed from external assistance (Khanna, 2020). Plate (2015) adds that the aesthetic of a house that appears visually "dead" through these pale colors is an early sign that the property has lost its protective function and has become subject to a malignant external force.

Data 2. Lorraine sensing a presence (00:34:40)

The use of blue-grey tones paired with a soft spotlight technique in this scene semiotically signifies psychic vulnerability. Denotatively, this lighting emphasizes Lorraine's facial expression; however, connotatively, the soft light surrounded by cool tones indicates the openness of her "sixth sense" to another dimension. According to Brown (2021), a soft spotlight in the midst of a cold environment creates a subtle yet disturbing contrast, as if the character is being "illuminated" by a force that does not originate from the physical world. Unease emerges as the audience observes that even the most psychologically resilient primary character begins to feel threatened and unstable (Heller-Nicholas, 2020). Hanich (2017) states that this technique is effective in transmitting the character's restlessness to the audience through visual identification, where the blue-grey color acts as a medium bridging human perception with the unseen entity.

Atmosphere Fear

The category of "fear" represents an immediate emotional response to threats that have begun to be identified and are actively undermining the integrity of the domestic space. Within this category, visual semiotics utilizes anxiety-inducing colors, such as dull yellow and cold blue, to indicate that the boundaries of protection within the home have been breached. Fragmented lighting creates visual isolation for the characters, emphasizing a sense of entrapment and helplessness in the face of supernatural forces. Two key scenes in this section demonstrate how fear is communicated through transitional spaces, such as long dark hallways, and supernatural visions that freeze the character's emotional state.

Table 6. Fear Atmosphere Category Tabulation

No.	Scene Description	Timestamp	Dominant Colour	Lighting Type	Semiotic Meaning
1	Long hallway inside the house	00:16:45	Dark Yellow, Black	Practical Lighting	Domestic space becomes unsafe
2	Lorraine trapped in vision	00:45:30	Cold Blue	Desaturated Lighting	Emotional numbness

Data 1. Long hallway inside the house (00:16:45)

In this scene, the use of dark yellow and black tones paired with practical lighting techniques semiotically signifies the transition of the domestic space into an unsafe environment. Denotatively, the yellow hue originates from dim interior lamps; however, connotatively, the dull yellow color within an environment dominated by darkness creates a "sickly" impression and profound anxiety. According to Bleicher (2023), yellow within the horror spectrum frequently functions as a signifier of instability and danger lurking beneath the surface of normalcy. The use of practical lighting (standard household lamps) actually amplifies the fear effect by demonstrating that the ghost or malevolent entity has invaded the most intimate areas of daily life (Brown, 2021). Khanna (2020) argues that long hallways with minimal lighting create a "tunnel vision" effect, making both the character and the audience feel trapped without a clear exit, effectively transforming the house's denotative function as a sanctuary into a terrifying visual prison.

Data 2. Lorraine trapped in vision (00:45:30)

The use of cold blue tones with desaturated lighting techniques in Lorraine's vision scene semiotically signifies a state of "emotional numbness" resulting from exposure to supernatural forces. Denotatively, the cold blue separates the reality of the vision from the warmth of the real world; however, connotatively, this color symbolizes death and the loss of hope. According to Fisher (2014), the application of a cold blue palette in hauntological cinema often refers to a past presence that freezes the present. The desaturation technique in this scene serves to suppress the audience's emotions to a nadir, creating a fear that is internal and paralyzing. Flueckiger (2017) states that cold light devoid of saturation neuro-aesthetically diminishes the viewer's sense of security, creating a psychological distance that makes the threat feel more alien and uncontrollable. The fear effect here does not arise from sudden movement, but from a visual stasis implying that the character's soul is in absolute danger (Heller-Nicholas, 2020).

Atmosphere Relief

As a conclusion to the emotional dynamics, the category of "relief" functions as a mechanism for releasing visual tension to provide a temporary resolution. Semiotically, this atmosphere is constructed through the restoration of visual harmony, utilizing warm colors and balanced lighting to eliminate the threatening shadows that dominated previous scenes. The film's final scene demonstrates how the transition toward visual transparency is employed to signify a temporary victory over darkness and the restoration of security within the household.

