

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**Over the summer, I did an episode about why Gothic stories have become trendy in literature and pop culture. And I was talking to a friend about that episode. And I said, matter-of-factly, well you know ghost stories are about issues of repressed trauma. And she said, huh. I heard that haunted house stories were metaphors for owning a house and all the personal and economic fears that come with that.**

**And when she said that it was not even like that proverbial light bulb that goes off in your head, it was like a whole house – a whole haunted house lit up in my head. And I said, that's so interesting, where did you hear that? And she said The Faculty of Horror.**

**Now, I knew The Faculty of Horror. It's a great podcast. They have deep analytical conversations about all things horror. But I hadn't heard that particular episode. After I listened, I got in touch with one of the co-hosts, Alexandra West. She has an outside perspective on all this subject because she's in Toronto.**

ALEX: There is this sense of American earnestness and like chutzpah, we're just going to buy this house and it's going to be great, and I love you so much babe, we're going to fucking do it, we're going to live in this creepy house and it's going to be fucking great, babe.

**<laughs>**

ALEX: And in Canada, we're like, oh gosh, I don't know, maybe we're going to buy this house, I don't know if this marriage is going to work out. <sigh>

**I also talked with Dahlia Schweitzer. She wrote a book of critical analysis of these films called Haunted Homes.**

DAHLIA: What drew me to the whole haunted homes narrative is this idea that, you know, drilled into our heads that the American dream is home ownership. And in these movies and television shows, it directly contradicts that and basically says, you know, the American nightmare is home ownership. You know, and over and over again, you have this pattern of, you know, people being, I think they call it like house poor, you know, where they, they buy sort of beyond their means because they are sort of, you know, aspirational suburbanites. They spend money, they don't have, they put it all in this house that they always get at a steal because, you know, someone was killed there, it's haunted or whatever, but they don't care because they're so desperate for home

ownership. And then once they get in, they can't get out because they can't afford to leave.

**The modern haunted house genre really kicked off in 1979 with The Amityville Horror, which was allegedly based on true events. Alex says that movie:**

ALEX: Allowed us a safe space to feel scared and not feel like, gosh, it's, you know, again, it's capitalism. It's crushing me. It's like, no, capitalism and ghosts are crushing me.

**And she's not the only one to see it this way. In a book of essays, Stephen King wrote that he thought the movie was a breakout hit because it came out at the end of the '70s, when Americans had been burdened by so many economic issues. In fact, he wrote the movie might as well have been called, The Horror of the Shrinking Bank Account.**

**The house in Amityville Horror was not a decrepit Gothic mansion like typical haunted house movies. It looked like the kind of house a lot of Americans live in.**

**Money comes up pretty early in the film. The characters of George and Kathy worry about whether they can afford to buy this place.**

*KATHY: \$80,000? I mean, might as well be \$800,000.*

*GEORGE: The house is worth 120,000. Easy.*

**The house isn't just a money pit. It's literally stealing their money.**

*GEORGE: What's the matter?*

*JIMMY: The money.*

*GEORGE: What money?*

*JIMMY: Money for the caterer. \$1,500. I put it in. I put it in this pocket.*

*KATHY: Well, it must have fallen out. Come on, now.*

*JIMMY: Well, it's not here.*

**And you know when you first buy a place, you discover things the previous owners did that make you wonder, who were these people? That's a big question of the film since those people are still around -- in spirit.**

*GEORGE: What do you want from us? God damnit. This is my house!*

**Amityville Horror also sets up a very pernicious trope, the so-called Indian Burial Ground.**

*CAROLYN: There was a tribe of Indians called the Shinnecock, and they use this land as sort of exposure pen. They put all the crazy people here and they left them here to die. There are people buried here.*

ALEX: I've read far more scholarship about it in the last few years, and more indigenous film critics being very vocal and critical about it. And, you know, instead of kind of writing them off as this ghost story, let's actually try to challenge ourselves in thinking about what needs to happen next and why, why they could be so very angry?

