Affective Intensities and Evolving Horror Forms: 
From Found Footage to Virtual Reality

Adam J. Daniel

Doctorate of Philosophy

2017

Western Sydney University
Acknowledgments

To my family: Terry, Moira, Andrew, Alison. For always supporting me, for being my devil's advocate, for challenging me, and for never discouraging me from burying my head inside of a book. I am always grateful for your love and encouragement.

To Brett Hendry and Kevin Thompson: two passionate teachers who opened my eyes to possibilities in the world through their love for education, literature and art.

To the Sydney Screen Studies Network, particularly Phoebe Macrossan, Jessica Ford, Melanie Robson: I love this organisation and the people in it, for their passion for cinema, their friendship, and the supportive environment we are working to create for film and media scholars in this city. Thank you!

To the New Directions in Horror Conference, University of Otago, 2016: for inspiring me and challenging me, for making me recognise there is a community of scholars who care about the ‘dark arts’ in the way I do, thank you.

To Alex Ling: for giving me a role model to aspire to, for your intelligence, good humour and constant encouragement, and for making me want to keep the torch burning.

Special mention to: Jennifer Ventura, Tito Ventura, Jeremy Byrnes, Katie Kolenberg, and extended family and friends for the big and little times you've encouraged me.

Thank you to all of the members of Western Sydney University's Writing and Society Research Centre for their constructive feedback, advice and for creating a collegial and positive community of scholars. Special thanks to Melinda Jewell for all her support.

To Anthony Uhlmann and Sara Knox: your feedback and guidance have been invaluable. Thank you for the generosity of your time and the intellectual rigour with which you have treated my work. Thank you for making me a better scholar and writer through your example.

To Anne Rutherford: It is difficult to encapsulate into words how grateful I am for your mentorship and encouragement over the last 4 ½ years. Thank you for your incalculable patience, your profound insight, and your generous professional guidance. Thank you for encouraging me to pursue further post-graduate education. It has been a richly rewarding experience. I am particularly appreciative that you have been both my most demanding critic and strongest supporter: without both I could not have achieved the highest standard of work I am capable of. I hope to one day live up to the benchmark you have set for me as both an academic and an educator.

To Lara: my very own person, my number one supporter, my best friend. Thank you for being patient, supportive and loving as I have wrestled with this monster. Thank you for suffering through the occasional horror movie. Thank you for putting up with books and papers scattered everywhere. Thank you for your diligent eye in proofreading. But mostly thank you for being wonderful you.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

.................................................................
(Signature)
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures and Illustrations</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: From the Semantic to the Somatic: Affective Engagement</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with Horror Cinema</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: From Identification to Embodied Spectatorship</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the Found Footage Horror Film</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Perception and Point of View in the Found Footage Horror</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film: New Understandings via Deleuze’s Perception-Image and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panksepp’s SEEKING Instinct</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four: The Evolving Screen Forms of New Media Horror</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five: The Spectator-Interactor of Virtual Reality Horror</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books, Articles, and Websites Referenced</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images Referenced</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos Referenced</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Films Referenced</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television Referenced</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Nola in *The Brood* .............................................................................................................. 16
2. Spirit Photography (Eugène Thiébault, ‘Henri Robin and a Specter,’ 1863) ........... 42
3. The haunted television in *Poltergeist* .................................................................................. 46
4. Rachel (Naomi Watts) watches the videotape in *The Ring* ........................................... 48
5. Samara crawling out of the television in *The Ring* ......................................................... 50
6. Example of reflexive presence of camera in *The Blair Witch Project* ................. 55
7. Surveillance-style cameras of *Paranormal Activity* ...................................................... 56
8. *Willow Creek* ..................................................................................................................... 75
9. Heather running in the *The Blair Witch Project* ............................................................... 82
10. Katie sleepwalks in *Paranormal Activity* .......................................................................... 90
11. Peachfuzz from *Creep* ....................................................................................................... 94
12. Aaron’s point of view in *Creep* .......................................................................................... 121
13. Josef takes out the trash in *Creep* .................................................................................... 123
14. Josef stalks the entrance in *Creep* .................................................................................... 125
15. *Marble Hornets: Conversion* .......................................................................................... 136
16. Are You One Of Them, in *Marble Hornets* ................................................................. 137
17. *Suicidemouse* by Nec1 .................................................................................................... 142
18. *11bx1371’s ‘Birdman’* ...................................................................................................... 143
19. Spectrogrammetric analysis of *11bx1371* ...................................................................... 145
20. *Username 666* ................................................................................................................ 147
21. *Cursed Kleenex Commercial* ........................................................................................... 148
22. The Slender Man (or The Operator) ................................................................................... 156
23. The ‘obscured’ Operator of *Marble Hornets #1* ......................................................... 158
24. The ‘obscured’ Operator of *Marble Hornets #2* .......................................................... 158
25. Bluetooth Earpiece Camera in *Blair Witch* ................................................................... 161
26. Camera attached to sternum in *Marble Hornets* .......................................................... 163
27. *Marble Hornets: File #1* ................................................................................................ 171
29. *Marble Hornets: File #3* ................................................................................................ 172
30. Incoming Skype call in *Unfriended* ................................................................................. 178
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Facial distortion in <em>Unfriended</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td><em>Unfriended</em>’s screens within screen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>The others who are waiting in <em>11:57</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>The little girl in <em>11:57</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>The woman returns in <em>11:57</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>Six Degrees of Freedom of Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>Jaunt’s high-end 360-degree camera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>VR Noir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>Catatonic VR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td><em>Escape The Living Dead</em> (Jaunt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td><em>Amateur Night</em> in <em>V/H/S</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td><em>Alien: Isolation</em> motion-sensor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>Confronting the xenomorph in <em>Alien: Isolation</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>Oculus Touch Haptic Controllers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>Volumetric Capture (<em>Microsoft Research, 2015</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>#Screamers: Go Ahead, Press Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>The Woman in the Graveyard in #Screamers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This thesis examines the evolving forms of cinematic horror, from the sub-genre of ‘found footage,’ to post-cinematic new media forms such as Youtube horror, both narrative and non-narrative, and cinematic virtual reality horror. By examining how these new forms alter the dynamics of spectatorship, the thesis asks how cinema’s affective capacities have shifted in relation to these modifications in the form of cinematic horror. Departing from psychoanalytic, representational and hermeneutic models, it explores the ways that horror as a genre strategically withholds its semantic content in order to produce terror and dread. I argue that somatic experience fills these gaps, and that the embodied experience of the viewer/participant is intensified through the way each of these modes utilises its unique aesthetic and technological capacities. Phenomenological approaches provide a framework here to interrogate the distinction between film-as-object and viewer-as-subject, and to reframe how, in viewing these cinematic horror artefacts, we do not simply decode or interpret these works, but interface with them through embodied experience. This thesis contends that horror’s specific affect emerges from this embodied experience of the image. Theoretical insights from emerging models of embodied simulation add further depth to this analysis. Drawing on Deleuzian readings of horror cinema, the thesis extends these models through an exploration of the concept of the perception-image in relation to found footage horror cinema, and the time-image in relation to the ‘post-cinematic’ short horror films of Youtube.

The thesis applies a theoretical synthesis of phenomenological and Deleuzian approaches to a number of case studies. A reading of the aesthetic and experiential aspects of several found footage films, including The Blair Witch Project, Willow Creek, Paranormal Activity, Creep and Unfriended, proposes that the found footage form alters the existing dynamics of embodied spectatorship. Extending the analysis of these shifts into a study of evolving media paradigms, I compare how horror projects that are experienced through the modalities of smartphones, computers and virtual
reality utilise their distinct aesthetic capacities to further destabilise the supposed
delineation between viewer and horror artefact.

Finally, the thesis considers the distinct narrative models, capacities for interactivity
and immersive properties of cinematic virtual reality horror, and explores how a
productive synthesis could be developed between our existing cinematic grammar,
centred around the frame, and the ‘frameless’ capacity of virtual reality. This analysis
of the evolution of the horror genre produces a more complete understanding of
emerging media and proposes that the shift in the relation between technology and
media content modifies the phenomenological imbrication between spectator and
filmic object, amplifying embodied experience of the viewer.

KEYWORDS: Horror, New Media, Affect, Embodied Spectatorship, Found Footage
Horror, Virtual Reality.
INTRODUCTION

What is often forgotten both in the homogenizing practices of dominant cinema and in abstract and ‘objective’ theories of spectatorship is that the particular human lived-body (specifically lived as ‘my body’) is in excess of the historical and analytic systems available to codify, contain, and even negate it.¹

- Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*.

Evolving forms, evolving affects

This is a thesis about horror film, technology, perception, screens and cameras, and the shifting experience of horror spectatorship. It is an exploration of what modern horror film is capable of, why it is a valuable resource for exploring the capacities of cinema itself, and how it explores questions of perception and affect in our increasingly technologically mediated society. The term ‘horror film,’ as it is applied in this thesis, should be read as a broader conception than that of just the theatrical experience: it is used to describe various forms of audio-visual horror media, among them feature films, web series, and cinematic virtual reality short films, that share a generic origin with conventional cinema.²

Academic studies in the field of horror cinema have often been focused around critically assessing why horror appeals to the spectator. This thesis poses the question from a different perspective and instead asks what it is that horror film does differently to other genres, what kinds of experience it can produce, and more specifically, how the aesthetic choices made within the genre generate a spectatorial engagement that differs from that of classical cinema. The understandings that emerge from this examination of horror also illuminate the experience of spectatorship more generally, and explain how it is that we become engaged with film in a manner that

¹ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 147.
² Similarly, it should be noted that the use of the word ‘cinema’ in this thesis it does not necessarily denote films that have been displayed in a theatrical venue.
cannot be fully explained by understandings of the spectatorial experience as one that is primarily predicated upon cognitive assessment of the film and its contents.

We live in a culture that is increasingly reshaped by transformations in audio-visual media. Within the last twenty years, our definition of cinema and its presence in everyday life has transformed rapidly – the theatrical experience is now but one element of a larger, ever-shifting human interaction with technologies of perception and expression. The ubiquity of the smartphone has availed us of the capacity to watch audio-visual media, and to make our own videos, at a moment’s notice. This acceleration in the production and distribution of audio-visual media has effects across all genres, but it is the field of horror that is the explicit focus of this thesis.

The thesis argues that the increasing velocity of audio-visual culture since the turn of the twenty-first century has led to the production of new sense ratios amongst its consumers. This term is borrowed from Marshall McLuhan, who contends that new inventions and technologies produce variations in sensory input that customarily require adjustments from our sense organs. Crucially, these modifications to the way we experience film, at the level of the senses, have effects that transcend variations in narrative content or structure. In order to best understand the intensification of experience these modifications produce for a viewer, we can productively build upon existing scholarship that has examined the limitations of cognitive appraisal as the primary foundations for spectatorship. This scholarship, in the field of embodied spectatorship, sees the sensory-affective properties of cinema as foundational to the viewing experience, and argues that they produce a bodily engagement between spectator and film. This thesis seeks to extend upon these models, by synthesising them with Deleuzian concepts, and by testing and applying these concepts in an exploration of emerging new media.

Horror as a genre is often the first site to interrogate evolving technologies, both within the narrative and through the formal properties of the medium within which it exists. However, any investigation into how horror responds to new media forms needs to be accompanied by an analysis of how they reconfigure experience. With the emergence of new media forms come not only new methods to construct

---

audio-visual horror narratives, but also alterations in the ways in which spectators process and experience these images. As William Brown argues, “digital technology has expanded cinema and the psychological sciences have expanded our understanding of perception to such a degree that new theories of cinema and our perception(s) of it are urgently required.”

In order to more fully understand them, these new realms require a synthesis of broader conceptions of cinematic affect, one that considers the primacy of the non-representational content of the sound and image as vital to its production. Emergent forms of horror, such as the found footage horror film, streaming video horror, web-series, and virtual reality horror cinema, provide a location where this non-representational content is often foregrounded.

Horror film has a long history of destabilising the semantic content of the image to increase its capacity to terrify. Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), for example, broke with the conventions of cinematographic realism in favour of a heavily stylised mise-en-scène that visually reproduced the inner landscape of insanity. This revealed cinema’s capacity to be not only a reflective medium, but also one that was capable of a poetics that allowed for a more expressive means of storytelling. There are, however, inadequacies in scholarship that contends that this poetics emerges by simply undermining the processes of cognitive or reflective mechanisms that supposedly lie at the foundations of how we process the cinematic sound and image; these theories neglect the primacy of the embodied experience.

Modern forms of horror media further this destabilisation of the image’s semantic content. They are less reliant on structures of narrative as their basis; in the place of the deemphasised narrative, these works often utilise distinct strategies of sound and image, such as placing emphasis on the out-of-frame, on visual and aural distortion, or on the image’s synaesthetic or haptic qualities, in place of a coherent image. Consequently, they activate a distinct concurrent embodied response for the viewer. This thesis posits that affect is at the origins of this corporeal response, and that, importantly, this affect is not necessarily coterminous with the presence of on-screen bodies.

---

This approach is a departure from the psychoanalytic, representational and hermeneutic models that have previously been used to understand horror film. These foundational approaches, by scholars such as Noël Carroll, Carol Clover, Barbara Creed, Julia Kristeva and Robin Wood, while offering crucial insight, have limitations, in that they are largely focused on unpacking the semantic elements of film. This thesis reframes an approach to horror around the somatic response, using theories of affect to elucidate the foundations of this corporeal interface.

Affect Studies consists of a diverse and wide-ranging number of scholarly approaches. My definition draws primarily from the work of scholar Brian Massumi, who understands affect as intensity, and emotion as the qualification of this intensity. For Massumi, the term affect also describes the work of various intensities in relation to each other, the way they translate or transform each other. In this conception, sounds and images carry an affective charge for the viewer, but this charge is not equivalent to a codified emotional response. Affect is the non-conscious experience of intensity, the unformed and unstructured potential that later becomes sedimented in “semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning.” This thesis draws on Massumi’s conception of affect to articulate how it is that horror cinema can work to produce responses in excess of cognitive appraisal or emotional codification, precisely because its affective components are not always directly correlated with the semantic content of the image, such as the on-screen body.

This work shares a similar phenomenological approach with scholars who posit the spectatorial body at the foundations of the viewing experience. Xavier Aldana Reyes, for example, argues for the spectatorial body as an “anchoring point” in moments of “visceral contact between the viewer’s [body] and the character’s [body], as foregrounded in examples of graphic horror, mutilation or torture.” Reyes positions the occasions when the viewer’s body is moved by the bodies seen on screen as “the epitome of the moment of affect.” His focus is on the somatic alignment between the

---

6 Gregg and Seigwort define at least eight approaches to affect, dependant on discipline and approach; Gregg and Seigwort, *The Affect Theory Reader*, 8–9.
8 Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect*, 2.
9 Ibid., 3.
viewer and the threatened, harmed or tortured body. In the works I analyse, such as found footage horror, the bodies of the protagonists, while in danger, are rarely explicitly mutilated or tortured, and as such, do not generate the same kind of “anchoring.” Similarly, the new media works I examine also de-emphasise the presence of the on-screen body.

The marginalisation of the on-screen body is a marked feature of found footage horror films, but this thesis argues that found footage horror nonetheless relies on embodiment as central to the spectatorial experience. My account departs from Alexandra Heller-Nicholas’ comprehensive and cogent examination of found footage, which theorises that the engagement produced by the sub-genre is primarily reliant on the viewer’s cognitive appraisal; instead, I focus on the embodied response of the viewer as a primary driver of the intensification of experience.

In an attempt to reconcile the somatic, emotional and cognitive responses of the viewer, scholar Julian Hanich has advanced a comprehensive account of the phenomenology of horror spectatorship, one that attempts to reinstate the importance of the lived body in the moment of viewing. His work develops a typology of cinematic fear that articulates the distinctions between shock, dread, terror and direct or suggested horror. My own approach echoes this move towards thinking the experience of viewing from the perspective of a “lived body,” and expands Hanich’s approach outside of the realm of traditional horror cinema, applying his concepts to media such as virtual reality.

Horror is unabashedly a “body genre,” as scholar Linda Williams has argued. However, it is important to distinguish that this corporeal response is not simply a cognitive response to bodies under threat. A persuasive field of scholarship has emerged in the last twenty-five years that understands the viewing experience as necessarily embodied, particularly in the works of Jennifer Barker, Laura Marks, Anne Rutherford, and Vivian Sobchack, among others. Often underpinned by a phenomenological conception of the film-viewer encounter, this scholarship has offered diverse accounts for how this embodiment occurs. This thesis draws from a range of these academic approaches to embodied spectatorship in order to support

---

10 Williams, “Film Bodies,” 3.
my contention that the horror viewer is necessarily intertwined with the sound and image in a bodily way.

The emergent forms of horror media examined here, such as found footage horror, streaming video and virtual reality, often have deficits in relation to narrative and its components, such as the incomplete construction of compelling characterisation or, as in the case of virtual reality, an equation between the VR camera and the protagonist, which implies that the spectator is a diegetic character. This leads to a lack in spectatorial identification as it is traditionally understood. Interrogating this conventional account of identification, I instead propose a more robust account of the engagement between spectator and film, by drawing on the foundations of embodied spectatorship theory.

The spectrum of horror media examined in this thesis provides several valuable sites for expanding the study of embodiment and affect in relation to horror, because accompanying this reduction in the semantic content of the image is a concomitant increase in the somatic aspects of cinematic experience. While many theoretical frameworks that examine horror texts decode the meaning of the monster, this work instead addresses the somatic response to the form itself from a phenomenological perspective. Examining how it is that horror cinema intensifies this embodiment can reveal new understandings about why horror affects a viewer in a way that can often transcend their intellectual or vicarious distance.

A movement beyond simply analysing the imbrication of horror and technology is crucial to this study. The study examines what these new technological forms do: how they alter the dynamics of spectatorship, how they traverse the material distinction between image and viewer, how they heighten the embodied experience. The exploration of these new forms is staged across several distinct new modes: firstly, the generic shift from conventional cinematic horror stories to found footage horror film, then the movement into the new media world of Youtube video (in the form of Youtube horror shorts and the web series *Marble Hornets*), and finally, the rapidly expanding world of cinematic virtual reality horror.

Building on studies of embodied spectatorship theory and expanded understandings of perception offered by modern neuroscience, that have crucially debunked the Cartesian logic of the mind-body dualism, this thesis examines its horror
texts not only for their content and meaning, but for the manner in which their form affects viewers on a bodily level.

For Gilles Deleuze, cinema and philosophy are similar endeavours: both are practices of thought, involved in a reciprocal process of generating concepts that can produce shared insight between the two, rather than cinema simply illustrating philosophy, and vice versa. Deleuze conceived of directors, artists, musicians and philosophers as all essentially “thinkers” – the only difference being that the “artists create percepts and affects,” where “the philosopher constructs concepts.”¹¹ This thesis works with Deleuzian concepts through what Robert Sinnerbrink calls an aesthetic-hermeneutic circle, where “aesthetic experience precedes and informs philosophical reflection,” bringing about novel means of expression.¹² This involves a consideration of how films themselves, much like philosophy, have the capacity to pose questions about the experience and meaning of being human.

Deleuze also sees the concept of “brain-screens” as being crucial to investigating not only how we process cinematic images, but also the processes of thought itself. In an interview with Cahiers du Cinema in 1986, Deleuze said:

The brain is unity. The brain is the screen. I don’t believe that linguistics and psychoanalysis offer a great deal to the cinema. On the contrary, the biology of the brain – molecular biology – does. Thought is molecular. Molecular speeds make up the slow beings that we are.... Cinema, precisely because it puts the image in motion, or rather endows the image with self-motion, never stops tracing the circuits of the brain.¹³

Given that neuroscientific research has, in the years since this quotation, illuminated the indivisibility of the brain and body as a cohesive unit, it is vital that we continue to also further expand our understandings of the interaction between the brain/mind/body assemblage and the cinematic image. Much recent neuroscientific scholarship has claimed an indivisible conception of brain and body, and sees the development of this research as fundamentally key to understanding how human

---

¹¹ Deleuze, cited in Flaxman, The Brain Is The Screen, 3.
¹² Sinnerbrink, “Questioning Style,” 43.
¹³ Deleuze, cited in Flaxman, The Brain Is The Screen, 366.
experience is produced. Grouped under the term 4EA, these scientists have adopted a phenomenological philosophical framework from the works of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. They see cognition as embodied, embedded, enactive, extended and affective, an approach which assumes an inseparability between cognition and affect. In this field of scholarship, brain, body and world are inexorably linked in interactive loops.\textsuperscript{14} This has considerable relevance to understandings of the experience of the cinematic image, in that it may lend credence to approaches that similarly consider spectatorship as a continual reciprocity between image, mind and body.

The phenomenologically-informed stance of 4EA scholars finds a considerable ally in Deleuze’s cinematic philosophy, despite his own objections to characterisations of his cinema work as “phenomenologically” informed. Cinema is an art both of time and of space and examining the space of the lived-body is crucial to understanding how cinema works. In order to explicate my own understandings of how these evolving forms of horror media are altering the spectatorial experience, the chapters following offer a detailed reading of particular exemplar works in light of the potential interaction and overlap between embodied spectatorship, Deleuzian cinematic theory and developing understandings of the mind/body relationship from neuroscience. This intersection opens up vital new ground for questioning the experience of spectatorship. This process, and its attempts to draw together the wide-ranging considerations of the work of Deleuze, the audio-visual works themselves, and elements of neurocognitive research, is a concerted embrace of Deleuze’s concept of a “machinic assemblage,” where the potential resonance of the ideas within each field and how they act upon each other provides greater insight than the isolated conceptual domains.

This thesis is structured to be a progression through several different forms of emergent horror media, analysing the embodiment produced by each, and how the specificity of their various modes alters these dynamics. Chapter One, “From the Semantic to the Somatic: Affective Engagement with Horror Cinema,” begins with a review of several of the conventional theoretical frameworks that have been applied

\textsuperscript{14} Protevi, \textit{Life, War, Earth}, 102.
to analysing how horror film works, and a critical assessment of the limitations of these existing notions.

Chapter Two, “From Identification to Embodied Spectatorship in the Found Footage Horror Film,” examines the inadequacies of a purely hermeneutic approach to understanding horror film’s effects. Turning to the horror sub-genre of found footage, exemplified by films such as The Blair Witch Project, Paranormal Activity and Willow Creek, this chapter examines how these films push the experience of modern horror spectatorship to its limits in terms of what Kimberly Jackson calls the “undecidable relation between reality and image” that often emerges in the nexus of technology and horror.\(^\text{15}\) Found footage horror films highlight the insufficiency of frameworks that contend that identification is our main form of engagement with the horror film, given that the films often reject the hallmarks of characterisation deployed in most conventional Hollywood narratives, and that they are, for the most part, presented as a record of events by a witness who remains largely unseen by us.\(^\text{16}\) A frequently utilised generic element of found footage horror is the threat of the out-of-frame. This chapter interrogates the particular embodied experience of the out-of-frame, specifically taking into account Hanich’s concept of “cinematic dread” and its affective properties for the spectator. Seeking to reconcile these phenomenological considerations with some aspects of Deleuzian theory, I synthesise this work with Anna Powell’s examination of the genre.

