

The Role of Suspicion in Conveying Narrative Instability and the Collapse of Legal Authority in *A Killer Within* (2004)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how “A Killer Within” (2004) transforms suspicion into a structural principle that destabilizes legal authority and epistemological certainty in the detective genre. Departing from the classic convention that positions investigation as a means of restoring order, the film reverses this structure by positioning the protagonist, Addison Terrill, as both suspect and investigator. This study uses a qualitative approach through textual analysis within a narrative theory framework, focusing on focalization, as well as detective structure and the representation of institutional authority. The results show that the film reconfigures the detective paradigm through the blurring of the boundaries between suspect and investigator, the fragmentation of focalization that limits access to knowledge, and the representation of legal institutions as structures that are not fully trustworthy. Suspicion no longer functions as a path to truth but instead circulates continuously and produces narrative instability. Furthermore, the deconstruction of the domestic space reinforces the collapse of the social order and the protagonist's identity. Thus, the film does not offer a restoration of order. It constructs a narrative world in which certainty is never fully achieved and authority is constantly questioned, reflecting a shift in contemporary crime cinema towards exploring uncertainty as a structural principle.

Keywords: narrative device; detective structure; classic detective story; focalization; institutional authority

INTRODUCTION

Film is an expressive medium that actively shapes the audience's experience, with the primary goal of providing attractions and producing perceptual, affective, and cognitive responses (Bordwell, 1985, 2004; Bordwell D, 1993; Linnel, 1993). Narrative is the core of a film presented to the audience. In film, narrative not only conveys events but also regulates how information is presented through story's structure and audiovisual techniques (Carroll, 1985). Narrative comprehension occurs through the interaction of the story structure and the audience's sensory experience (Simin, 2020). In classic crime stories, crime narratives promise epistemological restoration when chaos is introduced through crime and resolved through rational investigation. Classical detective fiction, from Poe to the hard-boiled tradition, stabilizes social order through the authority of the investigator. The traditional hard-boiled genre usually features a cynical and emotionally resilient detective who must navigate a dark and corrupt world (King, 2024; Simin, 2020).

However, the film examined in this research, *A Killer Within* (2004), directed by Brad Keller and running for 1 hour and 50 minutes, disrupts the classic crime narrative structure by positioning its protagonist, Addison Terrill, not as a detached agent of truth but as both a suspect and an investigator. In this film, suspicion not only functions as a structural principle, leaving the audience with a constant sense of uncertainty. The impact of this innovation is significant, as legal authority and trust in institutions are shaken; there is no traditional guarantee of certainty as in classic crime stories. Modern film narratives, particularly thrillers, often utilize plot twists to provide surprise, deepen understanding of the story, and increase audience involvement (Holgersson et al., 2024). In *A Killer Within*, this plot twist arises from the protagonist's ambiguous position, forcing the audience to reassess who can be trusted. From the perspective of fabula, the story the audience constructs in their minds, a chronological, cause-and-effect sequence of events that is never directly present on screen, and syuzhet, the way the film actually structures and presents its story material, including how information is arranged, revealed, or concealed to guide the audience's understanding (Bordwell, 1985), this film redesigns the narrative structure of classic detective stories. In detective films, the fabula typically follows a chronological structure of 'crime + investigation,' but the syuzhet strategically withholds information about the crime and foregrounds the investigative process instead, thereby creating gaps that the audience must actively fill, producing a narrative experience that is more complex than the underlying story order suggests (Bordwell, 1985). In addition, style and cinematic techniques such as camerawork, editing, sound, and mise-en-scène, help convey this murder mystery story, thereby enriching the audience's narrative experience (Bordwell, 1985, 2004; Linnel, 1993)(Bordwell, 1985, 2004; Linnel, 1993). Rather than following a pattern of "chaos to investigation to stability", the detective story today mostly emphasizes the protagonist's subjective experience and the fragmentation of reality. The classic detective story emphasizes objective certainty, and each revelation within plot directly affects the audience's perception and triggers the appearance of plot twists. However, plot twists in modern narratives are ambivalent; they can enhance the audience's experience and understanding, but they also risk being manipulative if not used appropriately and ethically (Brown, 2022).