**They're clearly very angry because they haunted the hotel in The Shining.**

*CARETAKER: The site is supposed to be located on an Indian burial ground. And I believe they actually had to repel a few Indian attacks as they were building it.*

**They haunted Stephen King's Pet Cemetery.**

*VICTOR: This was their burial ground.*

*LOUIS: Who's burial ground?*

*VICTOR: Micmacs Indians.*

**They haunted The Simpsons. Homer was so mad, he called up his real estate agent.**

*HOMER: You didn't tell me it was built on an Indian Burial Ground! No, you didn't it. Well, that's not my recollection. Yeah. Well, all right. Goodbye. He says, he mentioned it five or six times*

**Even The Onion did a fake news story about how the entire country is cursed because it's built on an Indian Burial Grounds.**

*EXPERT 1: That's right. The Treasury, The Pentagon Congress, every single foreclosed home, they're all built on grave sites and therefore are cursed.*

*EXPERT 2: That's why the economy is struggling. It's not about speculative bubbles and lax regulation. It's Indian ghosts.*

*EXPERT 3: It certainly explains why there are all these poor people everywhere. These ghosts have been screwing with capitalism, so it doesn't work like it should.*

**The Indian Burial Ground plays into our collective guilt that this land was never ours to begin with. It's also a racist trope. And the issue of race comes up in more subtle ways with this genre.**

**When Dahlia was researching her book, she wanted to do a chapter on haunted house movies which featured Black families.**

DAHLIA: I could not believe how white these movies are. And it becomes impossible to find a film where you have a Black family that goes and, you know, moves into a house in the suburbs. And, you know, it's like all the, the sort of cliched tropes that exist that seem so ubiquitous. It's like as soon as you introduce a Black family, it's like, nope, suddenly that doesn't work.

*MALCOLM: There's a ghost in the house, I'm out.*

*KISHA: You can't leave!*

*MALCOLM: You watch me!*

**Unless it's a parody film like A Haunted House starring Marlon Wayans.**

*MALCOLM: Who am I kidding? I can't sell a house in this market. Immediate possession? It's already possessed!*

DAHLIA: One of the rare examples is Haunted Mansion with Eddie Murphy, and what's crazy is about that is they don't own the house because they were real estate agents for the people who do own the house. And then they just got stuck there because of the storm.

*JIM: Hello Ramsey. I'm Jim Evers of Evers and Evers Real Estate at your service.*

*RAMSLEY: We were not expecting....others.*

**Today, the suburbs are more diverse than ever. But to understand why these movies are so white, we have to look at how the suburbs were created, and the place they have in our national psyche.**

**BREAK**

**Dahlia says, a lot of people think the suburbs just happened organically, like the cities were overflowing, so people just started moving to the countryside. But it was not that haphazard.**

DAHLIA: It was a very strategic, you know, plan on the part of a bunch of different sort of government agencies, capitalism, et cetera, where it was, you know, the soldiers were coming back from World War II and it was like, all right, well we got to, we got to give them something. So, we have, you know, the GI Bill giving them really affordable mortgages, you know, if they were white, we have the, the building of the highways, the more affordability of the car. You know, it was kind of like all these different forces that created this sort of white flight fleeing the city into the suburbs.

**There was also red lining, where the government valued the worth of people's homes based on how many white people lived in the area. And in the late '70s and throughout the '80s, there were huge drops in property taxes, a lot of deregulation -- that supercharged the housing market. Entire communities of houses seemed to be cropping up overnight. House flipping becomes a phenomenon.**

DAHLIA: I mean, look at Poltergeist, you know, I mean, Poltergeist also speaks to all these different tropes where you have, you know, the housing developer who wants to make a buck, you know? And so, he just moves the headstones, but not the bodies.