In Chapter Three, “Perception and Point of View in the Found Footage Horror Film,” Deleuze’s cinematic “perception-image” is considered as a way to understand how found footage horror may destabilise a hierarchical concept of film-object and viewer-subject. Here I argue that found footage horror does so specifically through its ability to catalyse both the subjective and objective properties of the cinematic image, a process Deleuze argues is inherent to the perception-image, a particular type of image in his taxonomy of images.\(^\text{17}\) Examining the film Creep (2014), this chapter unpacks the premise of the so-called subjective camera of found footage and asks if

\(^{15}\) Jackson, Technology, Monstrosity, and Reproduction in Twenty-First Century Horror, 35.

\(^{16}\) For example, Hud, the camera operator in Cloverfield (2008), appears on screen for only a few minutes of the film’s 85 minute run time.

\(^{17}\) Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement Image, 71-76.
the distinction between the subjective view of the character and the diegetic camera of these films is as clear as we would initially assume. This chapter critically contrasts “theory of mind” and “embodied simulation theory” as two theoretical propositions to explain an empathic engagement not only with the characters of the film, but with the image itself. I argue that a more productive pathway may be found in rethinking the process of spectatorship through the affective neuroscience theory of the SEEKING system, proposed by scientist Jaak Pankseep.

Chapter Four, “The Evolving Screen Forms of New Media Horror,” looks at the shifting nature of spectatorship in relation to the development of horror narratives in the space of internet video and the modalities of the third and fourth screens of media theory: computers and tablets/smartphones. Examining a variety of Youtube short horror videos that borrow the tropes of non-fiction, this chapter argues that these new modes appropriate the qualities of “post-cinematic” media, clearly differentiating themselves in their form as an evolution from both conventional horror films and the sub-genre of found footage horror films. The Youtube found footage series, *Marble Hornets*, becomes a site to interrogate these differences, as does the film *Unfriended* (2014), which takes place entirely on a computer screen in the film’s diegetic world. In order to examine how these projects alter our embodied relationship, I focus on their distinct synaesthetic and haptic qualities, and the ‘aesthetics of distortion’ which accentuate them at both the visual and aural level. I argue that these types of new media artefacts intensify our corporeal engagement.

Chapter Five, “The Spectator-Interactor of Virtual Reality Horror,” moves on to the burgeoning space of VR technology and those who are pioneering the integration of the cinematic form with the nascent potential of VR. This chapter asks what the potential ramifications are to the experience of horror spectatorship in this new world, and how the redefinition of the cinematic ‘frame’ in VR opens up new understandings about our embodied relationship to sound and image. The chapter examines a variety of virtual reality horror projects, such as *The Black Mass Experience*, *Catatonic VR*, *Escape The Living Dead*, and 11:57. It also considers the implications of the new cinematic space for narrative and interactivity, and the phenomenological implications of the temporal and spatial capacities of virtual reality, particularly in relation to the production of cinematic dread. Virtual reality cinema also offers us a compelling site to
examine the ideas about identification, empathy and embodied experience that are laid out over the preceding chapters, as the form itself demands that creatives reconceive the narrative processes that have been thought to be at the foundation of spectatorial engagement.

From found footage to cinematic virtual reality, these new domains of horror demonstrate that the somatic elements of experience are intensified in relation to a reduction in the semantic content. Given that the genre of horror largely relies upon this undermining or disruption of the viewer’s processes of meaning-making, horror cinema scholarship needs to examine embodied experience as the bedrock of the viewer’s engagement with the image.
CHAPTER ONE:

From the Semantic to the Somatic:

Affective Engagement with Horror Cinema

Horror cinema has a long history of affecting spectators in profound and often unsettling ways. Its impact is often catalysed in the way it produces a reluctant bodily response for viewer. While an intellectual consideration of its content may shock and unnerve, there is also often a coincident corporeal action on the spectator; this sometimes emerges in involuntary somatic responses, such as the startle or the freeze, or the capacity to nauseate the viewer. But is this response truly coincident? Or is there something fundamental in the coalescence of our bodily experience of sound and image that requires that we reassess arguments regarding horror spectatorship that understand this somatic response as a simple parallel to semantic appraisal?

To fully comprehend and interrogate the intensity of the spectatorial experience of horror cinema requires the application and development of a range of scholarly approaches, many drawn from film scholarship more broadly. However, these frameworks have necessarily evolved over time: as the nature of the approach of horror films has changed, so too has the nature of the analysis required to understand it. This dynamic process of co-evolution occurs in respect to many genres; however, my focus here is on the genre of horror. In Chapter Two I will turn to the evolution of the contemporary horror film within the sub-genre of found footage, and demonstrate how the contemporary shift in scholarly approaches to horror cinema can more fully explicate the unique capacities of these films.

Horror cinema scholarship requires that we attempt to understand both the appeal of horror and the foundations of its power. The dominant theoretical orthodoxies in the 1970s and 1980s in relation to this question involved the application of aspects of psychoanalytic theory (in the scholarship of Carol Clover, Barbara Creed,
Julia Kristeva, and Robin Wood, for example). These theories look to the unconscious to understand what it is that draws us to works of horror, and why these works are so powerful. More recently, a range of diverse alternative theoretical frameworks have emerged, approaches that utilise social and cultural analysis, gender theory, and genre studies as key components (such as Mark Jancovich’s consideration of horror’s allegorical role as a genre, Adam Lowenstein’s assessment of its sociological role post-9/11, and Andrew Tudor’s analysis of horror’s place within a broader social and cultural context).

One of the central responses that confronted the place of psychoanalytic theory in the canon of horror film studies is what came to be known as the cognitivist approach: an attempt to counter the positing of ‘unconscious desires’ at the heart of the viewing experience with understandings of perception and cognition that could be framed and tested with empirical hypotheses. Noël Carroll identifies horror film as a genre that is dependent on a specific consideration of the monster’s transgressive qualities by the spectator: an act of decoding and appraisal. In his work with William Seeley, Carroll argues that filmmakers “direct us to perceptually categorize an object or event,” leading to an “intended emotion” in the viewer. For horror film, he identifies two crucial aspects:

First, local narrative and visual cues are used to categorize the behaviour of a character as unnatural, and thereby disgusting. Second, global narrative cues are used to generate the long-term expectation that a negative outcome is highly probable, and likely inevitable, for the protagonist. The result is an intermingling of hopelessness, fear and revulsion that we delight in experiencing at the movies.

What is shared by the disparate approaches above is an understanding of the film itself as a site of signification that is open to a variety of analyses that focus on the film primarily as a text, where its representational aspects are the primary source of its meaning.  

---

20 Carroll, _The Philosophy of Horror_, 28.
21 Carroll and Seeley, “Cognitivism, Psychology and Neuroscience,” 68.
22 Ibid., 69.
meaning, be it through conscious or unconscious processes. This focus on the semantic content of the image is one that underscores many of these earlier theoretical orthodoxies.

In the application of psychoanalytic theory to horror cinema, for example, despite the focus on horror’s production and reception residing in aspects of the unconscious, there is often an attempt to ‘decode’ the semantic content of the film to link it directly to the unconscious. In ‘The American Nightmare: Horror in 70s,’ Robin Wood concurs with this derivation of horror’s function in the unconscious, and extends on the Freudian idea of repression with the notion of “surplus repression.” Wood argues that our culture’s attitude to sexual energy, bisexuality, female sexuality and children’s sexuality has led to the production of an excess of repression. This surplus is then “projected” onto the Other in order that it be “discredited, disowned and if possible annihilated.” The Other in the case of the horror genre is the monster. Horror, in the context of Wood’s argument, allows for a performance of a transgression of the dominant order of social norms, such as heterosexuality, monogamy, and other social institutions, by the monster, creating a celluloid location where these repressed challenges to normality can be explored and curtailed.

Though Wood presents possibilities where the monster’s presence may be subversive, the clear implications of his argument are that societal structures of monogamy and family will always result in an excess of sexual energy that must be repressed: energy that will struggle to return. Horror in this case performs the ideological function of sustaining the bourgeois social order. Wood illustrates his argument with multiple examples, but what is key is that they are reinscriptions of the semantic content: for example, referring to The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Wood writes that the “repressed energies” are “represented most unforgettably by Leatherface and his continuously whirring phallic chainsaw.”

This reliance on the semantic content of the film is also evident in the work of other horror scholars drawing from psychoanalytic theory, such as Julia Kristeva’s

---

24 Ibid., 66.
25 Ibid., 71.
26 Ibid., 63-69.
27 Ibid., 82.
Lacanian-influenced analysis in *Powers of Horror*. Here Kristeva contends that “abjection” is key to maintaining the social order. This abjection can be characterised by the primary examples of cadavers, filth, and food, and is the visceral reaction of terror toward that which threatens. The threat in this case is the imminent jeopardy of the psychosexual development of the self that may be elicited by a loss of distinction between subject and object, and correspondingly, self and other.\textsuperscript{28} This reaction, according to Kristeva, prompts the subject to restore the normality of the social order by disallowing the abject. At the same time, however, the subject develops a fascination with that which threatens, an attraction that is stimulated by the ability to recognise self as distinct from the threat. This combination of fear and fascination is a paradox that, for Kristeva, helps explain the lure of horror narratives. Under this paradigm, it is the abject in horror that draws us to a kind of repetitive catharsis; in the words of Kristeva, “refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live... There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.”\textsuperscript{29}

Building on Kristeva’s argument of the abject as central to horror, Barbara Creed argues that it is through confrontations with the abject, and particularly the “monstrous-feminine,” that film works to re-establish a symbolic order; by constructing the feminine as ‘Other,’ the patriarchal ideology sustains a social order wherein the maternal figure is a threat that is constantly disavowed.\textsuperscript{30} In this case, Creed is more focused on the perverse pleasure that arises from the confrontation and ejection of that which is abject, all from the apparent safety of a spectator’s seat. Both of these accounts, despite their different points of focus, broadly locate horror film’s emergence in the way in which the unconscious structures forms of representation: horror film is the necessary confrontation with what emerges when elements of the unconscious rise to the surface. However, in both frameworks, codifying the abject (and the “monstrous-feminine”) nonetheless requires that this scholarly approach processes the sounds and images of the film for their semantic content: the deformed

\textsuperscript{28} Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{30} Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 70.
abdomen of Nola in *The Brood* (1979) becomes the location of a “monstrous womb” [Figure 1].

![Figure 1: Nola in *The Brood*](image)

Another insufficiency in the accounts described above is the question of how we justify the pleasure generated by films that neglect abjection or the monstrous-feminine as core features (which is especially true of the found footage horror films examined in Chapter Two). An alternative account is to link horror’s appeal to the way in which it positions the audience through its manipulation of the gaze. Carol Clover draws on notions of the gendered understanding of the gaze argued by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” where Mulvey asserts that the formal qualities of cinema have been moulded by unconscious drives that split the gaze of the film into active/masculine and passive/feminine. Clover develops this concept in relation to horror film, asserting that it invites an “assaultive” and a “reactive” gaze from its audience: “assaultive” when the spectator is temporarily positioned to identify with the monster; “reactive” when we are then assaulted.
through our empathic identification with (typically female) characters. Clover identifies the reactive gaze as feminine, and accords it “pride of place in the scopic regime of horror.”31 The cogency of this argument underlies what Clover argues is the “first and central aim of horror cinema”: the ability to play out the fears of Freud’s ‘feminine masochism,’ that of being “impregnated” or “beaten, castrated and penetrated.”32

These unconscious processes that shape both the creation and the reception of horror film are central to the psychoanalytic foundations of the work of Kristeva, Creed and Clover. However, theorists such as Anna Powell have posited certain inadequacies in models that use this framework; Powell points to the ahistorical and incorporeal dimensions of psychoanalytic theory, and argues that the Deleuzian-Guattarian33 concept of “schizoanalysis” is a way of reframing desire outside of the rigid bounds of a Freudian egoic subject.34

Steven Shaviro also argues against the overemphasised bodily detachment of an engagement with film’s representational elements, arguing instead for the cinematic event as a location of “affect, excitation, stimulation and repression, pleasure and pain, shock and habit.”35 However, psychoanalytic theory is not the only field of scholarship in which these corporeal dimensions of spectatorship are not appropriately emphasised. This omission of the role of the viewer’s body recurs in other areas of studies in horror cinema; for example, scholarship that investigates the allegorical nature of horror representations. This field of inquiry locates the meaning of horror films in relation to their historical or political context. A key figure in this area of study is Mark Jancovich, who, in *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s*, investigates the varied critical response to alien invasion narratives. He notes that many scholars position alien invasion films as Cold War allegories, in which the aliens or alien invasion represent the fear of the spread of Communism. Jancovich posits an alternative reading, seeing them as representative of the struggles of individuals against modernisation and social development.36 However, in reducing the aliens to

---

32 Ibid., 216-217.
33 Emerging from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in this case their co-authored *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.
34 Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film*, 17-19.
their narrative presence as allegorical meaning, his analysis loses the tangible, *material* presence of the filmic monster, which is common to allegorical readings: the monster becomes nothing more than a metaphor. In cinema, however, the monster always has both a metaphorical and a concrete form for a spectator. As Franco Moretti reminds us, Frankenstein’s monster never loses its tangible presence as monster, just as the viewer never loses their sensory response to this materiality: “The metaphor is no longer a metaphor: it is a character as real as the others... The monster lives.”

By reducing the monster to its position as metaphor, we constrain our understanding of the complexity of spectatorship, as the spectator’s encounter with the monster is bound to an allegorical meaning that is politically, socially and historically contingent. Adam Lowenstein concurs with this when he argues that analysis that focuses on the “allegorical moment” restricts our understandings of a viewer’s possible responses to cinema.

In the documentary *The American Nightmare*, filmmaker Adam Simon contends that the reaction of modern audiences to *Night of the Living Dead*, for example, is less likely to be freighted by the effects of the historical and social changes of 1960s America. Simon perceptively juxtaposes images of the oppression of civil rights with images from Romero’s classic. This contingent interpretation of the monster shifts with the social, political and cultural context of the viewer, whereas its material presence (in the above case, an endless horde of zombies) is universal. The material presence argued for here is that which emerges from the interaction between the body of the film and the body of the spectator.

One approach to an interrogation of horror cinema’s power and efficacy is to recede in part from questions of subjectivity, and in turn attempt to locate answers not within the viewing experience itself, but in the question of *why* audiences are drawn to horror. Andrew Tudor sees a more complete understanding of horror cinema emerging from a consideration of “why [...] these people like this horror in this place at this particular time?” He claims that horror arises from distinctive cultural

---

37 Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, 105.
38 Lowenstein, “Living Dead,” 120.
materials, with broad and varied emergent trends. For Tudor, there are three specific levels at which this analysis can occur:

First there are those accounts operating at a relatively low level of abstraction which lay claim to a direct thematic link between specific features of the genre and aspects of agents’ everyday social experience. Second, there are those which focus upon genre developments apparent only in the longer term (an increase in explicit violence, say, or a growing emphasis on sexuality), seeking to demonstrate their congruence with more macroscopic currents of social change. And lastly there are arguments about the relation between whole horror discourses and the typical structures of social interaction which they presuppose and to which they contribute.\(^{41}\)

It is at this third level of analysis of the discourse of horror that Noël Carroll enters the fray, with an articulation of the underlying premises of horror and its relation to societal structures of categorisation. His philosophical investigation into horror’s paradoxical appeal is a cornerstone of many theoretical approaches to the genre. In his seminal treatise on its genesis, function and capacities, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, Carroll first separates ‘art-horror’ from horror, specifying the latter as the outcome of real world effects. His ‘art-horror’ requires that an audience evaluate the central monster for two particular components: its potential threat and its impurity. He contends that, if either element is missing, the evaluation will be incomplete; a monster without impurity generates only fear, whereas a monster without threat produces only disgust.\(^{42}\)

Building upon Mary Douglas’ classic study, *Purity and Danger*, Carroll infers that the impurity present in horror emerges from what Douglas defined as “the transgression or violation of schemes of cultural categorisation.”\(^{43}\) In Carroll’s terms, horror as a genre does not only require a “monster,” be it the literal titular monster of MGM’s horror classics, such as Dracula or the Wolfman, or the faceless, nameless monster of creature films such as *Slither* (2006); in his understanding, beings or

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 457-458.
\(^{43}\) Ibid., 31.
creatures only fully become monsters when they are defined as “categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete or formless.”

Carroll argues that the presence of these monsters is the intellectual hook which draws in a spectator: he claims that horror narrative works “because it has at the center of it something which is given as in principle unknowable.” Deploying Hobbes’ contention that curiosity is the “appetite” of the mind, Carroll presents horror fiction as an intellectual desire for the process of discovery, revelation and ratiocination of the “putatively unknowable.” Carroll sees disgust as affiliated with disclosure of the impure: this impurity manifests through monsters that are “categorically interstitial” (half-man, half-fly, for example), “categorically contradictory” (alive and dead, as in the vampire or zombie), “incomplete” (a severed hand acting on its own, for example), or “formless” (such as ghosts or demons). In this understanding, the experience of horror relies on a concerted cognitive evaluation of the horrific content by the viewer.

Cognitivist frameworks of spectatorship

This concept of the monster as an intellectual ‘hook,’ when applied to cinema, again frames the viewer’s primary experience with the horror film as one of comprehension of the semantic content of the image. It is unsurprising that Carroll’s consideration of how horror works aligns with his broader understanding of cinema spectatorship as a process whereby viewers primarily decode filmic images as representations. Carroll is a key proponent of the ‘cognitivist’ branch of film theory that arose in the latter half of the twentieth century and is exemplified in his work, along with David Bordwell, Murray Smith, Greg Currie, and Carl Plantinga, and others. Cognitivist film theory looks to examine the experience of film through an analytical frame that applies analogous real-world cognitive procedures and relies on rigorous “logical reflection” and “empirical research” to account for film spectatorship as a process. Bordwell and Carroll prefer to categorise cognitivism not as a theory but as a mode which “seeks to

---

44 Ibid., 32.
46 Ibid., 184.
47 Ibid., 32.
48 Carroll and Bordwell, Post-Theory, xiv.
understand human thought, emotion and action by appeal to processes of mental representation, naturalistic processes, and (some sense) of rational agency.”

Countering the approaches to horror made by Kristeva, Creed and Wood, among others, this understanding does not outright reject the practicality of applying psychoanalytical theory to film study, but instead limits its usefulness to the aspects of films that are irrational. Bordwell asserts that there is “no reason to claim for the unconscious any activities which can be explained on other grounds.”

Cognitivist theory relies on what Bordwell calls the “contingent universals” of viewers: in other words, the “hard-wired” physiological and cognitive systems of all human beings. Cognitivist theorists propose that the primary interaction between viewer and film emerges from the universal human comprehension of narrative. They suggest that the principal process in the act of spectatorship is the viewer’s use of “narrative schema” to build a dynamic cognitive model of the events of the film as they unfold, a model that adapts and adjusts with the presentation of further novel information through the film’s choice of shots and sequences.

Theories that draw conceptual links between the filmic image and thought have historical antecedents as far back as the inception of the cinematographic device. From the very advent of cinema there arose philosophical concerns regarding how the filmic image works on its subject. Hugo Münsterberg instigated the study into the connection between mental processes and cinema in his 1916 book, The Photoplay: A Psychological Study, which provided the foundations for what we refer to currently as spectator theory and narrative theory. Münsterberg argued that film’s effectiveness was the result of its ability to mimic psychological processes, and that it required the mental cooperation of the spectator in order to achieve its full potential. He proposed that film is particularly adept at expressing the consciousness of fictional characters when the cinematic devices used to do so are analogous to “the mechanisms of the mind.” Münsterberg drew comparisons, for example, between the close-up and our acts of attention outside of the film, the flashback and our processes

49 Ibid., xvi.
50 Bordwell, Narration in the Fiction Film, 30.
52 Münsterberg, The Photoplay, 44.
of memory, and the flash-forward and our facility to imagine or hypothesise. These then novel devices became, in Münsterberg’s account, metaphors for synchronising the thought process of a character with intrinsic human thought processes.⁵³

Münsterberg’s foundational research into questions of cognitive engagement is still very much at the heart of some contemporary theories that attempt to explain how a viewer processes a film. Carl Plantinga sees the “narrative information” of the film as the key driver of audience emotional response.⁵⁴ Likewise, Todd Berliner utilises Bordwell to argue that the central component of the aesthetic pleasure of film is storytelling: “the process by which an artwork selects, arranges and renders its narrative information in order to stimulate the perceiver to perform cognitive activities.”⁵⁵ In this understanding it is cognition that is the inevitable terminus into which our cinematic experience is channeled. This rationale is supported by Steven Pinker, who argues that the true act of artistry is the creation of “human mental representations” or the “cascade of neural events that begin with the sense organs and culminate in thoughts, emotions, and memories.”⁵⁶

Carroll argues that film is uniquely equipped to elicit this cognitive activity, due to the “pictorial recognition” that underlies its form, a universal “biological capability” that all humans use to recognise objects and events.⁵⁷ He contends that the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema utilise narrative, editing and framing to harness a viewer’s attention, particularly in the manner in which the shots, scenes or events of the film raise questions or answer them: this he calls the “erotetic model” of narrative.⁵⁸

Carroll’s approach raises the question of how cognitivist models account for the affective power of film, its capacity to produce somatic effects. Within the cognitivist model, affect is elicited by the sound and image and is simultaneously cognitively processed. Plantinga proposes a typology of affect that separates it into three forms:

---

⁵⁸ Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 98; “erotetic” meaning pertaining to questions.
“moods,” “emotions” and “various automatic body responses.” Moods are considered as “diffuse” forms of emotions, with “causes but not reasons.” Emotion, for Plantinga, is a typically a “concern-based construal”: something that occurs when we make an appraisal of a situation based on our own concerns. Plantinga argues that our investment in the narrative leads to our desire for various outcomes. For example, when we construe that a character is in jeopardy, the emotion elicited is fear. When we construe that the character has escaped jeopardy, the emotion elicited is happiness. The important distinction to make here is that emotion, in the cognitivist framework, is the outcome of thought. Regarding the “automatic body responses,” Plantinga largely equates these to “baseline affective charges” that arise from a viewer’s pre-reflective response to movements, sounds, colours, and textures; he uses the example of a physiological reflex action, like the startle effect, which occurs from the sudden appearance of visual stimuli.

While Plantinga acknowledges that affect and cognition generally “work together in a holistic and mutually dependent interplay,” he also asserts that a viewer’s cognitive activity “may sometimes run independent of affective experience,” and it is evident that he locates affect in a hierarchical relationship to cognition, where affect, outside of “automatic body responses,” is inevitably channelled into mood or emotion through cognition. He writes, for example, of how the elicitation of emotion typically comes about through a viewer’s identification with the characters or events of the filmic narrative. Torben Grodal describes this process as “a viewer-activation of affects and emotions in identification with the interests of a fictive being.” This notion argues that cinema produces a “prolonged cognitive identification,” of which empathic engagement will be a result. Ultimately, under this broad conception, our engagement with the film is primarily a result of the film/filmmaker manipulating the spectator’s “emotional trajectory” through cinema’s capacity to “elicit sympathies, antipathies, allegiances, and other responses to fictional characters.”

60 Plantinga, Moving Viewers, 57.
62 Ibid., 95.
63 Grodal, Moving Pictures, 93.
64 Ibid., 93.
scholars have contributed to this model in different ways: Smith in relation to recognition, alliance and allegiance; Currie in relation to simulation; and Bordwell in terms of narration and point of view. Plantinga extends these theories into a more pluralist approach, attempting to integrate the perceptual, cognitive, intentional and embodied responses of the viewer. However, while acknowledging cinema’s affective power, his emphasis remains on the role of cognition in how we process the image.