A Killer Within Addison Terril, a man who must urgently find his wife's killer, while being accused of being the perpetrator himself. In this film, Addison's suspicions about the killer are constantly shifting, leading the audience to question his role as a 'problem solver' and highlighting the epistemological uncertainty. The narrative complexity in this film can be understood as a puzzle that must be logically and causally assembled by the audience (Simin, 2020), where the narrative utilizes the technique of retardation and misleading initial impressions, which are then corrected as the story develops (Bordwell, 1985). This study analyses the film through narrative focalization, which in the context of *A Killer Within* helps highlight how information is filtered through Addison's perspectives, perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and ideological, and how this shapes meaning, organizes information, and influences the audience's interpretation of what is true or false (Gadhire et al., 2022; Saleh, 2025). Furthermore, the construction of space and the shifting roles of characters as suspects and investigators reinforce a sense of uncertainty and emphasize the collapse of epistemological stability and legal authority, as the audience can never truly be sure who can be trusted.

This article examines how the film constructs suspicion as a structural principle that challenges legal authority and epistemological certainty in the detective genre. Suspicion circulates like an unstoppable current, eroding the foundations of authority and silently

undermining the fragile coherence of institutional trust, without ever reaching certainty. Through narrative focalization, spatial construction, and character positioning, the film dramatizes a collapse of legal authority and epistemological stability. The film reconfigures the classic detective paradigm in three ways: first, by merging the roles of suspect and investigator, so that the audience continually questions who can be trusted; second, through narrative fragmentation and focalization, which emphasize the protagonist's divided perspective and subjective experience; and third, by portraying legal institutions as unreliable, thus rendering legal authority fragile. The consequence of this setup is a crisis of authority that supersedes any restoration of order, as the film challenges and destabilizes the classic expectations of the detective genre, positing suspicion as a condition that constantly shapes the narrative and the audience's experience.

A Killer Within had limited direct academic discussion, so this study positions itself within a broader framework of studies on detective narrative and epistemology, neo-noir and post-classical crime cinema, and the concept of suspicion as a narrative condition. In the detective narrative tradition, classic detective fiction is understood as a model of rational closure, where the detective functions as a guarantor of social order and the crime narrative leads to the restoration of epistemological certainty. Traditional detective fiction operates through the logic of transparency: clues accumulate, the investigator interprets them, and the truth is ultimately revealed. Information is limited so that the audience only knows as much as the detective, creating identification, suspense, and curiosity (Bordwell, 1985). However, in studies of neo-noir and post-classical crime cinema, attention has shifted to moral ambiguity, institutional corruption, fragmented narrative structures, and increasing distrust of authority (Brammer, R., Hackett, L. J., & Coghlan, 2025; Conard, 2006; Neema Amani, 2025; Zhou, 2022). In this context, the story's resolution is no longer final. It is provisional, while suspicion can persist even after the narrative ends. In line with this, recent theoretical discussions in crime studies suggest that suspicion in contemporary narratives no longer functions as a path to truth, but rather as a condition that creates instability; instead of clarifying, suspicion continues to develop and spread throughout the narrative structure (Ferdinando Spina, 2017).

While extensive research exists on classical detective fiction and neo-noir cinema, little attention has been paid to independent thrillers that disrupt narrative certainty through focalization. This article addresses this gap by examining how such films reconfigure authority and knowledge through narrative perspective. The uniqueness of this study lies in its focus on contemporary narratives that do not always provide a complete resolution for the audience. This study offers alternative resolutions through convoluted plots and open endings, allowing the audience to be more actively involved in interpreting and constructing the meaning of a film's conclusion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This analysis integrates three conceptual lenses, combining several key approaches to examining contemporary thriller films. It focuses on the relationship between narrative structure, narrative perspective, and ideological implications for legal authority. Through these three lenses, the research emphasizes that film functions not only as a storytelling medium but also shapes how audiences understand truth and justice. This approach is particularly relevant for analysing films that do not offer conventional resolutions but instead present a more complex and open-ended narrative experience.