*STEVE: Oh, come on. I mean, that's sacrilegious, isn't it?*

*REALTOR: Oh, don't worry about it. After all, it's not ancient tribal burial ground. It's just people.*

**Around the time that Poltergeist came out in 1982, we also start to see:**

DAHLIA: Cracks in the facade where we start getting into credit card debt. And this idea of, you know, kind of spending beyond your means and, uh, you know, keeping up with the Joneses and it's almost like you haven't been validated as an adult until you have a mortgage, but as you see in these haunted house movies, that there are people who, who can't afford these houses, you know? And they spend more than they should because then the, the cost of the houses went up. I mean, we see this happening now where the cost of housing has gone up disproportionate for people's salaries. And so, it becomes, you know, people couldn't afford to buy what their parents might have bought.

**But they bought the houses anyway.**

**I believe that this genre of haunted house films also reflects an emotional shift that's happening. Part of the American dream was that someone who was not born into privilege could own a house with a white picket fence. They could settle down in that house, raise a family, pass that house down for generations. They**

got a feeling of comfort every time they walked over a welcome mat which said Home Sweet Home.

But these days, I hear a lot of people refer to their homes as “the house” or “this house.” As in, “We put a lot of work into this house.” Or “How much do you think the house is worth now?”

ALEX: It's not just a home, it's an investment. It's part of your investment portfolio. It is literally an asset. It's this thing you exist in and that you maybe own or have access to. It's not this emotional place that you get to live in.

**Alex watches these movies, she can relate to that feeling of uneasiness, especially if there's an issue with debt -- economic debt or demonic debt.**

ALEX: Debt is a huge thing. It's something every generation, the more the middle class has grown, the more it's become an increasingly prevalent thing. We talk about it more and more, like I'm a millennial and my friends and I talk about it a lot. There's this notion that what we have, even if we're paying through the nose on it, is never truly ours. We don't have the means to leave, we don't have the opportunity to leave this horrible, haunted house. But then there's everything that has come before it, there's things that are coming back to haunt us and, and why are they trying to make themselves known is usually the key question. What is this presence trying to tell us? And why is it so angry at us? That's usually the question that you seek to answer in a haunted house film.

***It's funny, the more I started thinking about these films, the more I started becoming sympathetic to the ghosts. I don't know if you feel this way.***

ALEX: Yeah.

***It's kind of like they're, they're basically saying like, I put down a lot of money and a lot of time, and I was paying off my debt and I didn't think I was going to die! <laugh> I can't let go of this house!***

ALEX: That's, I mean, that's basically the plot of Beetlejuice

***<laugh>, right.***

*BARBARA: What's the good of being a ghost if you can't frighten people away?!*

*ADAM: Honey!*

*BARBARA: No, I'm not putting up with this!*

**Not surprisingly, there was another boom of haunted movies after the subprime mortgage crisis in 2008.**

ALEX: If you hadn't had had that 2008 housing crisis, you wouldn't gotten a film like *The Conjuring*, which is essentially kind of a retread of *Amityville Horror* in many ways. But it's played up like this family really doesn't have any money, and they are so cash strapped and they have so many kids, and it's so gosh, darn hard for them.

*CINDY: Do you think maybe we could've bought a house that has a toilet that actually works?*

*CAROLYN: Tell your father*

*CINDY: And there was this really funky smell in my bedroom last night, it reeked like something died.*

**Another reason why there were a lot of haunted movies around this time is because *Paranormal Activity* was a huge hit. The first movie came out at the height of the housing bubble. And the sequels came out after the bubble burst. In the first film, a young couple is living in a beautiful new home that's haunted. The husband buys a camera to capture what's going on.**

*KATIE: How much did this cost you?*

*MICAH: I think we're going to have a very interesting time capturing whatever paranormal phenomena is occurring or is not occurring so*

*KATIE: Seriously, what did you, uh, what'd you throw down for that?*

*MICAH: Well, about half as much as I made today*

**What stands out about the *Paranormal Activity* franchise is that films look like they're made by the characters with their own cameras. And Dahlia says a distrust of technology has become a common theme in these newer films.**

DAHLIA: You know, the evil comes through the computer monitor, it comes through the internet. You know, that if you want to be perfectly safe, you have to go to, you have to go to a place where there is no internet, where there is no Wi-Fi, there is no Bluetooth, because the technology is going to get you through that. It's still a very similar idea where, you know, the home, you're not safe in your own home, but the way that the, the evil is getting in has changed.