Table 7. Relief Atmosphere Category Tabulation

No.	Scene Description	Timestamp	Dominant Colour	Lighting Type	Semiotic Meaning
1	Final house scene (aftermath)	01:49:30	Warm yellow	Balanced lighting	Temporary safety restored

Data 1. Final house scene (aftermath) (01:49:30)

In this concluding scene, the use of warm yellow tones paired with balanced lighting techniques semiotically signifies that temporary safety has been restored within the domestic space. Denotatively, steady sunlight or interior lamps illuminate the room evenly; however, connotatively, the transition from a cool to a warm palette symbolizes the victory of benevolent forces over darkness and the return of familial harmony. According to Bleicher (2023), warm yellow is frequently utilized as a visual signifier for comfort, optimism, and the restoration of energy following a traumatic phase. In the context of James Wan's narrative, this balanced lighting serves to lower the audience's heart rate, providing a "reward" of visual tranquility after a prolonged duration dominated by dense darkness.

According to Bordwell et al. (2017), balanced lighting that eliminates sharp shadows (chiaroscuro) automatically erases the "negative space" that previously served as a source of dread. This creates a state of visual transparency where no corner of the room remains suspicious to the viewer (Khanna, 2020). However, as noted by Heller-Nicholas (2020), in modern horror, the sense of relief

constructed through warm colors is often fragile; it acts as a closure that provides emotional resolution while still retaining the visual memory of the darkness that once existed. The relief effect here relies heavily on the extreme contrast with previous scenes, proving that the semiotics of light functions relationally to manipulate the audience's emotional satisfaction (Metz, 2016).

Discussion

The semiotic analysis of the visual strategies in *The Conjuring* (2013) reveals that the articulation of fear is not merely a byproduct of a ghost narrative, but the result of a systematic orchestration of visual signs. The findings of this research confirm that James Wan utilizes a desaturated color palette specifically dark brown, ochre, and grey-green hues as instruments to construct an atmosphere of dread. Semiotically, these color choices transcend their denotative function as representations of the 1970s period; these hues transform into connotative signifiers of organic decay and spiritual stasis (Kokotović, 2025; Kovsh & Dziuba, 2022; Rabbaa, 2024). This aligns with Flueckiger (2017) premise that color in horror cinema operates as a "chromatic affect" capable of inducing neuro-aesthetic responses without the mediation of dialogue. The use of grey-green hues in the scene of Carolyn's possession (01:25:14) reinforces Bleicher (2023) thesis on contemporary color psychology, where low saturation and greenish tones are instinctively associated with pathological conditions, signifying, in this context, moral decomposition and the loss of the subject's human autonomy.



Figure 2. Scene (01:25:14)

The effectiveness of lighting in constructing atmospheres of suspense and fear is found to be rooted in the technical manipulation of low-key lighting and the application of extreme contrast (chiaroscuro). In the basement investigation scene (00:39:57), the severely limited light source creates a phenomenon of visual uncertainty that forces the audience to confront a perceptual void. As explained by Broomer (2024), shadows in the atmospheric horror genre are not merely the absence of photons but "negative spaces" that actively trigger subconscious projections of fear. This technique produces a visual isolation effect for the characters that is crucial in escalating tension, as it implicitly communicates that a threat can manifest from any blind spot within the frame (Niazi et al., 2024; White & Burge, 2024). Thus, the shadows in this film function as active participants in the sign structure, communicating the presence of metaphysical entities even before a physical manifestation occurs on screen.



Figure 3. Scene (00:39:57)

The analysis of the "terror" category indicates that backlighting techniques and the use of sharp silhouettes serve as semiotic vehicles to depict supernatural dominance over the domestic space. In the appearance of Bathsheba (01:01:20), the pale white color contrasted against absolute darkness becomes an indexical sign for death. Prince (2021) asserts that the manipulation of lighting from unconventional angles is capable of transforming familiar domestic objects into the uncanny. The impact of these semiotic elements addresses the research problem regarding visual effectiveness, where such stimulation evolutionarily triggers an "alarm" response in the audience's limbic system. As argued by Clasen (2017), the fear of dense darkness that restricts vision is an atavistic human defense mechanism technically exploited by Wan to achieve peak emotional intensity through the distortion of visual proportion and scale.



Figure 4. Scene (01:01:20)

Furthermore, backlighting and sharp silhouettes in horror films function as potent semiotic vehicles to portray supernatural dominance over domestic spaces. Backlighting creates a light contrast that highlights silhouettes, thereby evoking a mysterious impression and obscuring character identity, which visually signifies a supernatural power reigning over the space (Abigail et al., 2024; Niazi et al., 2024). Sharp silhouettes amplify the effect of uncertainty and fear by concealing facial details or expressions, generating an aura of an unseen yet controlling threat over the environment (Huttunen, 2025). Semiotically, this technique communicates the tension between the real world and the supernatural forces invading the domestic sphere, turning a supposedly safe space into a place of danger and instability (Abigail et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2016). This use of light and shadow also plays a role in establishing an intense horror atmosphere, reinforcing the narrative of a supernatural entity's power that remains beyond human logic (Niazi et al., 2024). Consequently, backlighting and sharp silhouettes are not merely visual techniques but symbols that effectively articulate supernatural dominance within the terror genre.