Addressing the issues of detective structure and narrative closure, Tzvetan Todorov (Todorov, 1977) explains that classic detective fiction is composed of stages: crime,

investigation, revelation, and restoration. This structure aligns with O.V. Koliassa's explanation that the detective story, as part of crime fiction, focuses on the crime, the investigation process, and the revelation of the truth, culminating in a denouement, with basic elements such as the victim, the perpetrator, and the detective (Koliassa, 2019). In this pattern, the detective functions as an epistemological authority figure who stands beyond suspicion and directs the plot toward a single truth through deductive logic, as inherited from Edgar Allan Poe through the pattern of mystery, rational investigation, and logical solution. Therefore, classical narrative emphasizes certainty, rationality, and complete narrative closure, which also serves as a source of intellectual satisfaction for the reader (Koliassa, 2019). However, over time, this structure has not always been stable. In hard-boiled detective fiction, the detective is no longer entirely outside the system but becomes an antihero who navigates between the criminal and corrupt social worlds, using more pragmatic and violent methods (Gadhire et al., 2022). This shift is increasingly evident in film noir and neo-noir, which Mark T. Conard and Jason Holt argue present moral ambiguity, pessimism, and what is referred to as stylized crime realism. In this context, the investigation process does not always produce a single truth, and the restoration stage often fails or is merely superficial (15, 19). Furthermore, as Brammer points out, neo-noir presents a more fragmented narrative and is full of distrust of authority, so that narrative closure becomes ambiguous or open (Brammer, R., Hackett, L. J., & Coghlan, 2025). Thus, although Todorov's model remains the foundation, the development of the genre shows a shift from certainty to complexity and uncertainty in the representation of truth.

Within the framework of narrative focalization, Gérard Genette positions focalization as a crucial aspect of narrative discourse, particularly within the category of mood, which distinguishes between "who sees" and "who speaks" (Genette, 1980). Focalization relates to how perceptual perspectives are constructed within a narrative, thus determining who sees, who knows, and who interprets the events in the story. This concept was also discussed by Sachin Subrav Gadhire, who explains that focalization encompasses various dimensions (such as modes of perception, aspects of time and ideology), types (such as zero, internal, and external focalization), as well as forms (such as fixed, variable, and multiple) (Gadhire et al., 2022). Furthermore, focalization involves the relationship between the focalizer, focalized, and focalizee, which together shape how information is filtered and conveyed to the audience. Thus, as emphasized by Taisuke Akimoto and Takashi Ogata, the choice of perspective in focalization significantly influences the meaning of the narrative and can even alter the assessment of characters and events (Akimoto & Ogata, 2015).

In the context of the film analysed, focalization is centered on Addison's character as the internal focalizer, so that the audience's access to information is limited by his perceptions and knowledge, which are not entirely reliable. This aligns with David Bordwell's view that film narrative is a dynamic process in which the audience actively constructs meaning through the interaction between the fabula and the syuzhet. The fabula refers to the story the audience constructs in their minds, consisting of a sequence of events arranged chronologically and linked by cause and effect, even though this story is never directly presented on screen. The syuzhet, by contrast, refers to the way the film organizes and presents these events, including how information is arranged, revealed, or withheld to guide the audience's understanding (Bordwell, 1985). This approach is also related to the concept of narrative complexity proposed by Luis Antunes, where narrative is understood as a puzzle that must be logically assembled by the audience (Simin, 2020). Consequently, Addison's limited knowledge produces narrative

uncertainty and limits access to "objective truth," thereby reinforcing ambiguity and opening up the possibility of diverse interpretations in the viewing experience.

As a theoretical implication, deviation from the classic structure of the detective narrative can no longer be read as having a single, fixed meaning; rather, it is shaped by context, reader interpretation, and cultural positioning. The narrative is produced through limited, fragmented, and unstable knowledge relations. In this context, the detective's authority as the epistemological core shifts because there is no longer a figure who fully controls information or guarantees its complete restoration. This also relates to the concept of the open text, which emphasizes that meaning is not locked by the text but is instead open to various possible interpretations. Similarly, David Bordwell explains that narrative strategies in film can be understood through three main aspects: knowability, self-awareness, and communicativeness, which collectively govern how information is provided, restricted, or withheld from the audience, thus shaping how the audience understands the story (Bordwell, 1985)(Bordwell, 1985).