**I mean, I think it goes back to the idea that a house is a place to escape to. It's not about being part of a community. It's about walling yourself in. Your home is your castle. The technology can act like the moat around the castle. You can watch the outside world, but no one can see you -- in theory.**

**I started to wonder, have we gotten to the point now where the genre is becoming self-aware? You know the way the Scream movies comment on the tropes of slasher films? Is there anything out there that uses the lens of real estate to tell haunted house stories?**

**Turns out there is.**

**SurrealEstate is a show on the Syfy network. Season two just started airing. It's also on Hulu in the U.S.**

**The main character is a real estate agent named Luke Roman. His job is to sell haunted houses or stigmatized properties. In this scene, Luke is explaining what they do to a person he just hired to join their team.**

*LUKE: Some agencies, they help their clients sell their houses by reducing clutter, or by putting drops of vanilla extract on hot light bulbs for that fresh-baked cookie smell. We help them by stopping the walls from bleeding. For these people, it's not just their houses, you know, it's their lives. Their lives have become a Stephen King short story. And they need someone nice and smart to talk to. Someone who wants to make a difference. One house at a time.*

**SurrealEstate was created by George R. Olson. The idea for the show actually came from a true story – a story he heard from a real estate agent. The agent told George that he was once in the process of selling a house. The realtor was feeling really confident and he was telling the homeowner all the reasons why the house was very marketable.**

GEORGE: And the homeowner said yeah, yeah, all that stuff is great, but I'm a little worried about Sad Sally. And he said, Sad Sally. Who, who, who is that? And he said, oh, that's the name my daughter has come up for the woman who sits at our kitchen table and cries once or twice a month. And he said, I kind of looked at him to see if he was joking and he wasn't, you know? And the, the agent told me, okay, if you've got termites, I know who to call for that. Who the hell do I call for this? And that was kind of the first thought that I thought, huh, that's kind of a fun idea. Several years later it turned into this pilot script.

***So then in terms of writing Luke and the rest of the team, I think, was it fun in terms of, you know, typically their main motivation is that they'd be these like altruistic demon hunters, but the fact that their motivation is actually selling the house, what were some of the fun aspects of writing him and the rest of the team in that regard?***



GEORGE: See, I think that you've hit on exactly what's fun about the show, and what I've always found fun about the show is that they treat these supernatural manifestations and, and, you know, the ghosts are tied to often very emotional and very ephemeral and very ethereal kinds of motivation. And our people look at them in the same way as you would look at radon gas or something. They are barriers to getting someone to sign on the line that is dotted. And that pragmatic approach to something that is very emotional and mysterious and ephemeral, that's, I think what, where I find a lot of fun. And what I wanted to do was, was create a protagonist who did feel deeply the pain that these disjointed souls felt and was able to communicate with them and help them move to a higher plane and onto the next step and onto whatever's out there. But he's doing that as the means to an end, which is to sell a house. And we never lose sight of that. Uh, on my wall in the office where I have all these cards, index cards of, of plot ideas and story ideas and episode ideas and everything, I have in the middle of it a big sign that says, we are a show about real estate. We're a show about real estate. We're a show about stigmatized properties and how this, uh, specialized group tries to, to make them marketable.