Plantinga contends that the viewer is never so deluded to believe what they are seeing is real, and draws on Smith’s term “twofoldedness” to explain the dual response of a spectator’s appraisal of cinema characters as both “real” (which Plantinga equates to having desires, goals and emotions that are equivalent to real people) and “fictional constructs.” Our experience of viewing, he argues, “is always tempered by a background awareness of the fictional and conventional nature of the movie-going experience.” Plantinga may be correct in asserting that we don’t respond to cinematic events such as an alien invasion in the same manner we would in real life by, for example, fleeing the cinema. However, to assert that the movie-going experience is always “tempered” in such a way leaves no space for the experiences of spectatorship that are affectively intense in ways that seem to exceed this delineation.

Plantinga’s account does, in part, explain the cognitive pleasures experienced by spectators of horror film, and highlights an important dimension of the appeal of horror, but this cognitive approach cannot encompass all the dimensions of spectatorship, and ignores an element that is vital to the experience of cinema: the pre-cognitive, affective power of film on the ‘lived-body’ experience of the spectator. In Plantinga’s conceptual model, the pre-cognitive aspects of affect are limited to automatic bodily responses to sensory stimuli. Through the processes of cognition, affect is codified into mood or emotion based on the viewer’s understanding of the representational content of the film.

This model is inadequate to fully account for instances when, in the moment of cinematic experience, our affective response exceeds or contradicts that which our semantic understanding of the image presents. Powell speaks to this when she argues

66 Smith, Engaging Characters; Currie, Image and Mind; Carroll, Theorizing the Moving Image.
that “film theory [that] treats images as static, symbolic components of underlying representational structures [...] abstracts them from their moving, changing medium.” Drawing on Deleuzian theory, Powell argues that film’s “affective power” is something which “exceeds the symbolic properties of both language and image.” She argues that filmic affect “vibrates intensively rather than extensively” and that it stimulates a kind of thought that moves towards “non-symbolic ideation,” something more akin to Bergsonian “intuition.”

Acknowledging cinema’s capacity to generate affect that may exceed the spectator’s cognitive appraisal of the image requires an interrogation of an understanding of cognition and affect outside of a hierarchical model. If we constrain our understanding of the appeal of horror film to the potential of a sharply defined central monster, or a narrative drive to know the unknowable, we neglect to consider that cinema has effects that go beyond intellectual evaluation of potential threat and impurity. Similarly, if we limit our analysis of horror to the submerged psychoanalytic compulsions at its origins, or the veiled social currents that shape its role as an allegorical text, we neglect to consider the full dimensions of the experiential moment of spectatorship, and most importantly, how it is the somatic components of the film-viewer relation that play a pivotal role in how we experience this excess.

Towards the somatic

By reframing the study of horror cinema spectatorship towards an emphasis on the somatic relationship between film and viewer, rather than the semantic components of the image, we can open up ways of thinking through how cinema works, as Powell argues, to “[bypass] the cognitive and reflective faculties [of the viewer].” This is a conception of spectatorship akin to that proposed by Shaviro: “cinema [as] a kind of non-representational contact, dangerously mimetic and corrosive, thrusting us into the mysterious life of the body.”

---

69 Powell, Deleuze and Horror Film, 10.
70 Ibid., 10.
71 Ibid., 11-12.
72 Ibid., 22.
73 Shaviro, The Cinematic Body, 258.
The visceral nature of horror undeniably brings our bodily response to the fore – the word horror, from an etymological perspective, is derived from the Latin *horrere*, which means to shudder or bristle – but, crucially, this response should not be comprehended simply as a reaction to cognitive appraisal of the monster or the horrifying situation: it is also a pre-cognitive feedback to horror’s sensory intensification, in which the senses can no longer be considered entirely discrete. By redirecting our understanding of the primacy of the experience occurring through this sensory intensification, we can challenge existing theories that attempt to comprehend the viewing experience in terms of “top-down processing,” where the structures of perception and cognition simply codify sensory intensification into cognitive appraisal. These structures place the body as secondary to cognition in our understanding of the film viewing event. This understanding potentially abrogates the capacity for bodily responses that run counter to cognitive conceptualisation.

The “top-down processing” model not only places cognition and corporeal response in a hierarchical binary, but it also conceives of the experience of spectatorship in terms of a strict delineation between film and viewer: on one side is a specific combination of sounds and images representing a monster or monstrous situation, arranged in such a way as to provoke and sustain audience attention and elicit this emotional response, and on the other side is the receptive viewer, whose perceptual processes result in an ongoing cognitive appraisal of these sounds and images, transforming this representation into the intended comprehension. However, horror as a genre continually reminds us of the impossibility of hermetic distinction, between film/viewer, true/false, inside/outside, self/other, and the untenable nature of each of these binaries within the heterogeneity of both the filmic world and the lived world. Much like the lived world, within the filmic world the boundaries between these entities are constantly under negotiation, which leads to supposedly singular entities, like the body, being susceptible to transformations and reconfigurations.\(^74\) Acknowledging this process of negotiation in the act of spectatorship is important, as it destabilises the subject-object dichotomy which underlies some of the existing

\(^74\) Representations of this possibility, in films such as *The Exorcist* (1973), bring to light the fallacy of these binaries.
theoretical frameworks that examine the effects of horror on the viewer (for example, those theories that focus on the representational aspects of the monster).

Reframing the primary interface between viewer and image to that of the spectator’s pre-cognitive, affective, corporeal engagement allows us to understand how horror may produce experiences that contradict or undermine our evaluative cognitive processes. This conception of affect, drawn from the work of Brian Massumi, differs from that posited by Plantinga: Massumi argues for an understanding of affect in the Spinozist sense, as the body’s capacities for affecting or being affected. Massumi defines affective engagement as the “passing of a threshold, seen from the point of view of [this] change in capacity.”

He goes on to clarify:

A body’s ability to affect or be affected – its charge of affect – isn’t something fixed [...] Depending on the circumstances, it goes up and down gently like a tide, or maybe storms and crests like a wave, or at times simply bottoms out.

It’s because this is all attached to the movements of the body that it can’t be reduced to emotion. It’s not just subjective, which is not to say that there is nothing subjective about it. Spinoza says that every transition is accompanied by a feeling of the change in capacity. The affect and the feeling of the transition are not two different things. They’re two sides of the same coin.

In *Parables for the Virtual*, Massumi argues for a framework of affective primacy by drawing on the research of Hertha Sturm into psychological and physiological responses to the so-called “emotional” content of images. Massumi contends that the event of image reception is “multi-levelled” and that at least two of those levels consist of, separately, the semantic content of the image and its intensity. As Massumi explains, “the strength or duration of an image’s effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way.” Content and intensity are non-corrrespondent, but can have relations of “resonation or interference, amplification or dampening.” Importantly, Massumi’s concept of emotion is separate from affect: emotion, in

---

76 Ibid., 4.
78 Ibid., 24.
79 Ibid., 24.
Massumi’s comprehension, is “the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience”; or “intensity owned and recognised.” However, prior to this semantic codification, there is a pre-reflexive bodily intensity that is unassimilable to language. This intensity, which Massumi defines as affect, opens up the potential for relational responses to the image that resist clear demarcation into codified meaning. These responses would run counter to those proposed by a cognitivist understanding of how we process a film.

Massumi’s concept of affect returns the body back to a central position in our understanding of how we experience images. Here corporeal experience becomes more than merely an ‘add-on’ to our cognition of the image and its meaning: it is instead at the very basis of it. Shaviro builds on Massumi’s work in his conception of “post-cinematic” affect. I will return to this notion of the “post-cinematic” in Chapter Four; however, here I want to note that, of the distinction between emotion and affect, Shaviro, drawing on Massumi, argues that “behind every emotion, there is always a certain surplus of affect that ‘escapes confinement’ and ‘remains unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any particular, functionally anchored perspective.’” Shaviro adds an acknowledgment of the inevitable proposition of this surplus remaining outside of cognition: “[o]ur existence is always bound up with the affective and aesthetic flows that elude cognitive definition or capture.”

Eugenie Brinkema concurs with this understanding of affect’s capacity to elude cognition, writing that affect:

*disrupt[s], interrupt[s], reinsert[s], demand[s], provoke[s], insist[s] on, remind[s] of, agitate[s] for: the body, sensation, movement, flesh and skin and nerves, the visceral, stressing pains, feral frenzies, always rubbing against: what undoes, what unsettles, that thing I cannot name, what remains resistant, far away (haunting, and ever so beautiful); indefinable, it is said to be what cannot be written, what thaws the critical cold, messing all systems and subjects up* (italics in original).

---

80 Ibid., 28.
81 Shaviro, “Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, Boarding Gate and Southland Tales,” 4-5.
82 Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, xii.
There are productive links here to the Deleuzian concept of affect and its production through cinema. In her explication of “the aesthetics of affect” in relation to horror cinema, Powell unpacks the Bergsonian foundations of Deleuzian affect. She writes: “For Bergson, all perceptions are prolonged into movement, and movement is the key to understanding perception. He locates affect in those bodily sensations and physical symptoms by which we evaluate the intensity of stimuli.”\(^{83}\) This link between movement and perception underpins the Deleuzian movement-image, which is composed of three varieties: perception-image, action-image, and affection-image.\(^{84}\) The movement-image, importantly, is not conceptually bound to the cinema screen; as Powell notes, it “occurs both on screen and in us at the same time, and actually blurs any such distinction between inside and out.”\(^{85}\)

Bergson’s consideration of sensation, as an evaluation of intensity, is vital to the workings of Deleuze’s affection-images. Powell explains:

As well as carrying representational meaning, images are material forces: shades of colour, intensities of light and timbres of sound. Every stylistic component is rich in affective gradations. These interact at a micro level between themselves and at a macro level with other aspects of the film.

These gradations in intensities are at the root of the complexity of affect. They contribute to the manner in which affect, to some degree, resists codification. Powell explains this by returning again to Bergson; she elucidates how Bergson “locates intensity at the junction between ‘the idea of extensive magnitude from without’ and ‘the image of an inner multiplicity’ that arises from ‘the very depths of consciousness.’ Such multiplicity exists in complex intensive layers that constantly interweave.”\(^{86}\)

Powell then explains how this multiplicity becomes overthrown by language when we attempt to communicate experience: “the complexity of these shifting qualitative sensations is difficult to quantify, because their milieu is quality itself, not quantity.” Bergson describes the experience of the shift in sensations thus: “we feel a thousand different elements which dissolve into and permeate one another without any precise

\(^{83}\) Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film*, 110.


\(^{85}\) Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film*, 111.

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 111.
outlines, without the least tendency to externalise themselves in relation to one another; hence their originality.”

This concept of affect’s relation to perception and sensation has, for Deleuze, a cinematic equivalent. The example he provides is from G.W. Pabst’s Pandora’s Box (1929):

There are Lulu, the lamp, the bread-knife, Jack the Ripper: people who are assumed to be real with individual characters and social roles, objects with uses, real connections between these objects and these people – in short, a whole actual state of things. But there are also the brightness of the light on the knife, the blade of the knife under the light, Jack’s terror and resignation, Lulu’s compassionate look. These are pure singular qualities or potentialities.

For Deleuze, these “potentialities” are singularities, which, when placed in “virtual conjunction” then “constitute a complex entity.” He describes them as “like points of melting, of boiling, of condensation, of coagulation.” Powell expands on this, describing affection as being in “dynamic motion,” something which “surges in the subjective centre of indetermination, between a troubling perception and a hesitant action.” It is evident that these conceptions of affect, like Massumi’s, are less about the demarcation of states of being and more about the relations that occur in the interval between them.

Both Bergson and Deleuze understood human perception as the integration of our movement through broader vibrations of matter with our neuronal processes. This concept sees the body/brain as embedded in the flow of images that constitute the universe. Recent developments in neuroscience both support this and contest the cognitivist approach. These developments, emerging from the work of neuroscientists such as Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, Antonio Damasio, Andy Clark, and Alva Noë, posit an “enactive” theory of perception, which contends that

88 Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement-Image, 102.
89 Ibid., 103.
90 Powell, Deleuze and Horror Film, 118.
perception necessarily involves the interaction between the activity of a body and its environment.91 As Noë states in his book, *Action in Perception*:

> Perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do. Think of a blind person tap-tapping his or her way around a cluttered space, perceiving that space by touch, not all at once, but through time, by skilful probing and movement. This is, or at least ought to be, our paradigm of what perceiving is. The world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement and interaction.... [A]ll perception is touch-like in this way: Perceptual experience acquires content thanks to our possession of bodily skills. What we perceive is determined by what we do (or what we know how to do); it is determined by what we are ready to do... [W]e enact our perceptual experience; we act it out.92

While cognitivist theory does not completely elide the body in its understandings of the cinema experience, it does to a degree bracket the bodily experience as secondary. However, the enactive theory of perception argues that this is a flawed notion, in that all cognition arises from the interaction between body and environment. Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, for instance, note that: “perception is not a passive intake of information or the mechanistic processing and collating of information into complete and stable representations. Perception involves activity—for instance, the movement of our body.”

This conception replaces cognition with the concept of the embodied mind. It argues that our bodies and our consciousness are inexorably entwined and always present in/with the world around us. As Gallagher and Zahavi stress: “Cognition is not only embodied, it is situated and, of course, it is situated because it is embodied.”93

This means that there is no ‘objective’ or detached position from which consciousness observes the world, but rather consciousness emerges from the relation of the body-

---

brain as a singular entity and the world it exists in. This is a stance that aligns closely with a phenomenological approach to film analysis.

Phenomenological accounts do not consider the body as one object among others: rather, the body is regarded as a constitutive principle, vital to the very possibility of experience, and implicated profoundly in mind-world relation. The phenomenological model presents a direct challenge to the notions of a stable and unchanging cinematic subjectivity. Jenny Chamarette concurs, arguing for a model that allows for the dynamics and fluctuations of the cinematic encounter, when she writes:

[I]f the mind is not the site of consciousness, but rather consciousness unfolds through an intertwining of mind, body and world, then bodies and bodily responses, such as sensation, are also involved in processes of experience. This reasserts the significance of the senses to the cinematic encounter – that notions of embodiment and the sensory permeate and interpenetrate the bodies of the film, the spectator and the screen. In short, embodiment and sensory theories of film are a means of thinking the cinematic with relation to slippery, unfixed subjectivity.

The phenomenology of horror
Returning to horror scholarship, this model has been taken up in the work of scholar Julian Hanich, who presents a more persuasive argument than cognitivist accounts for both the paradoxical pleasure of horror and the techniques by which it achieves its power on the experiential level. Hanich posits a phenomenological entanglement between film and viewer that is specifically charged by the five modes of cinematic fear he postulates: direct horror, suggested horror, cinematic shock, cinematic dread and cinematic terror. Each of these modes operates in a unique way, but all of them rely on the dynamic entwinement of film-as-aesthetic-object and viewer-as-experiencing-subject. Although this entwinement fluctuates in every unique experience of spectatorship, Hanich contends that horror films manipulate this

---

95 Chamarette, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film*, 63.
engagement, and that the fear produced can bring about gradual or sudden transformation of ourselves and our relation to the world around us. He identifies the origins of this breach in a contracted focus of attention that:

comes with a phenomenological (not geographical!) closeness of the intentional object that seems to press in on us and that we wish to flee. At the same time, the lived-body is experienced differently; we literally feel it foregrounded in a specific way.

Phenomenology, and more specifically the existential form of phenomenology drawn from the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, reframes the processes of perception in a manner that requires that we necessarily interrogate the distinction between film-as-object and viewer-as-subject. A phenomenological framework can offer valuable insight into the experience of spectatorship, because it not only provides us with certain methods that may question this dualistic dichotomy, as Chamarette argues, but also allows us to, as she suggests, cleave a “middle way” between subjectivism (reality constructed through the subject) and empirical objectivism (artefact as stable object-of-enquiry). From a phenomenological perspective, we cannot conceptualise the act of spectatorship as simply the outcome of a thinking subject or the empirical qualities of the object being watched: there is, as Vivian Sobchack stresses, a “dialogue” in the “dialectic of perception” that is shared between film and viewer. The “act of viewing” that the film performs, as an object, merges with the viewing activity of the spectator in an operation of reciprocity.

One explanation for why film theory has long wrestled with this notion of ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ is the ephemerality of the experience of film watching. As David Rodowick notes, whereas the “reassuring ontological stability” of painting, sculptures or books within modern aesthetic theory is self-evident, this stability is often in question within cinema studies, despite the “apparent solidity of the celluloid strip”

---

97 “Intentional object” is a term related to mental phenomena, and is taken from the work of Franz Brentano in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. It refers to the directed-ness of consciousness: that in the act of perceiving, feeling or thinking, our mental state is always “about” or “of” something.


100 Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 141.
and the “continuities in the experience of watching projected motion pictures.”\textsuperscript{101} This anxiety regarding cinema’s aesthetic value he attributes to its hybrid nature as “an art of space and an art of time”; cinema’s temporal aspect highlights its immateriality.\textsuperscript{102}

Phenomenological accounts of cinema, such as that advanced by Chamarette, recognise that films are not only “objects of and for interpretation,” but they are also “objects and moments of experience.”\textsuperscript{103} This approach draws attention to film’s status as a perceptual object and its direct sensory-affective features. As Daniel Yacavone points out, phenomenological accounts no longer reside at the margins of film theory, but are close to its centre, mainly due to the way these explanations, while recognising films as “cognitive, narrative or cultural-ideological [objects],” also offer us a way of interpreting the experience of film.\textsuperscript{104} Through the description of the phenomena of lived experience provided by a phenomenological account, we can more fully understand the spectatorial experience of a stable and unchanging aesthetic work. Simon Glendinning describes the approach of phenomenological theory as the work of “elucidation, explication or description of something we, in some way, already understand, or with which we are already, in some way, familiar, but which, for some reason, we cannot get into clear focus for ourselves without more ado”: it is “description” and not simply “explanation or analysis.”\textsuperscript{105} However, in revealing what is often obscured by institutionalisation and habituation, the description involved in a phenomenological account can produce new insights about the experience of spectatorship, revelations that are commonly unnoticed as our awareness is primarily focused on the filmic world and not necessarily the lived-body.

A phenomenological approach reframes our experience of the world, self, and others through embodiment, while also interrogating some of the earliest Cartesian distinctions that defined the mind-body concept. Husserl differentiates the objective body, \textit{Körper}, from the lived body, \textit{Leib}, as a method of explicating the two different ways we can experience and understand the body.\textsuperscript{106} This distinction is of a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{101} Rodowick, \textit{The Virtual Life of Film}, 13.
\item \textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 14.
\item \textsuperscript{103} Chamarette, \textit{Phenomenology and The Future of Film}, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Yacavone, “Film and the Phenomenology of Art,” 159.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Glendinning, \textit{In The Name of Phenomenology}, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Husserl, \textit{Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität II}, 57.
\end{itemize}
phenomenological kind, rather than an ontological one. The crucial point made by this
differentiation is that any account of the body from an observer’s point of view, as
something that can be analysed and dissected objectively, ignores the reality that the
only way we can make such observations (or any observation) is through an
experiencing, lived body. Gallagher and Zahavi, drawing on Husserl, expand on this
concept:

The body is not a screen between me and the world; rather, it shapes our
primary way of being-in-the-world. This is also why we cannot first explore the
body by itself and then subsequently examine it in its relation to the world. On
the contrary, the body is already in-the-world, and the world is given to us as
bodily revealed.\textsuperscript{107}

Our sense of our body is ultimately in what it accomplishes for us: its actions and
perceptions. This includes tacit awareness of our position in space in relation to other
objects or bodies, but also attunement with mood and feeling that manifest as
something that is felt bodily. These aspects of embodiment also shape our perception
of the world. If I feel claustrophobic, the world itself feels claustrophobic: this comes
about through the way my lived body is in constant contact with the world through the
embodied self as the grounds of perception. Unlike Husserl’s concept of \textit{Körper}, which
conceives of the body’s contact with the world as a distinction of surface of skin to
surface of world, the lived body is in rapport with the world in a way that constantly
makes new meaning through the body itself; the dynamics of perception necessarily
alters each side of this dualistic consideration of body/world in the moment of
experience.

The cognitivist approach advanced by theorists such as Bordwell and Carroll to
understanding how we process images inserts a hierarchical structure into the model
of the lived body. In this model, while there are various automatic bodily responses to
sensory input, it is cognition which restructures all sensory data into models of
meaning. For example, Carroll and Seeley propose that:

\textsuperscript{107} Gallagher and Zahavi, \textit{The Phenomenological Mind}, 136.
affective responses in general, and emotional responses in particular, are evolved means for appraising the behavioral significance of environmental stimuli. We can think of our affective responses to the environment as being divided into two types: involuntary, automatic reflexive responses like the startle response, and more cognitively nuanced emotional responses.\textsuperscript{108}

These approaches cannot account for the way in which affective responses may be in excess of, or antithetical to, our means of appraisal or evaluation. Yet it is these kind of affective responses that are crucial to the power of horror film, and also cinema itself more generally. A large body of work has emerged in cinema theory to address this disparity and systematically challenge the model of cinema spectatorship as primarily a process of cognitive assessment: this collection of interrelated scholarship investigates spectatorship as necessarily “embodied.”\textsuperscript{109}

Embodied spectatorship theory synthesises our understandings of film viewing through this notion of the lived body. Thinking about the lived body is central to the phenomenological project, and its consideration of material presence, perception, and sensory engagement informs many of the approaches within this thesis. The phenomenological approach is also significant in relation to an examination of the reinscription of cinematic possibilities into the new forms and technologies, given their potential to alter the lived body experience. Vivian Sobchack, drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s conceptual approach, frames the importance of phenomenology in relation to new technologies, when she writes:

...relatively novel as materialities of human communication, photographic and electronic media have not only historically symbolised but also historically constituted a radical alteration of the forms of our culture’s previous temporal and spatial consciousness and of our bodily sense of existential ‘presence’ to the world, to ourselves, and to others.\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{108} Carroll and Seeley, “Cognitivism, Psychology, and Neuroscience: Movies as Attentional Engines,” 67.
\textsuperscript{109} Among these scholars: Barker, \textit{The Tactile Eye}; Elsaesser & Hagener, \textit{Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses}; Marks, \textit{The Skin of the Film}; Sobchack, \textit{The Address of the Eye}; Shaviro, \textit{The Cinematic Body}; Rutherford, \textit{What Makes A Film Tick?}. Chapter Two examines these varied conceptual frames around embodiment in greater detail.
\textsuperscript{110} Sobchack, \textit{Carnal Thoughts}, 136.
These alterations of temporal and spatial consciousness and of our bodily sense of ‘presence’ become apparent to us when we hone our description of the cinematic experience in relation to the lived body. What is evident, however, is that the phenomenological approach has been disregarded by some aspects of horror scholarship, which have focused on the representational or hermeneutic dimensions of horror texts. To fully comprehend the cinematic experience, what is required is an integration of all of the following aspects: the viewer’s cognitive assessment, their physiological response, their emotional state, the environmental factors (including those with whom they may be sharing the experience), and the phenomenological presence that manifests in the experience of spectatorship.
CHAPTER TWO:

From Identification to Embodied Spectatorship

in the Found Footage Horror Film

To Look (or Not to Look)

In a darkened room I lie awake, watching the digital numerals of the bedside clock taunt me as they flip past 12:00, a new day announcing its presence far too early. Unable to sleep, I turn to what has now become for many a habitual reaction to insomnia: staring into the digital abyss of an iPhone.