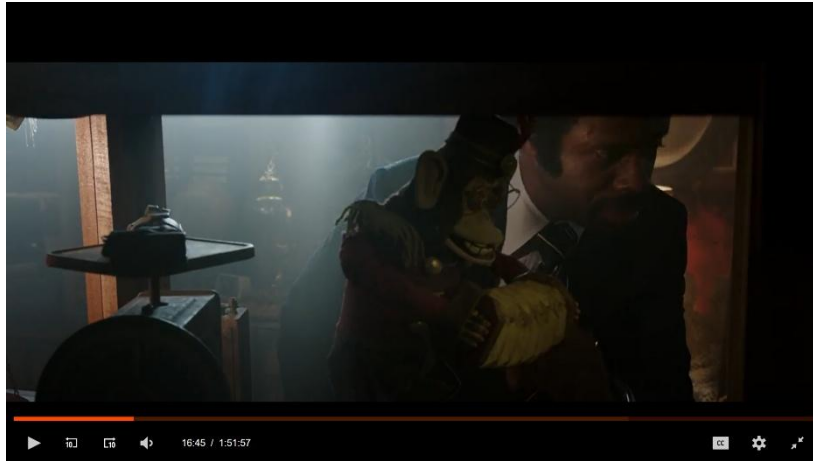


Figure 5. Scene (00:16:45)

Moreover, this study finds that the integration of cool colors and fragmented lighting successfully constructs a cinematic "myth" of the house as a predatory organism. The use of dull yellow in the house hallway (00:16:45) semiotically represents an infected transitional space, supporting Fisher (2014) concept of hauntology, where visual elements of the past are used to disrupt the ontological stability of the present. Although the termination scene employs balanced lighting and warm hues to trigger a relief effect, semiotically, this transition is relational; such visual catharsis can only be achieved through a dialectical contrast with the preceding chromatic horror. Heller-Nicholas (2020) argues that in modern horror, such visual resolutions often function as temporary closures that actually reinforce the traces of trauma through lingering visual memories.

The synthesis of this discussion affirms that the interaction between color degradation and contrast lighting techniques in *The Conjuring* constitutes a coherent semiotic engine in mediating the audience's experience of fear. These findings validate that a haunting atmosphere is not merely the result of visual surprises (jump scares), but the product of a sophisticated construction of signs where every gradation of shadow and chromatic saturation carries significant narrative weight. The mastery over this visual semiotic language allows the director to perform precise affective engineering on the audience, positioning this film as a vital precedent in 21st-century horror cinematography studies that prioritize atmospheric depth over the exploitation of physical violence.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the haunting atmosphere in *The Conjuring* (2013) is fundamentally constructed through a coherent system of visual signs, in which color and lighting function as the primary semiotic vehicles. The key findings indicate that the use of a desaturated color palette (dark brown, black, and greenish-grey) and low-key lighting techniques are not merely aesthetic choices for historical periodization, but rather connotative signifiers of spiritual corruption, isolation, and unseen threats. These elements work systematically to transform the familiar domestic space into a psychological labyrinth that is inherently unsafe for the audience.

Theoretically, this research offers implications for strengthening Roland Barthes' semiotic theory within horror cinematography studies, particularly regarding how the "myth" of the haunted house is produced through the manipulation of chroma and luminance. Practically, this study proves that the effectiveness of the modern atmospheric horror genre depends heavily on the cinematographer's ability to engineer "visual uncertainty." The final conclusion asserts that the fear generated by this film is the product of a sophisticated orchestration of signs, where the absence of light and the loss of color vitality effectively mediate the audience's experience of the uncanny and the supernatural presence.

Practical Implications For the film industry, these findings suggest that cinematographers and production designers should treat lighting and color grading not merely as "mood setters," but as a deliberate language of dread. By mastering the engineering of "visual uncertainty," filmmakers can effectively generate psychological terror without relying on high-budget visual effects or explicit gore. This study underscores that the strategic use of negative space and desaturated palettes can be a more cost-effective and sophisticated tool for engaging modern audiences who seek atmospheric depth over superficial jump scares. Suggestions for Future Research Future studies could expand this semiotic

inquiry by conducting comparative analyses across different cultural contexts for instance, comparing the "myth" of domestic space in Western supernatural horror versus Asian folk horror. Additionally, there is a significant opportunity to integrate these qualitative semiotic findings with neuro-cinematic approaches, such as using eye-tracking or EEG to empirically measure how "visual uncertainty" and specific chromatic affects trigger physiological fear responses in real-time.

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