The use of plot twists and open endings reinforces narrative uncertainty and opens up wider interpretative space. According to D. R. Brown, plot twists increase audience engagement through elements of surprise, reinterpretation of the story, and encouragement to reread the narrative, while also triggering strong emotional responses and critical reflection on audience assumptions (Brown, 2022). This technique works through the manipulation or withholding of information, thus not only conveying the truth but also shaping the narrative experience itself. Thus, the audience is no longer passive recipients because they also play an active role in constructing meaning. This suggests that independent thrillers present a more participatory narrative experience while simultaneously challenging the concept of definitive justice, as truth becomes relative, open-ended, and dependent on an unstable perspective.

METHOD

Film analysis in this study is defined as the process of examining a film's elements and their interrelationships to gain a deeper understanding of its meaning, artistic value, and socio-cultural context. A film is positioned as an aesthetic work and a socio-cultural medium, thus requiring a multidimensional approach that combines interpretation and evaluation through critical observation of technical, narrative, and thematic aspects (Liu, 2025; Wang, 2023).

This study employed a qualitative approach with a textual analysis method for the film *A Killer Within*. The analysis design involved several stages: repeated viewings to gain a comprehensive understanding, noting key dialogue and scenes, and documenting relevant narrative elements. The collected data were then analysed by identifying narrative patterns, relationships between scenes, and visual and thematic elements that support the construction of meaning, ultimately yielding research findings.

Another approach used was narrative analysis with a critical perspective, combining narratological theory, particularly the concept of focalization, with studies of institutional authority and legitimacy, and the concept of suspicion as a narrative condition. Using the concept of focalization, which draws on the thinking of Gérard Genette, narrative is understood as filtered through Addison Terrill's perspective, rendering the knowledge presented limited, partial, and unstable.

Furthermore, an analysis of authority reveals that legal institutions, which conventionally function as guarantors of truth, are instead represented as unreliable and repressive structures. This is reinforced by the concept of suspicion as a narrative condition,

where suspicion no longer leads to resolution. Thus, this methodology allows for a reading that positions the film as a construction that actively establishes a crisis of truth and the structural collapse of authority.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

THE CLASSICAL DETECTIVE FRAMEWORK AND ITS DISRUPTION

Classic detective narratives traditionally operate along a structured path from crime to recovery. This film disrupts that structure by disordering the certainty and interrupting the typical closure. In classic detective fiction, the investigator is detached, suspicion is directional, and truth resolves ambiguity. In *A Killer Within*, however, Addison is immediately positioned as the suspect. Law enforcement does not begin from an objective standpoint, but from presumption:

“Did anybody see you?”

“No, I used my key.”

“Well, the police report indicates that Detective Washington tried to contact your firm around 9:14 p.m. and got no answer.”

“I had left already.”

“So, you don’t have an alibi?” (30:02–30:08)

“When a wife is murdered, the primary suspect is always the husband.” (30:19)

The investigation in this scene demonstrates a shift from an objective to a biased process, with law enforcement seeking to confirm initial assumptions. It does not neutrally seek the truth. Generalizations immediately direct suspicion toward the husband, while the emphasis on the lack of an alibi indicates that the interrogation is focused on the suspect's weaknesses without exploring alternative possibilities. As a result, the investigation no longer functions as a search for truth. It is as a mechanism to reinforce initial suspicions.

The initial investigation phase is shaped by early findings that guide the direction of the case. Early evidence, the emergency response, and the absence of direct witnesses establish the basic narrative, while details of the victim's condition and the autopsy report reinforce the physical evidence. However, these elements are interpreted within a biased framework, meaning that this phase not only presents the facts but also shapes how those facts are understood.

The interrogation scene further emphasizes this dynamic by systematically directing suspicion toward Addison. The questions posed reflect the typical pressures of an interrogation room, but remain framed by initial assumptions, thus losing their neutrality. The presence of legal counsel demonstrates Addison's limited agency, which causes a need for him to defend himself within a system he cannot fully influence. The film reverses the epistemological hierarchy: instead of producing clarity, the investigation deepens instability. As David Herman argues, narratology consists of narration (how the story is told) and focalization (how information is filtered)(Herman, 2007). Because narrative necessarily involves selection, it inevitably shapes and limits what can be known.