Bored with social media, I load up the application called CamViewer, a remote viewing program that is connected to my home security cameras. I scroll through each of the exterior views. In the neon green glow of the night vision, the tree branches tremble softly in the night air. I switch to the interior view: our front door, and the alcove where the dogs sleep at night. The two golden retrievers are in their beds, mocking me with their blissful slumber. Using the buttons on the screen, I turn the camera three hundred and sixty degrees. The sleeping dogs remain still, unaware of the electronic eye watching them. More from boredom than from paranoia, I shift back again to the exterior cameras. Apart from the shimmer of movement from the light breeze, the street outside my house is also still and silent.

The silence is abruptly broken by a noise coming from outside the bedroom: a heavy thud. I switch back to the interior camera. One of the dogs is still sleeping. The other is not.

He’s now standing at attention, rigid, looking into the guest bedroom adjacent to the entrance. His tail is raised, signalling focused attention, if not danger. I can see only the doorway to this bedroom, but no further. Whatever has caught his attention is unknown, unseen. Out of frame.
I strain to hear, my body taut like a piano string, the slightest new sensation promising a discordant reaction. Was that a shifting of weight? The creak of the floorboards? An ineffable sense tells me someone – something – is in that room. But why isn’t Bentley barking? Why is he so still?

In the glow of the electronic screen, I watch the empty doorway, and hold my breath.

Technologies of perception in horror film

In the small tale that prefaces this chapter lie some of the elements that have drawn me to explore the field of new forms of cinematic horror: the pervasive presence of cameras, our need to watch and/or record, and the capacity of the actual (or even virtual) image to produce affective bodily responses. It is this emerging relationship between technologies of perception and expression, such as cameras and screens, and the genre of horror that generates novel forms, the apogee of which can be found in the subgenre of found footage horror.

Given that horror cinema as a genre has always been a site of radical fluctuations in phenomenological presence, it is understandable that newer forms of audio-visual technology have produced modifications in experience that have perhaps been overlooked, or have been mistaken for the pre-existing correspondences between various forms of horror and the concomitant bodily experience. At the core of this and subsequent chapters are the following questions: how is the diegetic interface between horror and the technologies of cameras and screens producing an innovative experience of horror spectatorship? What is it that the aesthetic choices of the sub-genre of found footage horror enables that the conventions of older genres of horror does not? By examining these questions, we can further interrogate the existing understandings of spectatorship raised in the previous chapter, and ask whether approaches that consider a phenomenological engagement between viewer and image allow for a more complete comprehension. We can also ask how foregrounding a Deleuzian conception of filmic affect over a film’s representational content might reveal deeper understandings of cinema’s capacities.
Horror cinema’s efficacy comes not only from its narrative contents, but also from the particular affective force generated by its sensory and sensual capacities, capacities that are being transformed by the genre’s direct engagement with technologies of perception and expression such as screens and cameras, particularly in the sub-genre of found footage horror. The imbrication of these technologies has had profound consequences on our experience of horror. In particular, it has accentuated and intensified the push/pull of attraction and repulsion, which many scholars such as Carroll, Clover, and Hanich have identified as pivotal to the genre. That horror generates both attraction and repulsion is central to my claims in this chapter; however, what is at stake is a more nuanced understanding of how the movement between these poles is not merely regulated by scopophilia and fear, but more fully by the spatial and temporal expansion and contraction of the lived-body experience of the spectator. Drawing on Freud’s conception of scopophilia as an unconscious desire to take others as objects of pleasure through a controlling gaze, Mulvey argues that one of the intrinsic pleasures provided by film is that it provides a location for this “voyeuristic phantasy.” However, scopophilia in the Mulveyian sense, understood as visual pleasure motivated by unconscious desires, is insufficient to fully account for horror film’s appeal and power, as is any theoretical conception of the gaze that elides the presence of a fully embodied spectator. While these conceptions of the gaze offer valuable insights, the ocularcentrism that underpins them elides the importance of the other senses; a more complete understanding acknowledges the integration of the range of perceptual, cognitive and bodily ways in which we are drawn into the image.

In horror, the bodily components of this engagement are predicated upon the unique spatial and temporal affects generated by cinematic fear, in combination with elements of mise en scène that are affectively charged. Our proximity to the image differs from the literal distance we take from the screen, as does our experience of cinematic duration differ from that of ‘clock time.’ I argue that this heightened

---

112 The gaze here referring to the relationship between a viewer and that which is viewed, traditionally conceived of in terms of power dynamics.
corporeal engagement emerges, in part, from how found footage horror films utilise the out of frame.

‘Found footage’ is a term that refers to “the conceit that the movie was filmed not by a traditional, omniscient director, but by a character that exists within the film’s world – and whose footage was discovered sometime after the events of the film.”¹¹³ The most common trope is that the film was compiled after the events portrayed on screen, from recovered tapes and film. It can be composed of footage from diegetic cameras operated by the characters, or from surveillance footage in the diegetic world of the film, or more recently, from recordings of computer screens. A more inclusive definition of found footage would also allow for the “mockumentary” components of films such as The Last Broadcast and The Last Exorcism, in which the film is presented as a documentary complete with interviews, voice overs and other documentary techniques, where the fictional content of the film, while crafted into documentary form, still makes the same claims to authenticity as unadulterated footage that has been ‘found.’ Bordwell takes issue with the term “found footage,” given its ties to an already established experimental film practice that involved the use of material shot by others for another purpose, and proposes the term “discovered footage,” but this has not become the preferred nomenclature in popular discourse.¹¹⁴

Horror cinema as a genre has a long history of exploring emerging technologies within the film’s diegetic world.¹¹⁵ However, a shift can be identified at the turn of the twenty-first century in terms of the way horror films began to explore these technologies at the formal level by integrating them in to the diegetic world. The incorporation of technologies of perception like the camera within the found footage sub-genre afforded these films the opportunity to examine the terrifying potential of the form itself. As with all films that engage with emerging technologies, this sub-genre is constantly evolving and is co-constituted by the evolution of technologies in the surrounding culture. However, this evolution is also one that has occurred more

¹¹⁴ Bordwell, Return to Paranormalcy.
¹¹⁵ For example, Them! (1954) explored the consequences of atomic testing; The ghosts of Poltergeist (1982) haunted the family television; and The Lawnmower Man (1992) looked at the potential terrors of VR and artificial intelligence.
broadly within horror as a genre: it is a location where technological advancements are often probed for their horrific capabilities.\textsuperscript{116}

Soon after the invention of photography, and later cinematography, both technologies were being used to produce macabre imagery. The nineteenth century experimentation with ‘spirit photography’ – the process of creating a superimposition on an already existing photographic image through double exposure – was an incipient point in the relationship between image-making technology and horror [Figure 2]. Spirit photography was used as a technique of both spiritualists, who argued for the authenticity of the images, and entertainers, who were less circumspect about its inherent trickery. With the invention of cinema in the late 1800s it was only a short

\textsuperscript{116} For a detailed investigation of how various forms of technology have been considered ‘haunted,’ see Jeffrey Sconce’s \textit{Haunted Media}. For an explanation of how technology informs the evolution of horror as a genre, see Brian N. Duchaney’s \textit{The Spark of Fear}.
time before the medium engaged with similar techniques for the purpose of constructing more elaborate horrifying illusions.

Drawing on Expressionist painting and surrealism for their look, and Gothic literature and the theatre of the Grand Guignol for their narrative, early horror film brought folkloric tales of various monsters or supernatural entities into physical presence, albeit as nothing more than a flickering image. The extent to which these images amazed or horrified their audience was dependent, much as it is today, on how much the novelty effect of the medium altered the affective properties of the experience. Regarding the experience of “first contact” with cinema, Beja Marghitazi argues that “the concept of a homogenous mass audience has to be demolished” and poses instead a separation between those who were “trained spectators,” familiar with magic lantern shows and similar amusements, and viewers with “untrained cognitive habits,” such as those from rural or non-industrial areas.117

However, even those attempting rational, measured responses to cinema were struck by its affective force. In 1896 Maxim Gorky, writing about the early Lumière Brother’s films, famously describes the intensity of its new properties for early viewers in the following passage:

Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows. If you only knew how strange it is to be there. It is a world without sound, without colour [...] It is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless spectre. Here I shall try to explain myself, lest I be suspected of madness or indulgence in symbolism. I was at Aumont’s and saw Lumière’s cinematograph — moving photography.118

Viewing a restored version of the Lumière’s Le Squelette Joyeux (1895), it is difficult to reconcile any reaction outside of amusement at the sight of the dancing skeleton, although there is no doubt it may have been frightening to those unfamiliar with cinematic medium who were suddenly confronted with a vision that had theretofore only existed in the imagination. Georges Méliès’ Le Manoir du Diable (1896), on the other hand, is rightfully credited as the first horror film despite its short duration (at just over three minutes), due to its supernatural narrative and inclusion of ghosts,

---

117 Marghitazi, “‘Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows...’”
118 Gorky, “‘Беглые Заметки’”
witches, bats, devils and cauldrons, all elements that came to be generic markers of the horror genre. Horror media has continued its evolution through several transformative epochs in the last 150 years: from the photograph, to the cinematograph, to the Hollywood cinematic narrative, all the way to the dynamic new media forms of internet video, computer games and virtual reality.

The most basic level at which we can consider the imbrication of technologies of perception and the horror film is to look at how this entanglement has been traditionally represented: through the diegetic employment of screens and cameras within the narrative. The most apposite exemplar here is the Hollywood adaptation of Japanese horror film *Ringu*, retitled *The Ring*, as the raison d’être of this film is the horrific transmutation of the television screen into a portal. By investigating various critical approaches to *The Ring*, we can begin to unpack the manifold ways in which horror films integrate technologies of perception and expression, like the camera and screen. Then, extending upon this understanding, we can see how this integration also transforms the experience of spectatorship, by intensifying an embodied interaction with the sound and image, thus adding fuller dimensions to any cognitive appraisal of the monster and its effects.

**Bleeding binaries: When a screen becomes a portal**

The history of horror film demonstrates that large scale technological shifts inevitably warrant investigation within the genre. As Jeffrey Sconce observes in *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*:

> Tales of paranormal media are important ... not as timeless expressions of some underlying electronic superstition, but as a permeable language in which to express a culture’s changing social relationship to a historical sequence of technologies.¹¹⁹

By engaging with emerging technologies in both form and content in their fullest expression, horror film (and in particular found footage horror film) is often the first genre to pose questions for scholars regarding the changing nature of the viewing

experience vis-à-vis our connection to cameras and screens, the effects of cameras
and screens on subjectivity, and the possible new modes of perception and experience
that may arise from the transformative powers of this new compact with screens (and
images). As these technologies attempt to replicate the process of human
consciousness and perception in their expression, they are also imbued with ghostly
traces of the information that passes through them: the ineffable presence that these
images have, despite their ephemerality, becomes an incubator of sorts for
metaphysical questions about the nature of that which we can and cannot perceive.
The residue of this presence is a haunting of sorts, and to see the effects of this
haunting one need only examine how quickly each of the ‘new’ media of their times –
photography, radio, the telegraph and the telephone – were soon imbricated with the
paranormal. This contention that there is a paranormal occupation of sorts in new
technology is furthered by the way that television and film consistently self-reflexively
present themselves as sites of this occupation: the screen, for example, becomes a
tabula rasa upon which our supernatural anxieties recur in various guises. Television
shows such as The X-Files and The Twilight Zone have employed the diegetic television
screen as the location of the horrific, and films have also similarly engaged with an
assortment of screens in different ways: television as a site of haunting (Poltergeist,
1982) [Figure 3] or brainwashing (Videodrome, 1983), projected 16mm film as portal to
demonic possession (Sinister, 2012) and the chat windows of a computer screen as the
site of a conversation with an angry and vengeful deceased teenager (Unfriended,
2014).

---

120 Nineteenth century photographs were believed to contain spectral images. Later technologies, such
as the phonograph, the telegraph, the radio and the telephone, were all at some time thought to
contain voices from beyond the grave.
The compact between horror film and technology has also been examined in detail by scholars seeking to understand the interchange between the two from the perspective of their contemporaneous evolution. Brian Duchaney argues that improvements in technology necessitate new forms of horror, and that horror as a genre acts out our distrust of the concurrent social advances that new technology brings.\textsuperscript{121} Caetlin Benson-Allott’s work further develops this concept, contending that the specific intersection of cultural and technological anxiety present in the horror genre makes it the ideal location for studying the shifting process of spectatorship, as it moves from the containment of the auditorium to what can now be the palms of our hands.\textsuperscript{122} Benson-Allot’s analysis of spectatorship statistics identifies 1988 as the year in which video consumption (which she expands over the timeline to today to include VHS, DVD, Blu-ray, Video on Demand, and streaming media) overtook the in-theatre experience.\textsuperscript{123} Drawing on Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, among others, she proposes that:

\textsuperscript{121} Duchaney, \textit{The Spark of Fear}, 5.
\textsuperscript{122} Benson-Allott, \textit{Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing}, 15.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 1.
The meaning-making process of watching a movie necessarily includes the mechanics of viewing, from the architecture of the theater to the location of the projector and the size of the screen, not to mention its constitutive components: the motion picture being screened and the human viewer.\textsuperscript{124}

For Benson-Allot, each viewing medium produces its own specific qualities of experience, which, especially when co-ordinated with the diegetic content of the film, allows for the spectator to be more pervasively ‘infected’ by the film’s content: by having the titles smash through what appears to be glass at the conclusion of the title sequence of \textit{Friday the 13\textsuperscript{th}} (1980), she argues, the film is embracing its predominant location of consumption, the television screen (via VHS), in an effort to more extensively join the medium with the content, and thus, more fully immerse the viewer.\textsuperscript{125}

Gore Verbinski’s film, \textit{The Ring} (2002), is an apt case in point for examining the evolution of integration of medium and concept. Although not a found footage horror film, \textit{The Ring} offers a potent illustration of how the horror genre can appropriate the dynamics of our regular interactions with modern screen culture, directly implicating television and video as the source of the film’s diegetic haunting. \textit{The Ring} tells the story of Rachel Keller, a journalist investigating the mysterious death of her niece and three other teenagers who all watched a particular videotape a week prior to their death. In the process of her investigation, Rachel also watches the tape, as does her ex-husband Noah and their child, Aiden. Initially sceptical, Rachel finds herself ‘infected’ by the tape, the contamination leading to nightmares, nose bleeds and supernatural phenomena. As she attempts to locate the origins of the video, she discovers the story of Samara Morgan, a young girl whose electro-telepathic abilities led to her tragic death at the hands of her mother. Far from stopping her abnormal powers, Samara’s death instead facilitated her ability to haunt electronic media from beyond the grave: to inhabit the cursed videotape and the screens upon which its contents are displayed. Rachel discovers that the only escape from Samara’s affliction

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 2.
is to copy and propagate the tape, and in doing so saves her son’s life – but also continues the spread of Samara’s destructive epidemic [Figure 4].

Figure 4: Rachel (Naomi Watts) watches the videotape in The Ring

Adapted from the Japanese Ringu series (1998), co-created by Hideo Nakata and Koji Suzuki (whose novel is the source material), The Ring (2002) was at the time the most commercially successful, and arguably, the most aesthetically successful Hollywood adaptation of what has been deemed “New Asian Horror.” As Jay McRoy points out in Nightmare Japan, this genre has allowed artists “an avenue through which they may apply visual and narrative metaphors in order to engage aesthetically with a rapidly transforming social and cultural landscape.”

Although the social and cultural landscapes of Japan and the United States are vastly different, they are both privileged locations in terms of the prominence and velocity of their uptake of electronic media and media technologies. Thus, it is to be expected that Japanese horror’s specific preoccupation with ghostly technology is effectively translated in its Hollywood adaptation.

The diegetic narrative of The Ring allows for an explicit investigation of haunted media. As Benson-Allott puts it, “The Ring uses VCRs and videocassettes as sponges,

126 McRoy, Nightmare Japan, 4.
which it saturates with recurring industry anxieties and then wrings out onto its spectator, who is already being wrung out by its horrors.” However, the most compelling aspect of The Ring is its ability to force us to question our separation from the image, and in turn the related binaries of body and world, at a narrative, thematic and affective level. Jeremy Tirrell first conceptualises how The Ring articulates the breakdown of these binaries, in his article, “Bleeding Through, or We Are Living in a Digital World and I Am an Analog Girl.” Tirrell claims that, in a culture that is progressively moving toward the use of binaries as a way of categorising and hermetically isolating elements, the “messy, variable and heterogeneous” conception of the world inevitably “bleed[s] through”: the understanding he proposes is more akin to that of the analog signal, as one that is not composed of discrete elements.

Among the specific binaries that Tirrell refers to are that of the body and world (a division that is traversed by infection, which he equates to Samara’s parasitic movement); the supernatural world and the empirical world; and the observer and the image. He argues that The Ring specifically threatens the distinction and separation that are usually entailed by vicarious identification with on-screen characters: by forcing us as viewers to watch the same images that cause the haunting of Rachel Keller, The Ring removes the apparent safety of our distance as spectators and directly implicates us in the haunting.

Tirrell’s understanding echoes Carroll’s notions of threat and impurity as the foundations of horror, recapitulating the notion that underlying all horror is the recurring thematic of the persistent human desire to enforce a binary structure of purity (true/false, inside/outside, self/other, for example) onto bodies and worlds that are inexorably intertwined, and that it is our failure to secure this demarcation that produces fear, disgust, and revulsion for the spectator. However, while Tirrell does not limit this demarcation to a cognitive appraisal, in that he argues for the broader possibilities of contamination between binaries (such as “biology” and “technology,” as one example), his consideration of film is still one of a monologic, “one-way” medium, where there is little to no reciprocity between film and viewer. What limits Tirrell’s

127 Benson-Allott, Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing, 104.
128 Tirrell, “Bleeding Through, or We Are Living in a Digital World and I Am an Analog Girl,” 141-160.
129 Ibid., 141-160.
account is that he primarily conceives of this ongoing breakdown as a conceptual or metaphorical one.

Horror films have often presented similar metaphorical accounts of the failure to maintain these limits through the infiltration of supposedly impenetrable boundaries by the ‘monster’: David Cronenberg’s *The Fly* (1986), Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* (1965), and David Lynch’s *Eraserhead* (1977) are paradigms of this collapse at the level of narrative. *The Ring* presents the same thematic, but in a manner that targets our superstitious insecurities and fears regarding technologies of the image. A particularly vivid example is that of the ghost of the young girl Samara crawling out of the television [Figure 5]. This nightmarish vision, of the monster escaping the confinement of the TV, is a potent one for horror viewers.

![Figure 5: Samara crawling out of the television in *The Ring*](image)

The television, in *The Ring*, becomes, at one level, a gateway for infiltration: in its most memorable sequence, the film explicitly explores this crossing of boundaries, as the ghostly Samara, coated in static, enters the real world through the portal of the television screen, crawling towards Noah in his final moments. In an earlier sequence, an onscreen fly is plucked into reality by Rachel’s hand – she reaches out to the buzzing two dimensional image of a fly on the screen and it instantly becomes a three-
dimensional ‘real’ fly – a demonstration within the film itself of the potential breakdown of this division between screen content and the world external to the screen. These unambiguously symbolic moments and their entwinement with technology metaphorically capture the manner in which this type of horror escapes the containment of our supposedly safe spectatorial ‘distance’ from it, rupturing the implied separation between what we are watching and the world outside of the viewing experience. This type of hermeneutic analysis is one way of analysing the uptake of technological shifts within the genre of horror. It is, however, perhaps the most superficial method of analysis, as it does not take into account the lived body experience of watching these films: while the forged bridge between the image and the ‘real’ is metaphorical within the diegesis, it is, on the level of actual spectatorship, decidedly material and corporeal. As viewers, we are literally ‘touched’ by the image, in terms of it affecting us in a bodily way, at varying levels of depth – the skin, the muscles, and the viscera.

For a viewer, there is also a second, more subtle affective shift that occurs in the complex interaction between character/screen/viewer: this second shift is the creation of a liminal space for a spectator, in which his/her conceptions of cinematic reality and unreality are unmoored by the complex relations we have with screens and cameras. This produces a cinematic experience that upends the spectatorial disbelief that is more easily summoned in standard horror genre films. As Kimberly Jackson claims in her study on the relationship between technology and monstrosity, by focusing on how inextricably linked we are to our technologies, these films introduce a hyperawareness of “the undecidable relation between reality and image.” Jackson contends that this irresolution “becomes horrific and affective rather than desensitizing and anaesthetic.”

The diegetic world of The Ring explores one version of a liminal space, through Samara’s escape from the confines of the screen, but the film itself also plays with an “undecidable relation between reality and image” in the unwelcome pact that occurs between viewer and image when the cause of Samara’s curse is presented on screen. As Rachel views the tape, we too see the same collection of macabre and chilling

---

130 Jackson, Technology, Monstrosity, and Reproduction in Twenty-First Century Horror, 35.
images within the frame of a television screen in the diegetic world, and the larger frame of our own screens, be they cinema, TV, computer or other. The diegetic screen flickers as the images coalesce, a flash many viewers would recognise from the days of analog video and cathode ray tubes, and then finally the sequence of images ends with the also familiar static hiss of white noise. The film cuts to Rachel only twice in this sequence, very briefly, as she stares directly at the screen, mirroring the stare of the viewer. As screen technology provides for the presence and propagation of malevolent images in the diegetic world of the film, so too does it confront the viewer in the non-diegetic world, making us complicit with those who are infected – and perhaps ‘infecting’ us as well. This sequence, and the consequences of viewing the tape established by the narrative, set up the possibility of a fusion between reality and fictional representation.

William Egginton draws attention to how this narrative trope of blurring between representation and reality has increased in prevalence in contemporary film, and he specifically examines its relation to found footage. Egginton pinpoints this “bleeding” as a natural concern for writers since the invention of theatre in the sixteenth century, as theatre, and other subsequent cultural forms such as television and film, are inevitably drawn to the question of the ontological distinction between “reality” and that which represents it. To distinguish how this confusion can potentially occur, he outlines two methods of “making represented realities ‘realistic’”:

“illusionism” and “realism.” “Illusionism” works to assure viewers that the medium – in this case, the film – is an aesthetic object. The common outcome for a spectator of “illusionism” is that the images are still perceived as “framed” object, seemingly realistic but never taken as real. Realism, in Egginton’s conception, presents the object as if it were the medium. The snuff film is its most extreme example, Egginton proposes, stating that “the viewer takes what is in fact the object—images of a human being’s death — as a medium, as a trace of a further, ‘real’ death, a mysterious and terrifying (or titillating, depending on the viewer) event.” This conception of realism necessarily requires the eradication of the distinction between object and medium. The realism of the found footage horror film can potentially produce the same

---

131 Egginton, “Reality is Bleeding,” 208.
132 Ibid., 212.
dissolution of this distinction, and fuse the audience with the film in a manner that exceeds the cognitive process of the “pact” described above. It does so through the way its distinct aesthetics intensify the liminality of the division between illusionism and realism, and bring to the fore the embodied experience of the viewer.