*MEGAN: So, you're a ghost chaser?*

*LUKE: Miss Donovan. Megan? Megan. I'm about one thing, preserving homeowner equity, protecting the God given market value of your property from anything in this world or the next.*

*MEGAN: I don't believe in ghosts.*

*LUKE: Neither do I. I just work with them.*

**I told George about the theme of this episode. And I asked if this is something he'd ever thought about. He hadn't, but he said it felt right on the money.**

GEORGE: Oh, I think that's very, very real. You know, this is the biggest investment most of us are ever going to make in our lives. We would not think of spending a half a million dollars, \$750,000, you know, whatever on anything else in our lives. And signing up for a commitment of 30 years? A lot of people's marriage don't last for 30 years. But this is something, this is immediately something that is sitting on your shoulder and is going to be there whispering in your ear for 30 years. That's very analogous to the dread that people find, you know, about a cold spot in the attic or, um, uh, a place where the dog just stares in the corner.

***I mean, a nice thing about the show too is that on one hand you've got Luke and the real estate agents who are good people, but ultimately have selfish motives. But then you've got the vulnerability of the people selling their houses. I mean, they're very vulnerable to be in that state of just, please help me. And so I think that becomes kind of a nice, a nice tension a little bit to some extent.***

GEORGE: Yeah, there's always the realization that our people are in it to sell a house and they're in it, you know, for the commission and know and for those purposes. But one of the, the, the opportunities that we have to humanize them and to give them compassion and kindness and the things that, that make us root for them and make us like them are how they interact with these people who have seen their biggest investment of their lives turn into a horror show. Our people are very kind to the client and to the entity, right up until the point that the entity proves not to deserve kindness. Luke says in season two that sometimes, if possible, we try to help them move on, but sometimes you just need to, um, be more forceful.

***What are the challenges with, especially as you go into season two, where the show could easily become repetitive and procedural, what are some of the challenges that you found and the fun ways to kind of, uh, to mix it up and to tell, to tell the story in a lot of different ways?***

GEORGE: For one thing, the, the inner lives of our, uh, characters give us a lot of different places to go. And, um, peeling back the onion of their characters gives us a lot of fun to do. And one of the things that made me excited about the concept from the very beginning is if you take the number of mythologies that there are about ghosts and demons and supernatural creatures from all kinds of different cultures, and then you take the different kinds of properties, um, from houses to old buildings being raised for condos, and we're, we're, we're very conscious not to make everything happen in a spooky old Gothic house. Things happen in newer houses. And then looking at the clients, what's the motivation for a different client? And so far, we've not had a lot of silent moments in the, uh, writer's room looking at each other saying, okay, now what will we do?

**BREAK**

**SurrealEstate is not entirely a work of fiction. There are realtors out there who specialize in haunted properties. Cindi Hagley runs a real estate company in the San Francisco-Bay Area, and part of her business is called Past Life Homes.**

**She's heard of the show SurrealEstate, but she hadn't watched it yet. She's definitely familiar with haunted house movies. And I was curious whether she thinks these movies measure up to reality.**

**And by the way, this is a real conversation, I have not slipped into audio drama. Cindi has been on Good Morning America, 20/20, How Stuff Works. She's done a lot of newspaper interviews. And she wants to clarify:**

CINDI: I am not a haunted house realtor. Every October people come around and they want to do interviews with a haunted house realtor. I am a top selling realtor here in California. I sell up north, I sell in the Bay Area. I sell in Southern California. I don't care if the home is haunted or not. People come to me with distressed property because I'm a marketer. Distressed property could also be a haunting, but I do not go after haunted houses. That is not something, in fact, on my desk, I've got at least three people that have called me in the last month saying, I want to buy a haunted home. I generally don't return their call because they're usually kooks. You know, I look at a stigmatized, haunted property as just another property that needs to get sold. The difference with me and another realtor is this doesn't scare me. It doesn't intimidate me.

**And that comes from personal experience.**

CINDI: As a child, I grew up in the hills of Appalachia, and I remember I would go visit my grandmother, Grandma Short. My mother died when I was 16 months old. And I remember as a kid going to see her, and one time she says, yeah, I saw Ellen out in the field today, and she was just beautiful and glowing. And she says to tell you hi. Well, Ellen was my mom that had been dead a couple years, right? I, I mean, it didn't faze me as a child because I just thought this was normal. You saw people, things happened. So, it was all very normal for me until I got to college and realized I was a freak.