The film follows Addison's search for his wife's killer but never provides complete clarity. All that emerges are fragments of clues that constantly shift. Initial suspicions point to

Sunny Brutin, a criminal who is thought to have a motive. However, this belief crumbles when evidence begins to show inconsistencies:

“I know who killed my wife, and it wasn’t Sunny Brutin... the stocking they fished out of the pool had no blood on it. It wasn’t a murder weapon...” (1:28:36–1:28:42)

Suspicion then shifts to Vargas, a supporting character who acts as Addison’s sidekick in the investigation and a former detective who was dismissed for violating legal procedures, yet still assists Addison in searching for his wife’s real killer:

“You’re keeping a file on me like the rest of your suspects... You killed Becky. You had the motive. You knew my address. You knew the entry code to my house. And you’re the one who planted that stocking on Brutin so you could incriminate him.” (1:28:47–1:28:59)

This shift demonstrates that the investigative process is increasingly hindered by subjectivity. Suspicions against Vargas are based not only on the logic of the evidence, but also on personal relationships, especially because a past conflict of Vargas’s prior dismissal from the police force which is suggested to have been influenced by Addison’s strict and uncompromising role as a District Attorney. Thus, the investigation is no longer purely rational. It is also influenced by bias and emotion. This uncertainty is further heightened when Addison is reminded that all the evidence points to him:

“If Brutin isn’t the killer, all the evidence points to you... You don’t have an alibi... There’s insurance money... You have the knowledge to set up Brutin as the killer.” (1:25:38–1:25:51)

This situation places Addison in a paradoxical position: he is both investigator and suspect. His quest for the truth continually clashes with the construction of evidence that criminalizes him. Suspicion then shifts again, this time to Sam Moss:

“Sam is one smart... he knew Brutin was being released... he planted evidence in the pool to incriminate me... It’s a perfect plan. Brilliantly executed.” (1:31:17–1:31:43).

However, as previously suspected, this hypothesis never achieves certainty. Any construction of truth is always provisional and easily replaced by other possibilities. Even when the case is formally declared closed by the authorities, with Sam Moss, Addison’s colleague and subordinate, confessing to the murder before taking his own life, uncertainty persists. This is reflected in Addison’s own doubt regarding Sam’s confession, as shown in the following statement:

“He said he killed her. That’s enough, I suppose. I wish I had more to go on.” (1:34:39–1:34:47)

Institutional resolution does not produce epistemological truth. The perpetrator's confession is not sufficient to eliminate doubt, as Sam Moss claims to have committed the murder out of jealousy, rooted in long-standing resentment toward Addison's achievements, having consistently been second to him both academically and professionally. He also suggests an intention to benefit from the death of Addison's wife. However, this confession raises further suspicion for Addison, who begins to question whether Sam is protecting the real perpetrator, possibly someone close to him, especially given his insistence that Addison stop pursuing the case. Finally, the film offers another possibility that further blurs the boundaries of truth:

"But what if it was a woman? Strangling is not a woman's crime..." (1:40:46–1:40:52)

Although there are indications that Sarah Moss, the wife of Sam Moss, may be the actual perpetrator, the narrative never definitively confirms this. The ending remains open, and this possibility can be read as either reality or as Addison's subjective projection. Thus, the narrative maintains a state of instability, where the truth is always delayed and never fully ascertained.

THE PROTAGONIST AS SUSPECT-INVESTIGATOR

Unlike the classic detective figure, who is rational, objective, and wields institutional authority, Addison operates in a paradoxical position: he is simultaneously investigator and suspect. This situation marks a significant shift from traditional detective narrative conventions. Addison not only investigates, but also does so under the pressure of suspicion, without institutional legitimacy, and in a state of emotional instability. Thus, the investigative process is no longer driven by controlled rationality. This process is actually supported by desperation and a personal need to prove one's innocence.