The birth and emergence of ‘Found Footage’ Horror Cinema

Catherine Zimmer identifies the genre of found footage as the best representation of “the increasing ubiquity of visual recording technologies in the hands of the ‘average’ person and the drive to record, on such consumer level technologies, virtually everything: to document, represent, share and spectacularize the world as it unfolds before each individual.”\(^{133}\) The modality of the camera/screen dyad has become an inescapable aspect of contemporary life. One glance at any crowded urban space and it is self-evident, with hundreds of people engaged in the act of either viewing or recording. The consequences of this large-scale shift to the ubiquitous tethering of humans and cameras/screens are bound to filter into cultural products like television and cinema, and vice versa. Joel Black contends that cinema itself holds much of the burden of responsibility for the compulsion people feel to render every element of their daily lives as a visible spectacle.\(^{134}\)

This ubiquitous presence of screens and cameras in real life emerges in fictional form in the increasing prevalence of found footage films in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The natural cinematic home of found footage appears to be the horror genre, although it should be noted that the found footage sub-genre has in recent years been adopted by a variety of other genres.\(^{135}\) Key exemplar films of the horror sub-genre include the Paranormal Activity series, the [REC] series, Cloverfield, Willow Creek, V/H/S and S-V/H/S, among many others, but few would dissent with Alexandra Heller-Nicholas’ contention that it was the commercial success of 1999’s The Blair Witch Project that ignited the rebirth of what has become a prolific, popular and

\(^{133}\) Zimmer, Surveillance Cinema, 77.

\(^{134}\) Black, The Reality Effect.

\(^{135}\) Action / drama (End of Watch, 2012), science fiction / superhero film (Chronicle, 2012) and comedy (Project X, 2012), to name a few. Xavier Aldana Reyes makes the argument that found footage is not technically a sub-genre, but a “framing device” that may be applied to different subgenres such as the monster film, the haunted house film, or the possession film (Reyes, Horror Film and Affect, 105).
profitable sub-genre within contemporary horror film.\textsuperscript{136} Although there were previous entries in the canon, none was as successful with mainstream audiences as \textit{The Blair Witch Project}.\textsuperscript{137} Most horror film scholars point to Ruggero Deodato’s \textit{Cannibal Holocaust} (1980) as the progenitor of the modern day found footage horror film, but Heller-Nicholas points back to more tangential origins, such as Orson Welles’ radio broadcast of \textit{War of the Worlds} (1938) and the road safety films of the 1950s.\textsuperscript{138} Heller-Nicholas also argues that \textit{Man Bites Dog} (1992) played a significant role in the development of the found footage conceit, melding the mockumentary format with the turgid violence of a serial killer film.\textsuperscript{139}

Perhaps the most vital achievement of \textit{The Blair Witch Project} directors, Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, was a transition from the more controversial and underground uses of found footage in arthouse and grindhouse cinema, such as \textit{Man Bites Dog} and \textit{Cannibal Holocaust}, to a mainstream appeal that was fostered on the development of a burgeoning millennial fascination with “reality” television. Kevin J. Wetmore argues that reality television’s fusion of documentary and entertainment was pivotal to naturalising the aesthetic of the documentary form in modern horror.\textsuperscript{140} It was in this intersection between horror and “reality” that found footage took hold of the imagination of horror audiences worldwide. Accounting for this appeal, Heller-Nicholas states:

\begin{quote}
The pleasure of found footage horror in part stems from the spectatorial knowledge that something we rationally know not to be true (the supernatural) can momentarily be reimagined (consciously or otherwise) as ‘real’ because the vehicle in which that information is delivered is one we otherwise trust to provide reliable information.\textsuperscript{141}
\end{quote}

Another potential explanation for the sub-genre’s growing appeal in the post-millennial years following \textit{The Blair Witch Project} is posited by Aviva Briefel and Sam J.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{136} Meslow, \textit{12 Years After ‘Blair Witch’, When Will the Found Footage Horror Fad End?}
\textsuperscript{137} With a budget of around $60000, the film grossed over $140 million on its theatrical release.
\textsuperscript{138} Heller-Nicholas, \textit{Found Footage Horror Films}, 32, and Sayad, “Found Footage Horror and the Frame’s Undoing,” 44 (among others).
\textsuperscript{139} Heller-Nicholas, \textit{Found Footage Horror Films}, 36.
\textsuperscript{140} Wetmore, \textit{Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema}, 78.
\textsuperscript{141} Heller-Nicholas, \textit{Found Footage Horror Films}, 22.
\end{flushleft}
Miller. They argue that, after being confronted with the real horror of the September 11 terrorist attacks, and the subsequent media coverage that prompted many to describe the shocking footage as “like a movie,” some American audiences sought out corners of the genre that steered clear of the explicitly graphic imagery of pre-9/11 horror films. What Myrick and Sanchez had coincidentally achieved prior to 9/11 with *The Blair Witch Project* was, in the words of James Keller, to create “a sense of actuality by systematically repudiating virtually every feature of the film industry’s formula for realistic drama.” As Keller says, “they have achieved realism by rejecting realism.” Keller claims that the directors had produced the veneer of reality by embracing unconventional techniques, such as allowing the camera to be reflexively seen, or presenting images that obscure rather than reveal the source of the terror, such as those sequences in *The Blair Witch Project* where the characters flee from an unseen threat, the cameras recording only a blur of movement [Figure 6].

![Figure 6: Example of reflexive presence of camera in The Blair Witch Project](image)

In this way, the directors demonstrated a formula that post-9/11 filmmakers could emulate, one that presented horror films in a manner that was ‘[un]like a movie.’ Indeed, a central aspect of the capacity of these films to produce a mode of terror that

---

142 Briefel and Miller, *Horror after 9/11*, 1.
differed sharply from the slasher or torture porn sub-genres was their embrace of methods of generating suspense that strategically mimic how apprehension and dread occur in the non-cinematic world. By dwelling on the quiet, the incongruous, the odd or the seemingly innocuous, found footage is where, in the words of Heller-Nicholas, “nothing seems to happen... in strategic ways.” The *Paranormal Activity* series is an ideal example of this concept, as much of the film is composed of static surveillance-style footage designed to prompt the spectator to search the frame for any presence of the supernatural entity [Figure 7].

Figure 7: Surveillance-style cameras of *Paranormal Activity*

Another influence on the emergence of these films was the increasing prominence of reality TV and the accompanying prevalence of amateur video in the broader culture. Found footage horror trades on the explicit consciousness of form that ghost hunting shows, such as *Most Haunted*, began to establish in the early 2000s. This referential familiarity carried over to the sub-genre, and bestowed on these films a superficial claim to authenticity. The apparent ‘reality’ of these films, however, is also predicated upon the viewer’s existing relationship with documentary form and its claims to

---

authenticity. These claims have, however, been problematised by a postmodern society that questions the notion of the visual record ever holding a stable claim to indexical truthfulness. The anxiety that belies this potential inconsistency between authenticity and the documentary form plays a vital role in the power of found footage, opening up a space for the ‘unreal’.

The unreal reality of found footage

Horror film as a genre has long made claims to the veracity of the events depicted, for the purposes of deepening a viewer’s curiosity and interest. The opening narration of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), for example, falsely claims that the film’s victims were based on real people and that the “the events of that day were to lead to the discovery of one of the most bizarre crimes in the annals of American history, The Texas Chain Saw Massacre.”145 Similarly, *Wolf Creek* (2005) opens with the assertion, “the following is based on actual events,” a claim that can only be based on its tangential relation to the backpacker murders by serial killer Ivan Milat, and the unrelated terrifying ordeal of British tourists, Peter Falconio and Joanne Lees.146 Haunted house films, *The Amityville Horror* (1979) and *The Conjuring* (2013), are also tenuously based on real events, employing claims of authenticity to heighten the immersive properties of the narrative. Similarly, in its promotional material, *The Conjuring* makes the claim that it is “based on the true case files of the Warrens.” Ed and Lorraine Warren (played in the film by Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga) were American paranormal researchers, and the founders of the New England Society for Psychic Research. The implication is that the film faithfully recreates the circumstances and details of their investigations, giving us insight into paranormal encounters that only a few can claim to have experienced firsthand.

Found footage goes beyond these claims. These films are not “inspired by” events, but are presented as actual documentation of real people, not characters

---

146 Ivan Milat was a serial killer convicted of the murder of seven backpackers in New South Wales, between 1989 and 1993. Peter Falconio and Joanne Lees were British tourists who were confronted and attacked in the remote Australian outback by an assailant named Bradley Murdoch in July 2001. Lees was abducted, but later escaped, and Falconio was believed to have been shot and killed, although his body was never located.
standing in for real people. Cecilia Sayad describes these films as being presented as “a fragment of the real world,” with the implication that their content has tangible connections to the world outside of the film. This contention explores the dissolution in modern media of clear demarcations between fiction and reality, which Sayad describes as “the increasingly tenuous boundaries separating representation from real life, the popularity of reality TV being this phenomenon’s clearest illustration.” Since the release of *The Blair Witch Project*, the prevalence of this realist impulse in the horror genre is clearly apparent, as evidenced by the large increase in the proportion of found footage films produced within the genre.

Horror is not the only genre to display this movement from fictionality to realism. Scholars such as Lucia Nagib and Cecilia Mello have noted this return of realist tendencies in film since the turn of the twenty-first century, offering a wide variety of sources for this shift, from the popularity of the Dogme 95 manifesto, to the explosion of various world cinemas that embraced this mode as a tool that aspired to reveal unknown or concealed political, social or psychological dimensions of reality. This realist shift could also be seen as a concerted counter-response to the hyper-reality afforded by computer-generated imagery, a way of regrounding film in what Bazin referred to as an unmediated relation to objective reality. Within the realm of found footage, the increasingly ubiquitous presence of cameras and screens in the modern world has produced a knotty web of technology, viewer and film, and raised questions about the authenticity effects of perceptual realism. Stephen Prince describes perceptually realistic images as those which “structurally [correspond] to the viewer’s audiovisual experience of three-dimensional space.” However, he also points out that this correspondence does not prevent perceptually realistic images from being “referentially unreal.”

---

147 Sayad, “Found-Footage Horror and the Frame’s Undoing,” 45.
148 Dogme 95 was an avant-garde filmmaking community conceived by directors Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995. It had a strict set of rules that were designed to purify filmmaking by focusing on performance, story and theme over the use of filmmaking technology or special effects; Nagib and Mello point to the new cinemas emerging in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Lithuania, Russia, and Iran from the mid-90s onwards; Nagib and Mello, *Realism and Audiovisual Media, xiv-xxv*; also Hallam and Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*.
149 See Prince, *True Lies*, for a counterpoint to this idea.
150 Prince, *True Lies*, 34.
It is arguable that the “unreality” of found footage horror images is often ameliorated by their engagement with documentary tropes. Employing what Bill Nichols describes as the “observational mode” in documentary, found footage horror relies on the viewer’s understanding that the camera captures events as they really are.\textsuperscript{151} This supposed fidelity to real events in the documentary genre is an assumption that, as Nichols points out, relies heavily on “the indexical capacity of the photographic image, and of sound recording, to replicate what we take to be the distinctive visual or acoustic qualities of what they record.”\textsuperscript{152} As viewers, we anticipate that documentaries will marshal evidence and present a perspective on that world – that they are, in John Grierson’s words, “a creative treatment of actuality” – but nonetheless, we still generally accept that these are actual occurrences that are being documented.\textsuperscript{153} This is due to documentary’s privileged position as genre, in that we assume that documentary harnesses a direct relationship between image and referent, and thus accesses and portrays reality. This privileged position has arisen from the concept of the camera as an “apparatus through which the natural world could be accurately documented and recorded.”\textsuperscript{154} This authenticity is also promoted by generic stylistic conventions, like the handheld camera, the self-reflexive presence of the recording devices, and the imprecise or ‘messy’ composition of the image.

However, the verisimilitude implied by the use of documentary codes, combined with the knowledge that the events depicted are often not of this world, produces an oscillation in terms of our conception of the film’s realism or fictionality, with each concept destabilising the status of the other. Barry Keith Grant concurs, arguing that “the realist aesthetic of these films, in combination with their fantastic and frightening elements, reveals a postmodern anxiety about the indexical truthfulness of the image that has been exacerbated by the ubiquity of digital technology.”\textsuperscript{155} Labelling this current cycle of found footage films “new verité horror,” Grant contends that they “[exploit] our psychic investment in the power and truth

\textsuperscript{151} Nichols, \textit{Introduction to Documentary}, 34.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{153} Grierson, \textit{Grierson on Documentary}, 147.
\textsuperscript{154} Roscoe and Hight, \textit{Faking It}, 9. This belief saw the documentary form as intimately tied to the aims of scientific Enlightenment and placed an emphasis on empirical observation.
\textsuperscript{155} Grant, “Digital Anxiety and New Verité Horror and SF Film,” 153.
status of documentary images to generate emotional affect.” However, Grant also acknowledges the complexity of this truth status when he identifies the capacity of this new vérité horror to express “a postmodern vacillation” between the concurrent faith we hold in the authenticity claims of documentary images, and our fear of their falsification, a fear he locates in our awareness of the “unlimited possibilities regarding the manipulation of digital images.”

Despite this awareness, most viewers still ultimately place faith in the documentary’s claims to be a truthful record of reality. This power stems from the observational documentary tradition, which came to prominence in the French cinema vérité movement and the North American Direct Cinema movement. In their work on documentary and mockumentary, Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight note that both of these movements were motivated by the pursuit of an objective and evidential insight into reality itself for the spectator. Heller-Nicholas contends that the convention of realism is, for the found footage genre, only a clever ruse intended to hook an audience. She asserts that found footage is intentionally crafted only to have the appearance of documentary, and that the films rely on a tacit agreement between film and viewer to acquiesce in the belief that the film is a documentary in form but not in truth status. Heller-Nicholas points out the changing dynamic of this documentary influence: she argues that “generic saturation” is responsible for audiences who “no longer assume [that] the signs that once denoted authenticity refer to anything but a specific (and fictional) horror style”; however, it could also be argued that, for viewers who are unacquainted with the conventions of documentary, this implied claim to authenticity is also absent. While she is careful to note that this absence does not rob the sub-genre of its pleasures, Heller-Nicholas does however contend that these films invite media-savvy audiences to “indulge in an active horror fantasy, one where (they) can knowingly accept and embrace the real-seeming film frame while never fully suspending disbelief.”

---

156 Grant’s notion of affect, it should be noted, differs from that of Massumi, in that it is referring to an emotional response generated by appraisal of the semantic content of the image; Ibid., 160.
157 Ibid., 170.
158 Roscoe and Hight, Faking It, 9-20.
159 Heller-Nicholas, Found Footage Horror Films, 8.
160 Ibid., 8.
Tethering found footage’s efficacy to its appropriation of the relative authenticity of the documentary form cannot fully explain the generation of a deep and penetrating experience for a viewer. It is not only this relative authenticity, but also the specific engagement generated by the aesthetics of the found footage form, that underpins the experience. In order to fully understand this engagement, we must examine how, in the viewer’s experience of the image, there is an interaction that operates prior to his or her cognitive evaluation of the image and its narrative contents. Although many contemporary audiences have become savvy to the codes and customs of the sub-genre, and are complicit in a pact between creator and viewer to experience these films only “as-if” they were authentic records of the experience they purport to be, there can be a surplus to this collusion that exceeds the boundaries of the spectator’s imaginative engagement: returning to Massumi, an intensity that does not necessarily correspond to our appraisal of the semantic content of the image.

The surplus is produced by adopting the tropes of our evermore visual culture, such as our predilection to record, and transforming them into horror through the intensification of image and sound allowed by the vagaries of the documentary form. The supposed realism allows the inclusion of that which would normally be eliminated to maintain the clear chain of causality and coherence of the classical Hollywood style, such as ‘empty’ frames, unidentified sound sources, indistinct spatial geography, and aberrant shot durations. Untethered to the demand that each shot of the film carry semantic content in an orchestrated narrative progression, found footage can utilise sounds and images that halt, contradict, or confound the kind of processing on which cognitivist theory predicates a viewer’s engagement. Contrary to notions that argue that found footage’s effects rely on an implied authenticity of the image, this spectatorial surplus can emerge with or without the spectator’s acquiescence to this supposed authenticity, because it resides not only in a cognitive appraisal of the image, but in the pre-cognitive manner in which the viewer’s body is affectively imbricated with the filmic image.

Vivian Sobchack argues for a similar dynamic understanding of a bodily engagement that is not entirely predicated on semantic content, in her writing on Haskell Wexler’s *Medium Cool* and Peter Jackson’s mockumentary film, *Forgotten*
Sobchack suggests that the way in which fictional film content intersects with documentary arouses a “documentary consciousness” in the viewer, which she defines as “a particular mode of embodied and ethical spectatorship that informs and transforms the space of the irreal into the space of the real.” While Sobchack is referring specifically to the use of actual documentary footage within a fictional diegesis, the vital notion is how an image can be “charged” with an “embodied” and “subjective” sense of what counts as the “objective” real. Sobchack points out that our engagement with cinematic representations is “more dynamic and labile” than that which formal or generic conventions would seek to preclude: for example, the disparate elements of fiction and documentary, when integrated in a single film, are experienced by the viewer in a manner that resists any clear demarcation. She contends that, in the contingency of the actual viewing experience, “our engagement with and determination of film images as fictional or real may be experienced either preconsciously or consciously, idiosyncratically or conventionally, momentarily or for relatively sustained periods of time...” Sobchack’s “charge of the real,” her term to describe the mode elaborated above, is a form of affective surplus which brings to the surface our corporeal presence, despite a viewer’s general awareness of the fictional status of the film. It occurs when we suddenly (or, in some cases, subtly) experience the emergence of our extracinematic and extratextual knowledge of the world, bringing with it the foregrounding of the viewer’s body, in the space where previously they were engaged with the irreal fictional world in the transparent way encouraged by conventional cinematic fictions. In Sobchack’s words, when this occurs, the fictional elements are no longer “typical particulars,” but instead become “specifically particular, real and embodied as other.”

161 Sobchack, Carnal Thoughts, 258-285.
162 Ibid., 261.
163 Ibid., 284.
164 Ibid., 268.
165 Ibid., 268.
166 Ibid., 284.
Found footage and the embodied spectator

Found footage horror film’s explicit playfulness with the truth status accorded to the documentary style combines with what Grant describes as the “post-modern vacillation” of a viewer’s credulity to facilitate this transition from the irreal to the real in ways that other genres rarely do. This transitional moment encourages this ‘bringing to the surface’ of bodily affect; however, this production of affect is also heightened by the intensification of the sensory in found footage horror film. Scholarship that examines this provides an alternative approach to the key question of how horror cinema, despite the inconceivability of its fictional content, can genuinely affect a spectator. This question is referred to in film scholarship as the ‘paradox of fiction’: how is it that we can come to be emotionally or affectively engaged with content we know is fictional? Colin Radford summarises the paradox thus: if the human emotional response is predicated on the actuality of the stimulus, and fiction presents us with characters and situations that we do not believe to be actual, how is it that we nonetheless respond emotionally to these characters and situations?\(^\text{167}\)

Robert Sinnerbrink takes issue with Radford’s contention that such a response is, in essence, irrational, and describes the various competing responses that have emerged to account for our response to fiction: “[p]retence theory,” “illusion theory,” and “thought theory.”\(^\text{168}\) Pretence theory posits that we have only a ‘quasi-emotional’ engagement through imaginative interaction; our emotional response is only a simulation, based on ‘make-believe’ (pretence theory essentially denies the third premise, that the viewer’s response is genuinely emotional). Illusion theory maintains that we come to believe that the characters or situations of fiction are, in some sense, real. This negates the second component of the paradox, that we don’t believe the characters and events to be actual. Thought theory, advocated by Carroll and extended in Greg Currie’s “simulation theory,” is premised on the notion that we mentally simulate in imagination the ideas of characters and situations, and that, in doing so, we arrive at an empathetic understanding of each of the characters’ subjective state, a process we continue throughout the film.\(^\text{169}\)

\(^{167}\) Radford, “How Can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina?,” 67-80.

\(^{168}\) Sinnerbrink, New Philosophies of Film, 77-78.

\(^{169}\) Carroll, The Philosophy of Horror; Currie, Image and Mind.
Sinnerbrink argues that these theories cannot account for the totality of our engagement. He writes: “[o]ur affective and emotional engagement... cannot be reduced simply to the thought being expressed, or to simulating the emotional responses of characters, but involves sensuous, bodily and aesthetic elements that heighten our receptivity to, and resonance with, the emotions portrayed on screen.” Each of these attempts to reconcile our response to the paradox of fiction has its limitations, particularly when we consider audio-visual content which strains the credulity of the viewer. However, if we reframe our understanding in light of the primacy of an embodied response to the cinematic experience, we have another way to understand how the cinematic experience itself can overwhelm an intellectual label of authenticity/inauthenticity. This is particularly pertinent to found footage horror. While the viewer may intellectually classify the film being watched as only fiction, the designated fictionality of horror is constantly under threat from the vividness of experience that is generated by the way we process the image corporeally. Thus, an understanding of embodied experience circumvents the various accounts for the paradox of fiction, because the bodily experience of a viewer can be in excess of, or contradictory to, cognitive appraisal.

This contention runs counter to the way many scholars approach found footage. Heller-Nicholas, for example, argues that found footage never escapes its generic placement as an artificially produced fiction. She writes:

On one hand, the formal construction of these films encourages a sense of verisimilitude and suggests that what is being shown is raw, unprocessed ‘reality.’ At the same time, however, it does this by making it impossible to forget that we are watching a film: If the shaky camera and the regular glitches in sound and vision fail to remind us of this, then the appearance of and references to filmmaking technologies in many of these films [make] it inescapable. This assumption that the viewer’s conscious critical awareness of “filmmaking technologies” extracts them from the “reality” of the experience does not match the

---

170 Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film*, 81.
experience of many viewers, particularly when the sounds and images presented are exceptionally intense. At a phenomenological level, our experience of the filmic moment vacillates between proximity and distance, and the intensity of the sounds and images is often at the origin of our movement towards either pole. Exceptionally intense sounds and images can produce horror that fascinates rather than repels, and produce dread or terror that can draw the viewer into the film. Moments of shock or overwhelming horror involve the film becoming ‘too close’ for the viewer, to the point where they may extricate themselves (by closing their eyes, or leaving the cinema).

As Angela Ndalianis argues in her account of the spectatorial event, the realism that is vital to fantastic horror emerges from an audience’s sensory rather than intellectual knowledge, and horror’s most powerful ability is “to be able to affect the sensorium in such a way that it perpetually collapses the boundaries between reality and fiction.” The sensorium that Ndalianis attributes this sensory knowledge to is the indivisible integration of the senses, the body, and cognition.

While I have previously argued that our conceptions of the real and fictional in found footage horror are potentially unmoored by the complex existing relations we have with screens and cameras, this concept goes beyond that, emphasising the viewer’s sensory responses as pivotal to their experience of the film. This is a direct challenge to the “top-down” model utilised by many of the cognitivist theories, and instead sees our experience as inextricably grounded in the interrelation between our sensory processes and our bodies.

By understanding this affective process as a pre-cognitive function, we can explain how the found footage horror film generates moments of intensification of experience that belie our attempts to classify them as merely ‘unreal.’ While much existing horror theory proposes a cognitive distance in how viewers successfully ‘process’ horror, reducing it to the outcome of viewer imagination, emotional response and mental representation, this ‘top-down’ model of processing ignores the primary interface between viewer and image: that of the affective, corporeal response, one that may contradict or undermine these evaluative processes. The concept of the embodied spectator instead embraces the notion that our bodies and our

Ndalianis, The Horror Sensorium, 163.
consciousness are inexorably entwined and always present in/with the world around us. This concept is supported by the phenomenological accounts of embodiment outlined in Chapter One, and the insights into enactive perception provided by neuroscience: that there is no ‘objective’ or detached position from which consciousness observes the world, but rather consciousness emerges from the relation between the body-brain as a singular entity and the world it exists in. The affective complexity that arises from this embodied response allows for the possibility of relational responses to the image that may be in excess of, or counter to, the intended codified meaning. In turn, we may respond to found footage horror film in a manner that goes beyond identification with its protagonists and their situation, as proposed by the cognitivist theorists.