***So, let's say somebody, a property comes to you, and they say, you know, uh, I don't know if we're going to sell this. I got to be honest with you, it's haunted. What do you do next?***

CINDI: I handle the haunted property just as I would any other property. I go out, I evaluate it, and then I'll sit down with the owners of the people that have experienced the haunting and say, okay, tell me what happened. Sometimes it's a true haunting, sometimes it can be debunked. That's not my job to debunk it, but it is my job to disclose what is necessary to be disclosed.

***I mean, are there houses that are so haunted or have a bad reputation because they're haunted, that they're difficult to sell?***

CINDI: Oh my gosh, yes. Oh my gosh. I have to be careful with identifying the location. But there was a home very close to the, the Tate-LaBianca home where Manson took everybody out. I've never been asked to sell this home in any way, shape or form. I have been in it a couple of times, and I think that it would be next to impossible to sell this home because the energy is just so present. You can feel it when you walk through the door. And also, whatever spirits is there likes to, likes to mess with me a bit too, which I don't appreciate. I won't say that I'm scared, but I'm certainly intimidated.

***I feel bad for the homeowners in those situations. I mean, it must be, they, they, they ever get stuck with a home that they just can't sell.***

CINDI: This is the state of California. Everything has a price. It's either price, product or pitch. If it's that haunted, you just lower the price or you, you, you create a movie behind it, and it gets sold at some ungodly price. So, I've never had a home haunted or otherwise that I have not been able to sell. I mean, I've got stories, and I can tell you, I can, I, I've been possessed on site. I was shooting a TV show, and something happened, and it totally freaked me out. So, I've got the stories, but it's, I'm not somebody that is active in selling homes on a day-to-day basis. I just get these homes.

**Of course, I had to hear this story about how she was possessed. It happened when she was asked to take part in a ghosthunters-type of reality show. After a few hours, she felt like this was a mistake. She didn't believe the guy who said his house was haunted. She was getting antsy to leave, and she started to make wise-ass remarks. A psychic medium named Lynn, who was also asked to be part of the show, told Cindi she should be careful. There was a presence in the room, and it was getting close to Cindi.**

CINDI: And I said, Lynn, this is a load of crap that is so not going on. Why are you doing this? And she says, no, there's an entity standing right next to you. So, I'm like, you know, flapping my arms trying to be funny and there's nothing there. I don't know, five, 10 seconds later, I feel this electric energy just consumed my body, and I am, I just felt fuzzy and buzzy. And then I could feel whatever this was going all the way down, all the way down my body. As it went down my body, that part of my body that was still exposed, became cold, and it kept going, going, going, going, going all the way to the floor. And when it got to the floor, I was down just totally collapsed. I believe that my body was overtaken by that point. And, you know, my buddies scooped me up and we got outside, and I recovered very, very quickly. It was just saying, hey, we're here and we're real, and stop mocking us.

**In the same way that Cindi says she can't verify if ghosts are real, I can't verify if she was possessed or if there was a medical explanation. What I find interesting is her attitude about all this. In haunted house movies, possession is a huge deal. It's often the climax of the story. Or if it happens earlier, the possession has to keep escalating and escalating. And what does she think of those movies?**

CINDI: I think they're stupid. If it's a great movie based on content and maybe historical value, I'm a fan. But if it's just pandering to ghost and paranormal, I am not a fan of that. And what you see in the movies and what you see on these TV shows, it is not reality.

**I think what bothers her the most is that the evil spirits take over the whole movie. As far as she's concerned, ghosts are just part of life, and death and real estate. Life is for the living. And the living have to make a living.**

**That's it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to Alexandra West, Dahlia Schweitzer, George Olson and Cindi Hagley. I have links to all of their work in the show notes. If you liked this episode, you should check out my episode The Curse of The Curse, which looked at supposedly cursed horror films like Poltergeist.**

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