Addison's character is unique due to his legal background: he once worked in a prosecutor's office but chose to leave and establish his own law firm with a friend because he couldn't stand dealing directly with criminal cases. This decision reflects his desire to distance himself from the world of crime, but things change when his wife is murdered and he becomes a suspect. Using his legal knowledge, Addison dares to hunt down the perpetrator using various methods, including enlisting the help of his former detective friend. This is where ambiguity arises: whether his actions remain within the corridor of institutional law or are driven by personal interests. As the protagonist, Addison blurs the line between official and private law but is still portrayed as a figure who upholds honesty and rejects cheating, thus embodying ambiguity itself.

David Bordwell explains that fictional characters are constructed by viewers through a person schema encompassing body, mind, emotions, goals, and traits, and are interpreted through inferences drawn from limited cues such as dialogue, actions, and visual details provided by the narrative (Bordwell, 1985). In Addison's case, this schema becomes unstable because the available information is partial and often contradictory. He is constructed as an ambiguous figure: a father, a husband, and a murder suspect. This ambiguity forces the audience to constantly revise their understanding of the character.

Addison's position as focalizer further reinforces this instability. According to Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri, focalization is not simply a representation of consciousness, because it is a process involving perception and cognition in the formation of meaning (Horstkotte & Pedri, 2011). Meanwhile, David Herman emphasizes that focalization is

characterized by the limitation of narrative information according to the character's perspective (Herman, 2007). In this film, because the focalizer (Addison) does not have full access to the truth, the information the audience receives is also limited, distorted, and unstable.

This condition is reinforced by a system of plot twist, which, as explained by Elias Holgersson and Tarek Hasne, serves to surprise the audience and shift their understanding of the narrative (Holgersson et al., 2024). In this context, Addison's dual position as suspect and investigator becomes the primary mechanism enabling this shift in interpretation.

This transformation results in a circulation of suspicion that is never truly resolved. as reflected in the following exchange between the investigating officer and Addison:

"I went back to my office. I had some work to finish."

"Did anybody see you?"

"No, I used my key."

"Well, the police report indicates that Detective Washington tried to contact your firm about 9:14 p.m. and got no answer."

"I had left already."

[30:02-30:08]

"Well, you and your wife having any problems..... You know the routine."

[30:13]

This quote demonstrates that suspicion is not directed toward resolution but continues to be reproduced by positioning Addison as the prime suspect, reinforced by the absence of evidence that could stabilize his position. The lack of an alibi not only prevents him from proving his innocence but also further entangles him in a web of institutional suspicion, where each interaction deepens rather than resolves uncertainty. His responses fail to provide clarification and instead open up new interpretations that cast further doubt on his position, while even crucial information emerges from external sources.:

"Your neighbor Sarah Moss... noticed a broken window."

"Jesus, I forgot to call her." [30:33-30:41]

This confirms Addison's lack of complete control over the knowledge relevant to his own case. As a result, the knowledge in this narrative is partial and fragile:

"He's four. He's a witness. He's my only witness." [32:11]

The reliance on a child witness marks a serious epistemological crisis, where the truth depends on unstable sources. On the other hand, Addison's position is also coloured by distrust, as clearly reflected in his words in the following statements, which reveal his growing suspicion toward the investigation, his awareness of being targeted by the authorities, and his attempts to redirect attention to other potential suspects.

"You said Sunny Brutin broke his parole. You don't know where he is? Find him." [37:33-37:40]

"They're not looking for Brutin." [38:28-38:33]

"The cops are circling me. And if I'm in jail and Brutin's on the loose..." [39:00-39:07]

These quotes indicate that Addison no longer trusts the legal system as a source of truth but instead sees it as a threat that could trap him. Simultaneously, Addison's own credibility is continually undermined by the narrative:

"You have a girlfriend, and we know she visited you at your office the day of the murder." [37:05–37:10]

"...her tubes were tied..."