This distinction can be illustrated with a brief example from *The Blair Witch Project*. Watching the compiled footage of the trio’s tragic journey into the woods, we gradually come to know each of the characters, their desires, and their fears about their situation. We come to know of fragments of the myth of the Blair Witch, which imbues the situation with dread. We are even privy to the story of Rustin Parr, a man convicted of the murder of seven children in the 1940s, who claimed to be acting under the command of the Blair Witch: a vital element of his story is how he would tell one of his victims to stand facing the corner of a room while he would kill the other.

At the film’s denouement, as Heather and Mike stumble upon an old house in the middle of the woods, the viewer is of course engaged in some sense by an imaginative assessment of the desperation of the duo’s plight and of the terror of their dimly-lit passage into the dark, rotting, dilapidated old house. Later, upon reflection, the viewer may come to a logical conclusion about how the film’s final images can be read: Heather finds Mike in the basement of the house facing the corner. Her camera is struck down, with the implication that she is also, and the film ends on the blurry, flickering recording of the broken camera. The viewer has witnessed someone, or something, replicating the Rustin Parr murders.

However, this retrospective reflection is completely insufficient to explain precisely why these final moments are so intensely freighted for a viewer. We see no explicit action of violence against either character. We see no monster, or witch, or murderer. What we are presented with are the manifold textures and inky black
shadows of the house, its incongruous, maze-like spatial dimensions (it’s nearly impossible for a viewer to get their bearings), Mike’s ragged breathing, and the frenzied screams of Heather. All of these sensory aspects contribute to an intensity of bodily experience that belies the film’s limited depth of narrative or characterisation.

At the root of cinema’s distinctive powers is this capacity to generate an affective event that has its foundations in the sensorium. Echoing the broader shift in film scholarship, recent horror scholarship has emphasised the return of the body to the moment of spectatorship, prompting equal consideration of the affective and sensorial power of cinema on the body with the film’s semantic content. Anna Powell, drawing on Deleuze, sees the vital importance of reframing the experience of cinema around the interaction between the film and the body, in her consideration of the genre of horror cinema. Noting that Deleuze’s conception of cinema involves the “flux of corporeal sensation and sensory perception” in opposition to accounts that see cinema as a “purely visual, specular experience,” Powell argues that horror deliberately stresses the “visceral, sensory nature of viewing.”

This understanding of horror’s “visceral, sensory nature” is shared by the work of Ndalianis, who argues that our encounters with horror operate across the full range of both sensory and intellectual responses. She does so to counter what she sees as existing homogenous models of understanding horror, ones that are predicated on a hierarchical model where vision is prioritised and interpretations that are outside of a specific theoretical orthodoxy are less valid.

The viewer’s sensory-affective response is crucial to the work of Angela Ndalianis, who argues that the sensorium is the indivisible link between the senses, the body and cognition. This approach seeks to reconcile “the sensory mechanics of the human body” with the “intellectual and cognitive functions connected to it.” Like Reyes, Ndalianis focuses on the presence of an on-screen body, particularly in her examination of New Horror, where she argues that “the mental, psychological and sensory impact on the bodies of the characters who suffer at the hands of the monsters are not only depicted explicitly but this trauma also thrusts itself onto the

---

173 Powell, Deleuze and Horror Film, 4-5.
175 Ibid., 16.
The presence of the on-screen body is also vital to her examination of the avatars of horror video games, which become vehicles for embodiment relations. For Ndalianis, this foregrounding of corporeality occurs in both the fictional worlds she examines, and outside of them.

Ndalianis argues for spectatorship as an experience of multi-faceted dimensions. To explain the range of cognitive and sensorial interactions between film and viewer, she describes the act of horror film spectatorship using the analogy of a “ping-pong match with multiple balls in play at once [where] each ball [represents] a different way of ‘being touched’ by what’s onscreen”; she argues that at any moment in time the viewer may be:

- picking up on a generic reworking or allusion to other horror films; recognizing the social critique embedded in the narrative; feeling one’s skin crawl; laughing at or recoiling from the over-the-top displays of gore and body desecration; empathizing with characters as they deal with abominable horrors; feeling a thrill deep down in that mysterious place called the ‘gut.’

While acknowledging the importance of the spectator’s cognitive response, Ndalianis contends that horror “endows the senses with an intelligence of [their] own: in worlds where meaning and culture collapses, the senses become a powerful – and often horrifying – method of communication.” Her model examines how it is that the vivid sensory spaces of horror fiction can “[translate] their sensorial enactments across our bodies.” Drawing on the works of Paul Rodaway, Vivian Sobchack, Laura Marks, Jennifer Barker and Brigette Peucker, Ndalianis’ work reveals the myriad ways horror not only works on the bodies on-screen, but also carries over to the body of the spectator. Ndalianis writes that:

New Horror Cinema deliberately addresses its spectator through an intense and unforgiving corporeality that demands the attention of the senses. Onscreen,
characters suffer graphic violence at the hands of the monsters, and this
violence continues to be played out offscreen and across the body of the
spectator.\textsuperscript{181}

This notion is also of key importance to Xavier Aldana Reyes, who proposes that
“[h]orror uses [on-screen] bodies in order to affect ours” and “corporeal threat lies at
the heart of the moment of [h]orror.”\textsuperscript{182} While this thesis’ aim of exploring the
affective potential of horror coincides with the work of both theorists, the key point of
difference is in their shared focus on the presence of on-screen bodies;
My approach, by contrast, is to examine how the corporeal aspects of spectatorship
can also be emphasised by films like found footage horror, which de-emphasise the
bodily presence of the protagonist and use alternative methods to address the
sensorium that Ndalianis discusses.

Rethinking the viewing experience of horror through the sensorium enables us
to consider how our bodily response to sensory input is capable of producing an
experience that may surpass a cognitive disavowal of the authenticity of the image:
while we are consciously aware of the fictionality of the film we are watching, our
bodies are capable of contradicting this logic in the way they process the sensory
components of the sound and image. The affect generated by the film shifts moment
to moment in relation to this.

Under most cognitivist frameworks, affect is simply a feeling or sensation that
has yet to be channelled into emotion through the activation of certain cognitive
processes. This concept of affect is distinct from Massumi’s concept, in that it sees
content and intensity as concomitant; the purpose of an image is in its content’s ability
to elicit a particular emotional response for a viewer. If we were to relate this limited
conception of affect back to the example posed by the conclusion of \textit{The Blair Witch
Project}, in this understanding there would be no unqualifiable intensity a viewer is left
with at the film’s conclusion: it would be simply a moment of empty signification until
it is transformed into an emotional response (of fear or dread) after the viewer has
cognitively understood that Heather and Mike were victims of some undisclosed and

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{182} Reyes, \textit{Horror Film and Affect}, 3.
unseen monster (acting in much the same way Rustin Parr did). This stance in cognitive film theory does not consider the full experience of spectatorship; it simply by-passes or “brackets” the primacy of affect by considering it as a bodily intensity that only becomes relevant after cognitive appraisal.\textsuperscript{183}

In this way, the theories advocated by Carroll, Bordwell, Smith, Currie, and Plantinga, among others, neglects cinema’s capacity for generating intensities that defy or precede cognitive grasp, which is especially pertinent for the horror genre. The fact that it is often difficult to articulate or encapsulate the precise origin or nature of our embodied response should not elide its significance. Neither should it be rearticulated merely as a psychological response – as if the bodily intensity the viewer feels has been brought about because he/she believes Heather and Mike have been killed by Rustin Parr or the Blair Witch – as doing so negates the complexity of the affective imbrication of viewer and film: that there are varied intensities and flows of affect in the moment of viewing, sometimes concurrent with our cognitive appraisal, yet at other times contradictory to it. Rethinking the experience of spectatorship from this perspective requires not that we overturn the paradigm of cognitive engagement with the film, but that we expand the boundaries of our understanding so that we can consider the full integration of body and mind in the process of viewing.

The out-of-frame of found footage

Horror film theory that focuses its account on the semantic content of the image reduces the cinematic experience to the effect of structures of representation, further buttressing the hierarchical paradigm of cognition ‘making sense’ of affect. However, if we examine the ways in which horror film often works against privileging this meaning-making, we can find productive gaps that destabilise this hierarchy. Found footage horror film’s common withholding of key information which would allow meaning-making to occur requires that we reassess its imagery for affective resonances that support this reframing of the corporeal interface as the basis for our engagement. In doing so, we find that, within these films, an affective surplus is often generated by that which we specifically cannot see: the out-of-frame.

\textsuperscript{183} Carroll, \textit{Engaging the Moving Image}, 60.
Horror film, as a genre, has a long history of manipulating the viewer through the unseen (although sometimes heard) presence of that which is out-of-frame. Found footage horror specifically manipulates the intensity of its sounds and images through the freedom it possesses to exploit the out-of-frame more fully, a freedom granted by its realist form: given that it purports to be a document assembled from previously recorded footage, the repeated failures to “properly” frame the content being recorded can often be ascribed to the exigencies of the horrific situation. Given that they are often fleeing from a monster, the camera operators within the film are largely forgiven for not carefully composing their frame. The out-of-frame of found footage horror highlights the embodied response of the viewer, as it engenders an intense sensory engagement, one that the viewer may less keenly feel when watching content that safely positions the frame within a larger diegetic world that is, in a sense, known.

Cognitivist understandings run counter to this stance. Carroll and Seeley, for instance, recognise framing as the process by which the filmmaker “[enhances] the perceptual salience of elements within depicted scenes.” They claim that the filmmaker does this through editing, camera movements, and lens movements, and that its primary purpose is to “index, bracket, and scale” the information required by the viewer to make sense of the narrative. These techniques, which Carroll and Seeley label “externally imposed attentional scripts,” are utilised with the goal of promoting “narrative understanding” and are also designed to “prefocus” a viewer’s attention, so that they come to know what they need to know when they need to know it, at the filmmaker’s behest: the spectator is “a passive participant whose attention is entrained to the informational structure of the movie, the communicative intentions of the movie maker.” They argue that the film works best if it mimics the “visuals routines” of the world outside of cinema, where our perception is guided moment to moment by the “salient” features of our environment. To the degree that cinema replicates this visual routine, it does so, they argue, by being “paired to the behavior of the characters.”

185 Ibid., 62.
186 Ibid., 65.
187 Ibid., 65.
This is the process of framing as the isolation of territory: the selection of spaces, objects and figures that will be captured by the camera and the mode in which they are presented. Tom Gunning describes this process as “arranging composition and spatial relations.”¹⁸⁸ Cecilia Sayad, in her treatise on the frame and found footage, acknowledges that this is the normal primary function of the frame: to “isolate the represented world from the surrounding reality.”¹⁸⁹ However, she argues that, through its absorption of the camera into the diegesis, found footage, in a manner, “merges the film and the extrafilmic.” For Sayad, a key element of found footage is that this produces a keen awareness of the world outside of what the frame contains. She draws attention to the Bazinian notion of the realist film frame as centrifugal, when she writes that the realist frame “[invites] us to conceive of the off-screen, to imagine what goes on beyond the edges of the image,” as opposed to the centripetal frame of a painting, which “isolates the depicted space from the surrounding real.”¹⁹⁰

Sayad’s conception of how the frame works against its usual isolating function can be very clearly evidenced in found footage horror. In conventional horror, the frame is strategically deployed as a border that is often transgressed by the intrusion of a figure or a threatening element that aims to startle or shock. In contrast, found footage horror instead employs the out-of-frame in more abstract, enigmatic, and thus more threatening ways. For many films in the subgenre, it is primarily that which is out-of-frame that generates fear, and its eventual capture within the frame is often transient or fleeting, or, on occasion, it is never actually achieved (such as in the example of The Blair Witch Project’s conclusion, described earlier).

The aural qualities of the works mimic this emphasis on the power of the out-of-frame. Michel Chion deploys the terms “acousmatic” and “acousmêtre” to describe how sound and vision are strategically detached from each other.¹⁹¹ Acousmatic describes an auditory situation in which we hear sounds without seeing their cause or source.¹⁹² Acousmêtre involves a being or character who derives mysterious qualities from the fact that they are either heard offscreen or are onscreen but hidden: it is the

¹⁸⁸ Gunning, D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph, 19.
¹⁸⁹ Sayad, “Found Footage Horror and the Frame’s Undoing,” 56.
¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 57.
¹⁹¹ Chion, Film, a Sound Art, 465-466.
¹⁹² Ibid., 466.
acousmatic in the form of a disembodied voice. For example, in the opening of Bryan Singer’s *The Usual Suspects* (1995), as the character Keaton lights a cigarette, we hear a repeated dripping noise. This acousmatic sound is later revealed to be the dripping of leaking petroleum. An acousmêtric sound, by comparison, is present in the Club Silencio sequence of David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001): when singer Rebekah Del Río collapses onstage while performing a Spanish version of Roy Orbison’s ‘Crying,’ the vocals enigmatically continue from no known origin, and are thus suddenly psychically relocated to an unknown person or being in the out-of-frame. Chion argues that this out-of-frame position confers certain powers on this unseen character, bestowing on the disembodied voice the powers of “ubiquity, panopticism, ominiscience and omnipotence.” When conferred upon a potential threat, these powers further intensify its threatening properties.

**Into the woods: Willow Creek and The Blair Witch Project**

*Willow Creek* (2013), considered by many as a contemporary incarnation of *The Blair Witch Project*, presents a valuable site to examine the visual and aural concepts of the out-of-frame and acousmètre, and elucidate their connections to the embodied experience of the spectator. As A.A. Dowd argues, *Willow Creek* often feels like a spiritual successor to the keystone film of the subgenre, returning the found footage horror film to the woods. The story follows filmmaking couple Jim and Kelly on their journey into the deep forests of Oregon. The couple are young, boisterous, easy-going. Jim is a Bigfoot enthusiast, on a mission to visit the site of the infamous 1967 Patterson-Gimlin footage: the famous shaky, poor quality images of a bipedal, ape-like man, captured in the Northern Californian forests, that is considered contentious evidence for the existence of Bigfoot. His girlfriend Kelly is an avowed sceptic, and while she wants to make this a fun weekend for her boyfriend, she won’t indulge his childhood fantasies of actually coming into contact with Bigfoot. It will simply be a few nights camping in the magnificent wilderness of the Pacific Northwest.

---

193 Ibid., 466.
194 Dowd, “Bobcat Goldthwait’s Willow Creek is basically The Blair Bigfoot Project.”
As the sun sets on a day of laborious but optimistic hiking, the two of them establish camp in the depths of the forest. This is the midpoint of the film: the first half is framed as an amateur documentary, staging the often humorous arguments between believer Jim and cynical Kelly, and the apparent gullibility of the locals they interview about the Bigfoot mythology. Documenting every moment on his handycam, Jim carries his love of the Bigfoot mythology with unabashed enthusiasm, gleefully exclaiming, “that could be Bigfoot scat!” as they stumble upon a large pile of animal excrement. The couple’s dynamic is captured in Kelly’s dour response: “Or it could be bear shit.” Despite the humour, it is at this point that the film shifts dramatically in tone: the second half is an escalation of tension and fear.

Night falls. Inside the tent Jim records an enthusiastic confessional to camera, almost vibrating with excitement about the possibility of finding the elusive Sasquatch. He finally switches off the camera lamp, and the two of them try to sleep. Shortly after, Jim stirs. He tells Kelly he heard a knocking sound. As he switches on the camera for both illumination and posterity, the first strains of angst ripple over Jim’s face in the dim light. Suddenly, we hear a piece of timber crack, echoing like a gunshot. The couple argue briefly over the source of the sound. Kelly suggests it may be a bear. Jim is not convinced. Kelly admonishes Jim to switch off the camera and go back to sleep, but he can’t. The static image of his sleep-stained face against the ripple of the tent wall stretches out like elastic. Minutes pass. It’s the sound that fills this moment, like water stretching the skin of a water balloon. There’s the gentle susurration of a nearby creek, and behind it a vast aural emptiness that is alien to modern city-dwellers.

In this confined moment, weighted with the suspense of Jim’s obvious angst, the scene is imbued with a sense of the immensity of the forest and the distant boundaries of roads and trails that tie it to the real world. In the hollow hush, their tension grows. The viewer’s eye is drawn from Jim’s face to the slight undulation of the tent wall behind him: this delicate border between the frail human body and the only thing keeping the ‘out there’ from us. Enveloped in the tent, haloed in the lens of the camera and its muted light, we are presented with an all-too human tableau of foolish security [Figure 8].
A wail pierces the almost-silence and the nylon border of the tent skin. It rattles out into the night, five seconds that feel even longer. The couple huddle together, pushing their bodies as close as physically possible. The near-silence returns.

The eighteen-minute sequence that evolves from this moment is the film’s tour de force. The bodily reaction it provokes is undeniable: a slow building dread, but also a strange sense of the material thinness of the tent walls and the awful immensity of the surrounding forest. One could argue that this spectatorial engagement with Willow Creek is a consequence of cognitive evaluation: that we identify with Jim and Kelly, and that we imaginatively put ourselves in their place, or that we cognitively engage in “active horror fantasy,” where we pretend that this documented account is authentic. However, this conception does not account for why the film has the capacity to affect us in a bodily way, even when we choose to deny its authenticity, or when our allegiance or identification with the characters is insufficient. One could argue that found footage horror often provides little in the way of conventional character development designed to facilitate identification. Identification does not account for how we feel the fragility of the tent wall at the end of the sequence, as something predatory pushes against it. It also does not account for the power of the sounds of
cracking branches, footsteps, breathing, and finally, the haunting wail, to conjure such fear and dread: not only for the characters, but for us.

Why is it that, in the experience of watching *Willow Creek*, there is an almost palpable quality to the surrounding woods, and, at the film’s conclusion, the pressing darkness? Can it merely be derived from our identification with the characters of the campers, or is there something else occurring? This material quality can be more clearly understood when we rethink how the frame works in found footage. As the ‘in-the-frame’ is presented as a “fragment of the real world,” the out-of-frame retains a tangible link to the materiality of this “real” world, one that emerges as an affective surplus to the image. Both the immensity of the forest and the unknown form of the entity stalking around the tent become tangible presences despite never being seen. The force of the acousmêtre in this case is magnified through the combination of this sensory knowledge of the Bigfoot’s tangibility and our inherent fear of its tangible form (which is, in our imaginations, charged with the omnipotence and ubiquity that Chion ascribes to the acousmêtre). What is clear is that the sensory aspects of the scene described above far exceed the visual content of the frame.

Explaining this tangibility in our experience of a two-dimensional screen image requires an expanded view of our interaction with images, one that returns to embodiment as central to experience. In “What My Fingers Knew,” Sobchack wrestles with the difficulty of what she sees as a vacillating corporeal response between the “as-if-real” sensual experience and the direct sensual experience of the spectator. Sobchack observes that much of contemporary film theory has struggled with the comprehension of human bodies being “touched” or “moved,” not only in the figurative sense, but also in the literal sense. Arguing that “we see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium,” Sobchack posits a primary engagement with the sensory qualities of the image, with its materiality on a sensible level.

Importantly, this concept does not place the sensuous embodied experience to one-side, bracketing it, as Sobchack notes is so often done, as either “phantasmatic

---

195 Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 73.
196 Ibid., 63.
psychic formations, cognitive process, or basic physiological reflexes.”197 Sobchack’s alternative is a conception of spectatorship as consciousness and flesh amalgamated, wherein off-screen and on-screen bodies subversively function “both literally and figuratively”: this she terms the “cinesthetic subject.” This is a neologism that she has derived from cinema, synaesthesia and coenaesthesia. Here Sobchack is considering the ways in which the dominant senses of sight and hearing in the cinematic experience can be transmuted to the other sensory modalities. In clinical synaesthesia, there is the involuntary stimulation of one sense in the perception of another: for instance, literally seeing the sound of a horn as red. In coenaesthesia, there is a perception of one’s whole sensorial being: Sobchack uses the example of the general and diffuse sensual condition of the child at birth, before the hierarchical arrangement of the senses through cultural immersion and practice. The integration of these concepts provides her with a way of commuting seeing and hearing to touching, and back again “without a thought.” Merleau-Ponty presents the concept of the lived body as “a ready made system of equivalents and transpositions from one sense to another. The senses translate each other without any need of an interpreter, and they are mutually comprehensible without the intervention of any idea.”198 What Sobchack does with this foundational phenomenological concept is apply it to the process of spectatorship in order to argue how the predominantly visual and aural medium of cinema can have an array of sensory effects beyond these senses.

Sobchack’s conception of an amalgamation between consciousness and flesh transforms spectatorial bodies into “matter that means” and on-screen images into “meaning that matters,” where each informs the other in the co-creation of experience.199 While the presence of the literal and the figural vacillates, they are both simultaneously at hand within the spectrum of spectatorial experience, not as separated entities, but as reciprocal and reversible presences. This conception allows us to bridge the gap between the literal body of the spectator and the figural representation of the image. For example, in relation to Willow Creek, the camping sequence turns the fluttering tent wall (a two-dimensional image) into a tangible,

197 Ibid., 60.
198 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 273.
199 Sobchack, Carnal Thoughts, 75.
material presence for the spectator. On the other side of the equation, the spectatorial body, open to a sensory interplay where light and sound are not simply processed by the visual and aural senses, becomes the foundation upon which we make meaning of the sequence: the matter of our bodies – skin, muscles, and viscera – is not at the mercy of our cognitive assessment, but instead grounds it.

Drawing on phenomenological understandings of the film-viewer relationship, Elena del Río explains the possibility of a material engagement between body and image through the notion of “surface.” Del Río expounds on filmmaker Atom Egoyan’s description of the affective exchange between a viewer and a screen image; in Egoyan’s words, “a true surface can be developed if the viewer breaks the impassive nature of the screen identification process with a degree of involvement. This involvement may be internalized – the image may trigger a memory of an event or a conversation – or it may find more overt manifestation”;\(^{200}\) in turn, Del Río proposes that viewer and image can be rethought as “surfaces in contact, engaged in a constant activity of reciprocal realignment and inflection.”\(^{201}\) Acknowledging that Egoyan’s use of the term is somewhat contradictory, given that surface connotes that which is “flat, immediate, and obvious,” Del Río explains that the surface-image is in fact quite different from those connotations, in that it represents “a mobile, subjectively-inflected layer, an individuated form of perception and interaction that exceeds the image's ready-made signifying status.”\(^{202}\) Rather than thinking of the body and film as “discrete units,” Del Río considers the image as having layers of affect that can produce a “surplus of subjective significance”; however this surplus resides not in “mental abstraction” but a sensory and bodily interface with the image.\(^{203}\) This conception of “surfaces in contact” presupposes that there is the potential for an interaction with cinema that goes beyond our identification with the semantic content of the image.

Thinking of film and viewer as “surfaces in contact” also offers us a way to think about how images such as the tent sequence from *Willow Creek* are necessarily

\(^{201}\) Del Río, “The Body as Foundation of the Screen,” 101.
\(^{202}\) Ibid., 102.
\(^{203}\) Ibid., 102.
inflected with what the viewer brings to the exchange; as Del Río states, “what becomes apparent in the encounter between body and artefact is the idea that the body is always outside of its visible form, that it constantly extends itself beyond its objective spatial and temporal boundaries.”