She didn't tell me about that." [37:17–37:22]

The contradictions between Addison's claims and the evidence that emerged undermined his credibility, making him no longer a reliable source of information. Addison also could not claim to be a good and faithful husband. The woman suspected of being his mistress who visited his office was his wife, disguised in a colored wig to entertain him at work. On the other hand, the suspected killer, despite his history of sexual violence, did not touch Addison's wife (*"Brutin raped three women, but he didn't rape your wife."* [36:40–36:46]). This fact indirectly challenged the initial suspicions and pointed to Addison as the true perpetrator. Thus, Addison's position as suspect-investigator creates a situation where suspicions continue to circulate, interactions reinforce uncertainty, and knowledge remains partial and fragile. This ultimately creates narrative instability, as the focalizer itself is epistemologically unstable. The audience not only doubts the world depicted, but also the perspective upon which they base their understanding of that world.

This change is also evident in the visual representation of Addison's house. Initially, it is associated with luxury and order, as implied by the phrases *"Mama's wearing Prada"* [9:37–9:44] and *"we have a fortune"* [10:50–11:02]. However, as the story progresses, this space becomes chaotic and riddled with traces of violence, such as *"He was found face down on the kitchen floor"* [29:24–29:30]. When Addison returns home, he marks this change with, *"my wife used to keep this place so spotless"* [49:09–49:14], demonstrating the contrast between the past and the present. The state of the house after the murder such as *"kitchen window's broken"* [49:14–49:20] and *"he grabs your kid"* [50:06–50:12] demonstrate that the domestic space has now become a site of negotiation between memory and speculation.

Furthermore, the emotional breakdown sequence emphasizes Addison's loss of psychological control and stability.

"Oh, screw this" [21:39–21:45],

"Why would you do that without discussing it with me first?" [23:18–23:23],

"Oh God... Jesus" [27:39–27:45]

The small expressions of annoyance above contain emotional outbursts, the intense conflict, and the traumatic response. The problem feels circular, Addison is trapped in his own confusion, wanting to find the answer to his problem by catching the real killer, but his own thoughts and actions make him next in the endless line of suspicion. His internal conflict is deepening because of his emotional ambivalence. Thus, through unstable internal focalization, the film shows that the domestic space is no longer a center of order. The domestic space is a place where conflict, trauma, and uncertainty accumulate, indicating the overall collapse of order.

INSTITUTIONAL DISTRUST AND LEGAL FAILURE

The legal system in this film is represented as a problematic structure that never functions as a stabilizing institution: it tends to assume guilt, fails to provide protection, and operates rigidly. In conventional crime narratives, legal institutions typically represent order and truth. However, when law enforcement begins to rely on suspicion and even accuse the protagonist, it becomes an oppressive force. This shift reflects broader anxieties about institutional authority, particularly in the context of the early 2000s, when trust in the legal system began to be questioned.

The film consistently demonstrates that truth is not guaranteed by law. The truth depends on how it can be proven and presented. This is evident in the following conversation, which emphasizes that the primary focus is not on what happened, but on whether there are witnesses who can corroborate the story:

“I went back to my office... I was there for a while...”

[29:56]

Truth, then, is reduced to a matter of visibility and proof, as illustrated in the following exchange between Addison and Vargas:

“Nah, I don't blame Garrett. He's always been by the book. Straight lace, no imagination.”

“No imagination? Is that what it takes to plant evidence?”

“It's not like I didn't have any evidence on Stroud, just not enough to convince a jury. I only planted enough to prove the elements. A lot of cops plant evidence. We don't plant evidence on innocent people, only on the scum we can't quite get.”

“And who decides who's scum?”

.....

“You don't know what it's like to track a criminal for two years and watch him go free. You don't know what it's like to tell a mother that her kid is never coming home from school again. And when you let Stroud go and he killed another little girl, that's when I hated your guts. You know something? You're lucky I didn't prosecute you for fabricating physical evidence. You'd have spent 2 to 10 years in prison for that, not to mention a fine of about \$10,000. Would you have preferred that?”

[01:05:04–01:05:38]

This exchange suggests that legal truth is shaped less by objective facts than by the ability to construct a coherent and convincing account. In this context, truth is not something to be discovered, but something that is produced and maintained within the logic of the legal system.

Furthermore, the use of forensic evidence in the film does not provide certainty. It opens up room for interpretation. The statement *“My wife had a 0.15 blood alcohol level... so she'd been drinking... that changes things”* [50:30–50:40] demonstrates how data can be used to direct perception and shape a particular narrative. Under these conditions, justice does not emerge inherently from the system. Legal outcomes are determined by loopholes in the system, not by truth itself. Thus, the film presents legal institutions not as guardians of justice, but as

fragile, manipulable, and not entirely trustworthy. When the law fails to guarantee truth and justice, individuals are forced to navigate, and even exploit, the system's weaknesses.

NARRATIVE INSTABILITY AS STRUCTURAL CONDITION

The narrative instability in this film does not merely emerge as a temporary effect of the conflict but develops into a structural condition that shapes the experience of the audience. The accumulation of previous suspicions, uncertainties, and institutional failures results in a situation where suspicions are never truly resolved. The narrative maintains ambiguity, leaving the audience in a state of doubt about what happened. This is evident in how information is always presented in a partial and debatable form. Even when the narrative appears to be moving toward an explanation,

The explanation does not completely close off the possibility of other interpretations. Thus, every attempt to achieve conviction opens up space for new doubts. Truth is never final, but always in a state of suspension. As a result, the form of "closure" in this narrative is fragile. While structurally the film provides a sense of resolution, it does not fully restore a sense of epistemological certainty. The audience is not given a strong enough foundation to accept one version of the truth in its entirety.

On the other hand, authority, both in the form of legal institutions and individual figures, remains compromised. When the legal system proves incapable of guaranteeing truth, and the protagonist himself is complicit in producing a narrative that is not entirely trustworthy, there is no longer a source of authority that can serve as a guarantor of meaning. This creates a situation where there is no truly stable position on which to base interpretation.

Thus, suspicion in the film *A Killer Within* becomes a structural principle that governs the entire narrative. Uncertainty is the fundamental condition of the story itself. The narrative reveals the impossibility of achieving closure.

FROM INDIVIDUAL INSTABILITY TO INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE

The instability of Addison's position is not isolated and reflects a broader failure of institutional authority. His ambiguity as both suspect and investigator demonstrates the legal system's inability to consistently produce certainty. The legal process relies more on prejudice, narrative construction, and evidence selection than on objective truth. Throughout the film, suspicions about Addison are not based on solid evidence. Reasoning relies more on procedural logic. The absence of an alibi alone is enough to maintain his status as a suspect. This situation demonstrates that the system focuses more on gaps and inconsistencies than on understanding the full extent of events. As a result, the law loses its position as a neutral arbiter and reinforces suspicion.

Addison's efforts to navigate this situation also demonstrate the system's limitations. He has a legal background yet remains unable to stabilize her position. His independent investigation lacks institutional recognition. This position makes him even more vulnerable. This demonstrates that truth in the legal system is highly dependent on position and legitimacy within the institution.

Legal truth in this film is also performative. Statements must be consistent, and the narrative must appear convincing. In such circumstances, the need for a coherent narrative often trumps the truth. Addison's instability emerges as part of a system that emphasizes probability over certainty. Ultimately, the persistent suspicion surrounding Addison reflects

the instability of the legal system itself. He is unable to overcome suspicion as a suspect in his wife's murder. This situation demonstrates the institution's restriction to provide certainty. Thus, Addison's crisis develops into a structural problem related to the limitations of the legal system to guarantee truth and justice.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *A Killer Within* reconfigures the detective paradigm by collapsing the boundary between suspect and investigator, fragmenting narrative focalization, and destabilizing institutional authority. The film constructs a world in which suspicion circulates without a stable resolution. In doing so, it participates in a broader transformation of crime cinema where authority is no longer guaranteed; it is perpetually contested.

Within this framework, Addison's role as focalizer is key in shaping the viewer's experience of instability. His limited and unreliable perspective hinders the formation of a complete narrative truth. As a result, the focus is on how knowledge is constructed. Thus, the film challenges the notion that detective narratives must end with clarity. By embracing ambiguity as a structural condition, *A Killer Within* expands the possibilities within the detective genre. The film demonstrates that the value of detective narratives lies not necessarily in their ability to resolve uncertainty, but in their ability to reveal the limitations of knowledge and the instability of truth itself.

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