This is a more resonant conception than that posed by mere imaginative engagement, because it more fully accounts for why film so powerfully interfaces with our bodies. Anne Rutherford echoes this point when she argues that the power of cinema is in its capacity to create “an affect, an event, a moment which lodges itself under the skin of the spectator.” These moments are facilitated by qualities of sound and image that intensify its affective properties, of which the acousmêtre and the strategic use of the out-of-frame are but two.

Other scholars have also contributed to a clearer understanding of the “cross-modal flow” theorised by Sobchack above, which provides a foundation for how the affective properties of cinema are amplified. Anna Powell utilises Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “body-without-organs” in her claim that the images and sounds of cinema do more than merely produce a sensory response in the corresponding eye or ear of the spectator. Powell claims that the body of the film and the “body-without-organs” of the viewer are engaged in a mutable “molecular” assemblage which results in a fusion that allows for sensory experience beyond that occurring in the moment of viewing. She elaborates that “affects and percepts are not limited to our organic bodies,” and that the body-without-organs, engaged with the film, enables the viewer to “virtually recreate the corresponding [on-screen] corporeal effect and ‘feel it.’” Powell explains that this results from the way certain perceptions of images of sensation are difficult to process in their “undiluted affect,” but makes clear that the meld between spectator and screen is not mimesis understood as “a copying of on-screen behaviours,” but rather the reverberation that occurs between sense and thought, “a mental encounter made through the viscera.”

204 Ibid., 102.
205 Rutherford, “Cinema and Embodied Affect.”
206 Powell, Deleuze, Altered States and Film, 100.
207 Ibid., 100.
208 Ibid., 100.
This concept of mimesis as contact is elaborated in the work of Michael Taussig, who promotes a conception of the cinematic experience that invokes the dynamic transfer of “mimetic” experience in the “palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived.”\(^{209}\) Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s conception of the mimetic faculty as the human inclination to mimic or to imitate, to recognise and produce similarities to objects in a manner that can transform the relationship between subject and object, Taussig argues for a bi-fold concept of mimetic experience that differs from the traditional understanding of mimesis as copy, or mimetic replication of reality. For Taussig, mimesis is both copy and a form of contact, and mimetic experience in this second understanding allows for the distinction between viewer and image to become porous, generating a unique, sensuous and tactile exchange between the two.\(^{210}\)

Rutherford further develops this potential of mimetic experience as the antithesis of epistephilia in her consideration of documentary affect. Epistephilia, which Bill Nichols describes as the “desire to know” that is specifically stimulated by the documentary mode, is often posited as an explanation for how documentary-style images work to draw us in. Rutherford points to the limitations of the conventional concept of a purely epistephilic drive behind spectator interest that negates the mimetic capacities of cinema: when we consider documentary only as the meeting point of a “rational, intact subject” and a “completed, formed and unchanging” real, we lose the possibility of a cinema in which the image “brings the material world into play, to life, in the moment of its reception.”\(^{211}\) In found footage horror, this epistephilic drive is also often frustrated by the manner in which the camera misleads the viewer or denies revelation of the source of the horror: for example, when the single most graphic visual element of *The Blair Witch Project* is a bloody scrap of shirt containing a tooth.

The found footage genre often engages with this capacity to employ images that are in excess of, or even contradictory, to the “desire to know,” and which instead heighten our corporeal and sensory engagement: the out-of-frame offers one such


\(^{210}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{211}\) Rutherford, “The Poetics of a Potato,” 236.
example. In many cases, the out-of-frame becomes a location for the deliberate obfuscation of the source of the terror. We can return to *The Blair Witch Project* to illustrate this. The approach of a third night in the woods has been met with dread by the three reluctant campers. Darkness falls. With the pronouncement that the lights are potentially drawing attention (from what they do not and cannot say), they switch off the camera lights and attempt to get some sleep. The screen goes black. Five seconds pass, and then, in a distant murmur, the sound of children’s voices. It’s interrupted by a rapid shudder of breath: Heather’s, as she fumbles with the Hi-B’s camera lamp. Now we have a glimpse of the interior of the tent, but seen through a foggy condensation that coats the lens. Panic seeps into their voices, as they each react to the approach of the childish murmurs. Little can be seen of any notable detail, just glimpses of bedding material and shapes and, as Heather puts on her jeans, we are visually presented with the edge of the air mattress captured by the temporarily dropped camera. The sonic landscape, however, builds a vivid and disquieting picture: its layers are the hyperventilating breaths of the lost filmmakers, Josh’s plaintive, repeated “Oh Jesus, oh Jesus,” and the strangely malevolent giggles of children. Suddenly, there is a new sound – something amorphous violently pushing up against the tent walls. The image suddenly switches to Josh’s 16mm camera, and he screams for them to “Go, fucking go!” as he follows his own advice, tearing into the night. Now we have more detail in the image, although it’s densely granular and rapidly undulating, as Josh and Heather flee into the darkness, away from the tent, lit only by the twin lights of their cameras. Heather bobs in and out of the frame as Josh runs, a white figure against obsidian black, there for one moment, lost the next [Figure 9]. She slows slightly, turning to face something in the out-of-frame. Whatever it is prompts her to scream, her terror captured in her repeated cries of “what the fuck is that?,” and all the while she is still running and, crucially, still filming.

This strategic deployment of the unseen is often vital to the production of horror affect, in that we react just as intensely to the components of the image we are not given. If what we are given is visually insufficient to provide the required narrative information, such as the intense darkness that restricts vision in this sequence, it results in the intensification of other senses (in this example, the acousmêtric property
of the noises of the children). While the sound and image may contain very little semantic content, their effects are intensely powerful.

The second element related to found footage horror’s specific use of the out-of-frame is the employment of negative screen space: the blackness or potentially ‘empty’ frame, where the narrative content is simultaneously occurring or suggested to be occurring within the out-of-frame. So rarely can this be justified in conventional filmmaking terms that its use in found footage is striking and deeply affective. In examples where darkness is used, such as the sustained moment at the end of the sequence in *The Blair Witch Project* described above, the spectator scans the full frame, searching for the first break in the dark, the glimmer of any light. In examples where there is visual content but it has a lesser semantic role, we are also drawn in. Rather than a passive immersion in the image, these ‘empty’ frames produce an active spectator response that feeds into the construction of greater terror and suspense.212 In his assessment of *The Blair Witch Project*, Scott Dixon McDowell writes: “I can think of no other film that prompts the viewer to anxiously search the periphery of the screen for a glimpse of something that simply is not there.”213 This opinion would no

---

212 This is also a convention of the aforementioned reality TV ‘ghost-hunting’ shows, where the audience becomes trained to scan the frame for the presence of visual evidence of the ghost.
doubt have been updated with his exposure to the *Paranormal Activity* series, which utilises the ‘empty’ frame far more frequently and to greater effect: perhaps its most clever application is the constantly panning camera of *Paranormal Activity 3*, created by the central character strapping his video camera to the base of a cooling fan, allowing it to pan across a range of roughly one-hundred and forty degrees and move from ‘empty’ frame to ‘empty’ frame, each pan threatening the viewer with the possibility that the frame will no longer be empty on its return. For Dennis Giles, this “delayed, blocked or partial vision [...is] central to the strategy of horror cinema,” a strategy that in this particular subgenre involves actively highlighting the process of visual perception. As J.P. Telotte argues, horror film often specifically “calls attention to the way in which we perceive its horrors and underscores that manner of seeing with specific imagery of a failed or improper vision.”

This “failed” or “improper” vision does not jeopardise the power of the found footage film. On the contrary, it further imbricates the body of the viewer. We can illustrate this concept with a return to *The Blair Witch Project*: in the moments following Josh’s disappearance, Heather swings her Hi-8 camera around in a dizzying manner, capturing only the dense thicket of scrub surrounding their campsite and the cage-like trees encircling them. The lens drops at a certain point, focusing on the leaf-strewn soil and the shadows of the trees, and remains at this angle, the camera dangling from Heather’s hand as she hyperventilates over Josh’s disappearance. The textural properties of the image, accompanied by Heather’s ragged breathing, offer us very little in terms of narrative development. Yet something about this scene produces more and not less presence for the spectator: the forest becomes not merely the tableau upon which this drama is being acted out, but as in Sobchack’s cinesthetic subjects, a location that is in some respects sensorially present to us, and thus even more frightening. While we cannot touch the leaves or trees surrounding Heather, there is a sensory transfer from what we see and hear to what we feel on a bodily level.

This emphasis on how we experience the image over its semantic content is further explicated by phenomenological explorations of cinema. Julian Hanich offers

---

215 Telotte, “Faith and Idolatry in the Horror Film,” 25.
one of the most comprehensive phenomenological accounts of horror film in his book, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*. Hanich’s examines the dissolution of the boundary between film and viewer as a vacillation of phenomenological distance. Contending that proximity shifts are a key feature of horror cinema, Hanich states that horror film engages the viewer directly through the “vividness and impressiveness of threateningly close cinematic images and sounds.” The “closeness” he refers to is the distance of our ‘intentional relation’ to the image and sound: intentional relation is a phenomenological term that refers to the aspect of our mental state towards an object, real or imagined. He argues that, while our physical distance from the images and sounds cannot be bridged, the phenomenological distance fluctuates on a continuum between intensely close and distanced. Hanich builds upon previous phenomenological understandings, by stating that there are conscious strategies that we apply after the fact that can work to either intensify or de-intensify the affective quality of the image. There are also semantic and aesthetic techniques that a film can use to manipulate this intensity and therefore our phenomenological distance. Among those that Hanich suggests are the construction of allegiance (to character or actor), the accentuation of somatic empathy (through focus on the on-screen body), and, specific to the field of horror, “exceptional immorality and brutality” of the image. However, what is key here is the notion, developed by Sobchack and expanded by many scholars in the field of embodiment theory, that seeing is a form of touching at a distance.

This phenomenological distance is negotiated in a variety of ways. Hanich refers to the aversive experience of temporary avoidance, for example, that audiences use when the phenomenological distance becomes too intensely close: the viewer’s closing or covering of eyes and ears, the conscious decision to look at the image and consider it as artifice (rather than looking through it, as we do when we are immersed), or cognitively shifting our focus to its fictional status. These are all potential responses that can reset the phenomenological distance, although, should they choose to re-engage, most viewers find it relatively easy to be drawn back into the filmic world.

---

While Hanich does not discount the cognitivist understanding of why we feel certain ways in the process of viewing, he focuses more specifically on how we feel them. He points out that cognitivist film scholarship “emphasize[s] the thinking part of an emotion— the evaluation or judgment about the object of the emotion— and often treat[s] the emotional experience as epiphenomenal,” and that, as a result, this type of analysis is less dimensional than that which explores what these emotional experiences feel like.217

While hermeneutic approaches, like those offered by Benson-Allot and Duchaney, can reveal certain ways that horror and technology have been integrated, to understand horror as an experiential mode, we need to look beyond representations of technology to the lived body experience in its negotiations with the varying forms that horror takes. One manner of demonstrating this is to utilise Hanich’s phenomenological framework in a consideration of how Paranormal Activity (2007) employs the camera and the out-of-frame to intensify cinematic dread.

Cinematic dread and the camera of Paranormal Activity

To explore the fluctuation of phenomenological distance that Hanich proposes, we can specifically examine how his concepts of cinematic dread, cinematic shock and suggested horror emerge in the experience of found footage horror film Paranormal Activity, directed by Oren Peli. Paranormal Activity demonstrates how found footage horror capitalises on the spatial and temporal foundations of these types of experience. The film involves the domestic haunting of the home of Southern California couple Micah and Katie, and Micah’s attempts to capture the demon responsible on camera. Almost the entire film takes place inside the confines of the couple’s home, and it is captured entirely on a high-end consumer camera purchased by Micah at the film’s beginning.

Scholars have analysed the film from a variety of perspectives: psychoanalytic interpretations, feminist conceptions, even consumerism and consumption as a site of abjection.218 Examining the Paranormal Activity franchise as a site where the domestic

217 Ibid., 21.
take-up of security cameras is problematised, for example, Janani Subramanian argues that the destruction of the protagonists occurs “despite their increased visual security” and that this “re-emphasizes the connection the franchise consistently makes between domestic (in)security and technology, as increasing the amount and sophistication of the cameras fails to protect domestic space from outside threats.”

Few scholars have focused on the experiential aspects of watching the film: how the film draws the viewer into an entanglement with the uncanny in a way that conventional horror rarely achieves (or aspires to). *Paranormal Activity* doesn’t feel, as so much of cinema does, like a representation of events carried out by actors. Instead, it seems to harness the verisimilitude of presentation – achieved, in part, by mimicking what we accept as the presentational elements of documentary or surveillance-style footage. It also engages the viewer through its use of the techniques of obfuscation and negative space. The feeling of authenticity produced by this presentational mode translates into an affective tremor, one that starts as small as the rumble which announces the presence of the film’s haunting, but which gradually swells like incoming waves on a rising tide, building to the seismic fissure at the film’s jarring and dramatic conclusion.

As previously stated, found footage relies upon the diegetic presence of the camera, which can be either the engine which successfully drives the narrative, or alternatively the source of a viewer’s extrication from immersion, as they are forced to interrogate the authenticity of the presence of the camera: the common “why is Character X still filming this?” question. *Paranormal Activity* leans more toward the former, as the camera becomes a proxy for character Micah’s obsessive mission to rid his home of its haunting. As Micah says in one early scene: “Once we get it on camera, we can figure out what’s going on.” Because each scene is underscored by this determination to capture the “paranormal activity” on camera, the viewer is less inclined to question the credibility of the narrative. Ironically, it is the camera that appears to fuel the manifestation of the demon Toby, as noted by its victim Katie multiple times throughout the film.

The camera of *Paranormal Activity* is particularly productive of Hanich’s “cinematic dread.” With the bold claim that dread “enables the strongest form of

---

219 Subramanian, “Candid Cameras.”
immersion in all cinema,” Hanich refers to the way in which dread makes the viewer “advance” into the filmic world. He argues that there are several cinematic qualities of dread that generate this “undertow”: spatial immersion, temporal immersion, and visual restriction. What separates dread from direct horror is that dread resides in the future, in the possibility of what may be seen or heard. Drawing on the phenomenological theory of Hermann Schmitz, Hanich isolates dread as generated by a particular split kind of intentionality. Schmitz extends the notion of intentionality into two parts, a “concentration section” (Verdichtungsbereich) and an “anchoring point” (Verankerungspunkt). This concept can be demonstrated by imagining a patient with a fear of needles visiting a doctor. For the patient, their fear appears to be directed at the needle but it is commonly actually the blood-letting which is the real source of their concern. In this example, the needle itself becomes the concentration point, at which attention condenses, while the loss of blood is the anchoring point, as this is where the patient’s emotion is principally “anchored.” Hanich points out that, in direct horror, concentration and anchoring point are synchronised, whereas dread splits the two aspects of intentionality: the film The Texas Chainsaw Massacre works as direct horror, for example, when Pam is chased and caught by the macabre Leatherface, because the anchoring point of Pam’s inability to escape is also the point at which our concentration is focused. It works as dread, however, in the sequence where another of the teenagers, Kirk, first investigates Leatherface’s house, because our concentration is on his passage through the home, but our anchoring point is our concern that he is walking directly into mortal danger.

Scenes of dread appear to eschew what Hanich identifies as two vital principles of conventional storytelling: “maximum visibility and temporal economy.” Instead of giving us vital information and removing wasted screen time, scenes of dread revel in their lack of spatial information and delay of outcome, which again returns us to the importance of the out-of-frame, which is where much of this lack or delay resides.

---

220 Hanich, Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers, 160.
221 Intentionality, a central concept of phenomenology, refers to the “directedness” or “aboutness” of experience. It is the way we are “in touch with” the world.
223 Hanich, Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers Horror, 158.
224 Ibid., 163.
Despite the deficiency of information, there is, for the viewer, an intensity and increased proximity to the world of the image. It is in the anticipation that dread fully grasps the viewer. As Dennis Giles says, “the viewer senses a terrible presence in the articulation of imagery, but the images themselves display only an absence of the terrible object, or the possibility that it may become visible.”

Paranormal Activity illustrates this concept within the repetitive nightly recordings Micah makes of the couple’s darkened bedroom. The narrative falls into a routine in which the couple record themselves sleeping each night, as many of the supernatural incidents have occurred in the early hours of the morning. The viewer’s dread coalesces around these long, repetitive, static takes of the murky bedroom. It is intensified by a low, ominous, diegetic sonic rumble which accompanies each of the demon’s manifestations, and which gradually comes to cue the viewer’s attention. When I watch the film, my concentration point shifts continuously, from the doorway, to the external hallway, to the interior of the room, to the sleeping couple; however, Hanich would identify my anchoring point as the fearful anticipation of the demon’s inescapable violence towards the couple and the effect of the shock or horror that results from this, not only for the characters, but for me as viewer. This can account for the intensity of the experience when there is insufficient sympathy or empathy for characters to justify our response: we can simply be fearful for ourselves.

The intensity of these sequences is also fuelled by the three elements mentioned above: the first of these, spatial immersion, is pivotal in horror. Hanich refers to how the moving camera can create a sense of spatial immersion, such as that which occurs when the camera follows a character into a dimly lit basement. While Paranormal Activity does utilise this technique (when Micah operates the camera after fleeing the bedroom for the living room, for one example), it builds its spatial immersion in a different way: through the containment of the locked-off camera.

In the repeated bedroom sequences, the limitations of the low-resolution consumer-level camera’s clarity in darkened environments, combined with the specific composition which accentuates the darkened areas of frame such as the hallway, works to draw us in as viewers. I find myself, in watching these scenes, rapidly shifting

---

between trying to look for specifics (movement in the frame or a shifting shadow) and trying to take in the whole of the image. When the demon is visibly evidenced, through movement or interaction with the bodies of the protagonists, the shift in my attentional directedness brings about an increased proximity to the image, at the level of my own body. Hanich describes this in the following way:

We feel the field of consciousness reorganized and flexibly shifting emphasis; our bodily experience instantly becomes more complex; a gradual, sometimes abrupt sensual metamorphosis takes place. Suddenly, the hitherto occluded, absent body comes to the fore and tacit corporeal dimensions are brought into awareness.\footnote{Hanich, \textit{Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers}, 232.}

Hanich’s claims are staked on the cinema auditorium as the locale par excellence for immersion. He argues that the merging of the darkness of the filmic space with the darkness of the auditorium makes the boundary between filmic world and reality more tenuous. Found footage horror is partly able to transcend this limitation as a result of its aforementioned realist tendencies. Unlike the conventional horror film, in which engagement more fully coincides with emotional immersion, and is more readily achieved in a darkened environment of the theatre, found footage can work differently. As this chapter has stressed, we instead participate with the found footage image as a “fragment of the real,” and respond to it as such.
Limitations to visibility only partially explain how *Paranormal Activity* utilises Hanich’s cinematic dread. Hanich complements this concept with a discussion of temporal immersion, which he also identifies as a key component. The passage of time is key in found footage horror film, and especially so in *Paranormal Activity*: the bedroom sequences discussed above have a rhythm that intensifies our attentional directedness, in that they present a time-lapse from when the couple go to bed through to the moment just prior to when the demon becomes present. The sudden return to ‘real time’ in the deceleration of the speeding time-lapse image establishes an expectation that something horrifying is coming, and yet the specifics of how it will manifest remain inchoate [Figure 10]. Sound becomes a potent harbinger in these sequences, the silence of the time-lapse gradually replaced by the low bass rumble. The intensity of these occurrences builds with each night of footage, to the point where our dread coalesces with the slowing of the clock. We become suddenly aware of each second as it ticks by, and, in these moments, the tacit presence of the spectatorial body emerges. Hanich labels this a temporal “thickening.”

Fear is amplified by the emerging presence of our spectatorial bodies, but crucially it is less of a response to our vicarious fear for the characters Micah and Katie

---

227 Ibid., 23.
than it is a fear for ourselves. Returning to Schmitz’s split intentionality, the anchoring point for this fear can reside just as much in the out-of-frame or the acousmêtre as it does in identification with the characters. The intensification of foreboding can be queued not only by a slowly approaching threat, like that skilfully utilised in *It Follows (2014)*, where the supernatural entity pursuing the protagonists can only approach at a walking pace, but also by the very possibility that the threat exists, unseen, outside of the limited view we have been provided within the frame. This kind of cinematic fear can potentially enable both the centrifugal movement of the viewer towards the collective (in the case of viewing with other spectators in a theatre) that Hanich describes, and the centripetal intensification of the lived-body experience of the individual.

**Camera supernaturalis**

From a survey of each of the films presented in this chapter, a common thread emerges: the aesthetics of found footage horror films accentuate the manner in which cinema can have transformative effects on a spectator that go beyond our identification with character or engagement with narrative. The pursuit or capture of the supernatural on camera, in its various forms, taps into our pre-existing relationships with modern image recording technology and, through found footage horror’s similarity to the documentary form, intensifies its presence. Within this subgenre, the affective potential of the out-of-frame and the threatening omnipotence of the acousmètre imbue the image with increased sensory resonance. These heightened sensual properties bring our corporeal presence to the fore in ways that can transcend the limits of an emotional engagement (or disengagement) with the narrative or characters. Found footage horror works counter to much of the ‘monstrous’ imagery of conventional horror film: the ‘monster’ is often not so much a creature or thing as it is the intensification of the sound and image, an intensification that can be produced by what is not seen (the out-of-frame), as much as what is.

By shifting our attention as film theorists to the manner in which we are drawn into the image in a bodily way, as well as cognitively and perceptually, found footage horror film reveals a new paradigm of the relationship between technologies of
perception and expression, and our bodily interaction with them. Rather than interpreting found footage horror through a purely hermeneutic frame, we can reframe our interaction with the image as one that is predicated on the sensory-affective dimensions of corporeality that are at the basis of enactive perception. In doing so we can understand how these films produce a new experience of horror spectatorship, one that relies less on the presence of a ‘monster’ than on our bodies’ inherent responsiveness to images that contain the “charge of the real.”

Transformations of existing technologies and the emergence of new technologies invariably manifest themselves within the genre of horror. The ubiquity of cameras and screens in contemporary life has been synthesised in horror through the genre of found footage horror. This synthesis allows us to examine how it is not necessarily the iterations of monsters and their various terrifying forms that underpin the complex relationship between horror and technology in cinema: it is instead the way in which the developments and revolutions of technology alter the aesthetic dynamics of the form of the horror film, imbuing the film itself with the monstrous dimensions of sensory intensification. Found footage horror film provides us with a location to examine how these unconventional aesthetic choices enhance the embodied experience for a viewer, intensifying the corporeal interface between body and image.
For just a moment, it feels like we’re getting to the truth. Caught on camera in the glare of the spotlight, Josef appears to be about to break. Then suddenly he shoves past us, darting back into the house and down the main stairwell – towards the only viable exit.

We are witnessing this scene through the lens of a camera, somewhat reluctantly operated by Patrick, a modest and docile man in his 30s. We hear the anxiety in Patrick’s breathing.

This odd man, Josef, alternately charming and unsettling, has lured us to the house and conned us with his lies, and now stands between us and escape. We enter the house from the porch, furtively. We creep forward, past the dining table to the head of the stairs. Then we descend, slowly, tentatively, down the stairwell. We turn each corner with great trepidation, until finally – the doorway. The exit.

Blockading the door, wearing the cartoonish yet somehow terrifying visage of a hungry wolf, is the man. The wolf is called Peachfuzz. We know this because Josef has told us of how his father created the “friendly wolf” when he was a child.

Patrick: “Josef. Please let me go. Are you going to let me go?”

Evidently, he doubts that Peachfuzz’s intentions are friendly. Rightly so, it appears: Peachfuzz shakes his head.

Patrick: “Why are you doing this to me? Are you just trying to scare me, or....?”

Peachfuzz nods vigorously, his arms and legs spread out to barricade our point of escape.

Patrick: “Well, I’m terrified, okay. You won. Now will you just step aside and let me go.”
Peachfuzz begins to growl, a repetitive low moan. We watch as he begins to rub himself against the door, gyrating his hips. The performance of his movements is a mélange of three disparate tendencies: they are somehow all-at-once threatening, comical and erotic [Figure 11].

With repetitive cries to stop, each cry becoming more plaintive, Patrick reaches a breaking point. Escape is the only option – and so we charge forward, slamming into Peachfuzz. The sound cuts, and the image degrades before it evaporates, leaving us only in the black.

How do we get ‘inside’ a movie?

The above scene from the 2014 film Creep, directed by Patrick Brice, is quintessential “found footage” horror, in that it is, like the rest of the film, entirely composed of the video record of the chilling and bizarre meeting between Aaron, a videographer, and his employer and subject, Josef, who transforms into Peachfuzz by donning the wolf mask in the above sequence. My choice to narrate the sequence in the first-person plural is a deliberate one, in that it is designed to elicit a more subjective involvement with the reader’s memory of, or imagining of, the sequence. By writing “we,” I am borrowing a stylistic device used by many Hollywood screenwriters to place the reader ‘inside the movie’: the “we” in both uses is not simply a conjunction of the viewer and
the protagonist. In a screenplay, its purpose is to descriptively facilitate an imaginative integration of sorts between the viewer/reader and the fictional world. The central argument of this chapter is that the form of found footage horror not only produces a similar subjective involvement, but that it is also uniquely capable of producing an experience that is immersive in a manner that extends beyond identification with either the camera or the protagonist wielding it. There is something more here: a deeper, embodied connection with the image that is specifically facilitated by the found footage form. That is not to say that the experience of conventional horror film is somehow less rich, only that it operates on different levels, with an approach to generating audience immersion that focuses more on compelling narrative and characterisation.

As the previous chapter argued, found footage horror, like all cinema, generates an embodied spectatorial experience. Extending from this understanding, this chapter continues to explore the spectatorial experience as an encounter and exchange between the film and the viewer that occurs on this bodily level. Because the traditional notions of how film elicits an empathic connection with its protagonists are complicated by the found footage horror form, we need to examine more productive ways to approach this question, methods that are less reliant on these traditional models.

My description of the sequence opening this chapter in the subjective voice of first-person plural is an attempt to express how it is that the spectator is integrated differently into the found footage film. These films operate in a manner that is less reliant on the traditional process of imaginative intervention, or simulation as Currie would describe it, where the viewer projects themselves imaginatively into the situation of the acts and events of the fiction, and these imaginative processes run “off-line,” “disconnected from their normal sensory inputs and behavioural outputs.”228 In found footage, we commonly experience the world with the protagonist, through a shared perceptual verisimilitude: we literally see the world as they are seeing it.

228 Currie, *Image and Mind*, 144.
Because the genre of found footage deliberately implements a marked point-of-view, requiring the film to be a record of events captured by someone (or some object, in the case of an unoperated camera, as in certain sequences of *Paranormal Activity*), found footage horror presents a location for scholars to investigate both the boundaries and the opportunities to horror presented by the form. An examination of *Creep* as an exemplar film allows an investigation into questions about subjectivity and spectatorship that are universal to found footage films, yet differentiated from conventional cinema. These questions include, but are not limited to: does found footage produce a different experience of spectatorial empathy?; do subjective camera and marked point of view reconfigure our engagement beyond traditional notions of empathy?; does subjective camera alter the subjectivity of cinematic spectators, and if so, how?; finally, how specifically does found footage produce an oscillation between subjective and objective vision?

In the sequence described above, Aaron, played by Patrick Brice, has found himself a reluctant visitor to Josef’s remote cabin. Josef, played by Mark Duplass, has hired Aaron to record a documentary of his life in the late stages of his terminal illness, to give to his unborn child at a later date. What begins as a somewhat benign film project gradually devolves into horror, as Josef’s entreaties become more sinister and bizarre throughout the day. The film is presented almost entirely as the camera record of Aaron’s experience of that day and subsequent days, and later as Josef’s continued monologue direct to camera. The sequence above, like much of the film, is presented as Aaron’s recording of an attempted escape from Josef’s house, in the long takes of documentary style. Like much of found footage horror, it manifests as Aaron’s perceptual experience of the horrific moment, mediated only by the camera.

This optical perceptual verisimilitude, rarely utilised in genres outside of the found footage or documentary mode, is, however, only one of the two common forms of found footage images. The second is the so-called ‘objective’ camera: operating much like a surveillance camera, this is the static or automatic record of the scene. Like a surveillance camera, it implies impartiality: the image is no-one’s point-of-view but the camera’s own. Often this is the only time we see the protagonist onscreen.

Together, these two different ways of *capturing* the image create an experience of *watching* the image that differs from that of conventional horror: as
proposed in the previous chapter, there can be an intensification of the lived-body experience in relation to the aesthetic techniques deployed, such as the strategic use of the out-of-frame. However, there is also in found footage horror an empathic engagement that differs from conventional horror, due to the limitations of the documentary-style aesthetic: because found footage is the record of a camera operator who is usually the central protagonist, we have little to no visual access to the emotional experience of that character through their facial expressions, which challenges some of the traditional notions posited to explain our empathic engagement with cinema. For, where conventional horror cinema can use the face of the protagonist to relay his or her emotional reaction and thus elicit an appropriate response, found footage commonly has to transmute this into the experience as it is recorded by the protagonist’s camera – a view that comes to be generally equated with their “point-of-view.” There are, of course, occasions when the sub-genre does make use of the face of the camera operator: most famously, the sequence in *The Blair Witch Project* in which a crying Heather confronts her predicament is an apposite example. The moments when Josef turns the camera on Aaron in *Creep* provide another example. However, occasions such as this are outliers within the form.

The conventions of classical Hollywood cinema create a space in which an intelligible logic of cause and effect can unfold: camera and editing techniques are used to construct an internally coherent diegesis, including, for example, the 180-degree rule and various techniques of montage, such as the shot-reverse shot. Vitally, this process also aids in the formation of a privileged space for the spectator to watch the events unfold: a place inside the diegetic world with a clearly demarcated perspective that is supported by the filmmaking techniques above, but also where he/she who is viewing is mysteriously ‘invisible’ to the other participants of this diegetic world. This production of a space for the viewer to occupy, more fully explicated in the concept of ‘suture’ by theorists such as Christian Metz, provides the foundation for a deeper involvement with the filmic world. Suture promotes a convergence between the ‘I’ of the spectator and the all-seeing ‘eye’ of the camera. According to its proponents, suture collapses diverse subjectivities into a singular subject through the mental construction of a unified space where, for example, through the process of shot/reverse-shot, a sense of subject-hood is established for
the spectator in both shots, a process which continues throughout the viewing: as Robert Stam puts it, suture gives “the all-seeing spectator the illusion of being omniscient and omnipresent.” For theorists such as Metz, the primary identification of the viewer in classical cinema is with the camera itself, but this is predicated on the camera’s facility for voyeuristic omnipotence and omniscience. Identification with character is, for Metz, a secondary form of identification. The concept of suture is difficult to apply to the found footage genre, given that suture relies on the invisibility of its process, its illusory qualities. Suture is problematized in found footage horror due to the explicit foregrounding of the camera’s presence. The camera of found footage is also the opposite of all-seeing, given its firm grounding in the diegetic world as the point of view of a particular character or a literal camera.

Because found footage horror film deliberately foregrounds the diegetic act of recording, and its presentation of a marked point of view, further examining traditional film theories of point of view isolates how these theories may be complicated by found footage’s distinctive form. Questions of point-of-view invariably lead into the interrelations between a cinematic subject and subjectivity. A common analogy ties subjectivity to the subjective camera, which takes the position of a particular character, either corporeally or mentally. Kristin Thompson asserts that cinema’s subjective qualities are generally demonstrated within a film by sound and/or image which shares either the character’s eyes and ears or both, or those moments in film in which we enter the character’s mind. The subjective camera in this understanding presents us with a specific point of view, whereas the “objective” camera is understood to be from an omniscient position, independent of the characters. This demonstrates the reduction in cognitive interpretations of film-watching experience: the shot is reduced to its function in constructing a viewer’s understanding of the diegetic world, its capacity to communicate information from either an ‘objective’ or ‘subjective’ position. The viewer ‘objectively’ sees Character A look, and we then cut to a shot equivalent to the optical-perceptual experience of a viewer in the spatial location of Character A, and thus, we are then thought to be ‘subjectively’ experiencing her world.

---

229 Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 137.
230 Thompson, “Categorical Coherence.”
Point of view shots are often identified as a key element in the production of an image which has subjective qualities. Edward Branigan uses the term “internally focalized (surface) shot” to describe point of view shots, and argues that this type of image provides access to a character’s subjective experience within the diegetic world.\textsuperscript{*231} Bordwell and Thompson similarly claim that “optical” point of view shots largely equate to perceptual subjectivity.\textsuperscript{*232} Robert Montgomery’s 1947 film, \textit{Lady in the Lake}, epitomises one of the most comprehensive uses of point of view in conventional Hollywood cinema. Shot entirely from the perspective of a diegetic character, \textit{Lady in the Lake} attempts to entirely replicate the optical perceptual experience of a character within a cinematic narrative, although its relative success has been much debated, with Branigan labelling it as “a mere trick, a curiosity or a failure.”\textsuperscript{*233} He points to the limitations of equating optical point of view with the experience of being a character and contends that, for a film to be “genuinely” subjective, it requires something more than the formal act of reproducing a consistent point of view shot.\textsuperscript{*234} Branigan argues instead for broader conceptions of a subjective view that may allow for a more multifaceted interface between what we see and our way of experiencing it, considering for example, that “we may see through one character’s eyes while our sympathy is for another.”\textsuperscript{*235}

Found footage is clearly operating with the paradigm of replicating the optical perceptual experience of diegetic characters as they record it. However, it challenges the notions of primary identification as Metz proposes it, by explicitly drawing attention to the equivalence between the spectator’s optical-perceptual experience and that of a diegetic camera being wielded by a character. Yet is still forges a powerful interface between spectator and the filmic world, drawing the viewer into the image in a way that is difficult to ascribe to the traditional notions of primary or secondary identification.

The explanation may reside in reconceptualising our engagement outside of traditional notions of primary or secondary identification. One way of doing so is to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{*}Branigan, \textit{Narrative Comprehension and Film}, 112.
\item \textsuperscript{*}Bordwell and Thompson, \textit{Film Art}, 91.
\item \textsuperscript{*}Branigan, \textit{Point of View in Cinema}, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{*}Ibid., 7.
\item \textsuperscript{*}Ibid., 23.
\end{itemize}
examine the broader range of explanations for how we may be drawn into a film, and
the potential challenges they offer to the theoretical orthodoxy of primary or
secondary identification.

As discussed in Chapter One, cognitivist theorists such as Carroll look to a
spectator’s natural perceptual processes as the foundations for their interaction with
the filmic image. Carroll argues that one of the key drivers for a viewer’s engagement
can be found in the way spectators subconsciously raise questions throughout the
viewing experience; according to him, “[spectators] frame narrative questions tacitly
and they subconsciously expect answers to them.”\(^{236}\) These answers are then
actualised by later scenes. This process is a return to the erotetic model raised in
Chapter One, and is based, according to Carroll, on an instinctual human urge to forage
for information in our environment that will assist in our survival: when viewing a film,
we are unaware that we continually repeat this process on behalf of the characters.\(^{237}\)
The distinction in Carroll’s concept is one of sympathy over empathy. To clarify, Alex
Neill describes sympathy as a feeling for someone while empathy is feeling with him or
her.\(^ {238}\) In Carroll’s conception, the feelings of care or understanding towards the
character are a feeling for them, distanced and reflective. Sinnerbrink offers this
further distinction between empathy and sympathy in relation to film spectatorship:

From a phenomenological perspective, empathy and sympathy can be
described as poles between which we are ‘moved’ perceptually and affectively:
poles marking two distinct yet related kinds of subjective perspective-taking
having different but related emotional dynamics and evaluative valences (more
immediate, immersive, and affective in the case of empathy, more mediated,
reflective, and normative in the case of sympathy).\(^ {239}\)

Murray Smith also addresses the problematic elements of the concept of secondary
identification with his proposal of three different levels of engagement between
audience and character: recognition, alignment and allegiance. Recognition, for Smith,
is the “spectator’s construction of character: the perception of a set of textual

\(^{236}\) Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 98.
\(^{237}\) Ibid., 97.
\(^{238}\) Neill, “Empathy and (Film) Fiction.”
\(^{239}\) Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 92.
elements, in film typically cohering around the image of a body, as an individuated and continuous human agent.” Alignment is the process by which “spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of their access to their actions, and to what they know and feel.” Smith proposes two interlocking functions that underpin alignment: “spatio-temporal attachment” and “subjective access.” These functions determine how we are given access to the mind of the character or their relationship to the space they inhabit. The third term, allegiance, relates to our moral evaluation of the character: how we judge their actions by imaginative access to their state of mind. Importantly, Smith also makes the distinction between sympathy and empathy, and sees the relation between recognition, allegiance and alignment as constituent components of “structures of sympathy.” Empathic engagement, he proposes, occurs differently to sympathetic concern. In this account, empathy is “other-focussed personal imagining” combined with other low-level ‘pre-reflective’ responses, such as affective mimicry and emotional contagion. Smith describes this concept of other-focussed personal imagining thus: “Person A [...] imagines perceiving, cognizing, or feeling, partially or globally, the perceiving, cognizing, and feeling of [person] B, where such imagining involves conscious, qualitative awareness of the state imagined.”

Found footage horror films arguably draw most strongly on Smith’s notion of “alignment,” given that they work specifically to provide the “spatio-temporal attachment” and “subjective access” Smith proposes. Empathic engagement however, as Smith sees it, may be more problematic, given the viewer’s scarce access to the stimuli that allow for affective mimicry and emotional contagion: the body and face of the protagonist.

A more expansive model of empathy’s relation to art can be drawn from Robin Curtis, who examines the origins of the concept of empathy in the work of theorist Theodore Lipps. Curtis explains that Lipps proposes the act of einfühlen (which translates as to feel into) to explain the human inclination to empathise not only with other creatures, but with other objects, be they animate or inanimate. This extensive account allows for an engagement with phenomena such as colour, sound, and atmosphere, and goes beyond the rudimentary processes of empathy that occur

---

between real and/or fictional persons. Curtis argues that this broader engagement with the world (described by the term *Einfühlung*) is evidenced by the way people viewing dance will themselves “begin to sway or rock,” or the “sympathetic tension” felt by someone observing a tightrope walk.²⁴¹ This concept could certainly hold relevance for the lack of visual access to the central characters given by found footage horror.

The limitations of the viewer’s visual access to the protagonist requires alternative perspectives on the generation of engagement. Joseph D. Anderson’s notion of “affordances” provides a one such approach. Derived from Anderson’s development of an “ecological film theory,” the concept of affordances draws on our hardwired biological responses to new environments.²⁴² An affordance is how the viewer processes each shot of a film based on its “action possibilities,” or what is potentially useful for their needs, a response that directors can use to craft our attention and engagement.²⁴³ Anderson’s approach would suggest that when we watch Josef run down the stairwell in the sequence described from *Creep*, our interest moves to the potential use-value of following him down the stairs (the potential that Aaron may escape, or confront and defeat Josef).

Anderson identifies “perspective-taking” as a key function of our engagement with film. He writes:

>To evaluate the affordances in a narrative context (that is, in a diegetic world), one must perceive them in relationship to a character in that world; one must, in other words, perceive them from that character’s perspective. The protagonist usually has a problem to solve or a goal to achieve. Whether we are able to share that protagonist’s definition of the problem or understand his motivation for pursuing a particular goal, that is, share his perspective, is a factor in our experience of the movie.²⁴⁴

---

²⁴¹ Curtis, “*Einfühlung* and Abstraction in the Moving Image,” 429.
²⁴² Anderson, *The Reality of Illusion*, 41. These responses are biological in the sense that they are predicated upon our natural processes of perception in the act of watching a film.
²⁴³ Ibid., 137.
²⁴⁴ Ibid., 138.
While the perspective-taking Anderson refers to is a psychological process, found footage horror offers a literal translation of perspective-taking in the way shots can be composed to mimic the optical perspective of the protagonist and replicate his processing of the affordances of an environment. For example, in *Creep*, when Aaron searches the exterior of his property for any signs of Josef’s intrusion, we share the same goal of locating Josef, because doing so will placate our fear of not knowing where he is. Anderson’s model, and the other models examined above, offer alternative ways of thinking about how found footage horror film problematises the conventional notions of primary and secondary identification, given that these films are often attempting to replicate the optical perceptual experience of diegetic characters. This also requires rethinking the conventional theories of empathic or emotional engagement, and advancing new models to address these limitations.

**Empathic identification and ‘Embodied Simulation Theory’**

As discussed in Chapter Two, there have been two common approaches within film theory towards attempting to understand our empathic or emotional engagement with the image and why we react to the filmic image ‘as-if’ it were real: those theorists who propose that cognitive processes are at the root of this connection (such as the aforementioned Bordwell, Carroll and Currie), and those who propose more phenomenological methodologies, which explore the implications of embodied experience as the basis for how we interface with the image (Sobchack, Barker, Rutherford, Marks, among others). The most prominent cognitive methodology, “theory of mind,” holds that we use our real-world ability to understand the behaviour and actions of others in terms of their mental states – intentions, beliefs and desires – and that we employ this same technique when experiencing a filmic narrative, through identification with the character’s behaviour and actions: this is Grodal’s conception of empathy as “a viewer-activation of affects and emotions in identification with the interests of a fictive being.” Ultimately, under the cognitivist conception, we are empathically engaged because the film-viewing experience mimics our experience of

\[\text{Grodal, *Moving Pictures*, 93.}\]
the world outside of the theatre.\textsuperscript{246} In Jeffrey Zacks’ description: “Our brains didn’t evolve to watch movies: Movies evolved to take advantage of the brains we have.”\textsuperscript{247}

Recent neuroscientific models have confirmed that a viewer’s engagement with cinema is to some degree an extension of their perceptual system’s grasp of the real world. One specific field that has captured the attention of film theorists is that of the research into mirror neurons, discovered by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his colleagues at the University of Parma in 1996.\textsuperscript{248} Studying macaque monkeys, their research into motor-neural activity discovered that particular neurons were triggered not only when the monkeys performed the action, but also when the monkeys saw an action demonstrated to them. This discovery, and its expansion into theories of empathy, saw the positing of mirror neurons as a key element to the emotional engagement that can occur between a spectator and the cinematic image. Theorists such as Smith, however, have pointed to the insufficiency of mirror neurons as a complete explanation, acknowledging that, while the system of mirror neurons “does suggest how simulation of higher-order states can work from the platform of motor and affective mimicry,” it should be best considered as a “scaffold” for imagination, especially empathic imagination.\textsuperscript{249} This conceptual stance appears to revert back to a hierarchical approach to understanding the construction of empathy, where motor and affective mimicry are simply a “platform” and “higher order” empathy is produced through imaginative engagement with narrative. However, horror cinema often intentionally frustrates these “higher order” processes by restricting our access to the narrative content that underpins it, which in turn accentuates the motor and affective mimicry that remain at the fundamental basis of our ongoing interaction with the image.

The positing of mirror neurons as the fundamental substratum of our empathic or emotional engagement with the image has some limitations. While the action of mirror neurons may address the special quality of ‘realness’ that the filmic world contains, despite its ‘unreal’ quality, they do not completely account for the particulars of the experience of film spectatorship. For example, they do not fully explain the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{246} Zacks, \textit{Flicker}, 3-23.  \\
\textsuperscript{247} Ibid., 4.  \\
\textsuperscript{248} Rizzolatti and Sinagaglia, \textit{Mirrors in the Brain}.  \\
\textsuperscript{249} Smith, “Empathy, Expansionism and the Extended Mind,” 102.
\end{flushright}
'something more' in the experience of viewing that qualitatively differs from our real perceptual experience. And, importantly in relation to found footage horror, they rely on the explicit visual presence of a motor action or expression of emotion by an actor, which found footage often hinders by placing the protagonist behind the camera.

Informed by the phenomenological approach, the recent neuroscientific research into ‘embodied simulation theory’ (EST) expands upon the concept of the mirror-neuron mechanism, and develops new insights into how the body may figure more prominently in understanding our empathic engagement with cinema and how we overcome the “paradox of fiction.” Originating in the work of Vittorio Gallese, embodied simulation theory argues that the “actions, emotions and sensations” of others, both in the real world and on the fictional screen, are translated onto an observer’s own sensory-motor and viscero-motor neural pathways, producing corresponding physiological responses simply through the act of perception.250 As Gallese and Guerra write:

According to [embodied simulation theory] our brain-body system re-uses parts of its neural resources to map others’ behavior. When witnessing actions performed by others, we simulate them by activating our own motor system. Similarly, by activating other cortical regions we re-use our affective and sensory-motor neural circuits to map the emotional and somato-sensory experiences of others. By means of [embodied simulation] we have a direct access to the world of others.251

EST further fleshes out the argument that the perceptual processes of watching film are directly analogous to our perceptual interactions with the real world. Advocates of EST contend that the theory more pertinently explains the intensity of our empathic engagement with cinema, in that EST offers a way of understanding how this interface often exceeds the effects of a purely imaginative engagement with narrative. Gallese, reflecting on our processing of fictional narratives, rejects “suspension of disbelief” as that which allows for intensity of immersion, proposing instead that cinema can allow

---

250 Gallese and Guerra, “Embodying Movies,” 184, see also Ebisch et al., “The Sense of Touch: Embodied Simulation in a Visuotactile Mirroring Mechanism for Observed Animate or Inanimate Touch.”
251 Ibid., 185.
for “liberated embodied simulation,” an “immersive state” in which we “fully deploy our simulative resources.” For Gallese, “liberated embodied” simulation allows us to temporarily forego embodied simulation in the real world, which in turn magnifies our receptivity to the cinema screen.

EST helps to explain how horror films can feel authentic despite our incredulity towards their narrative content. For Gallese and Guerra, EST offers an answer to the question of how, being aware that we are spectators to a film, we can still be gripped by “suspense,” and more importantly, why we feel the same or similar feelings on second or third viewings: they label this aura of authenticity film’s “reality effect.” They also acknowledge Bordwell’s interesting contribution to this debate, when Bordwell writes: “a great deal of what contributes to suspense in films derives from low-level, modular processes. They are cognitively impenetrable, and that creates a firewall between them and what we remember from previous viewings.” EST accounts for some of the “low-level” processes of Bordwell’s “firewall,” in that the observer is unable to limit the sensory-motor and visceromotor pathways that are activated by the image, regardless of their ability to exercise an intellectual rationale over the reality of what they are observing.

As useful as EST’s understanding of the mirror mechanism can be, it cannot fully explain immersion in found footage horror films in which the viewer’s visual access to the actions or expressions of emotion of an onscreen other are restricted. Many films in the found footage horror genre constrain identification with character due to the limitations of the visual form: while we may have “alignment” with many of the characters in found footage horror, in terms of “spatio-temporal attachment” and “subjective access” to their optical perceptual experience, we have less access as viewers to the other dimensions that more commonly foster identification, such as the bodily presence of the protagonist, their voice, and importantly, their face. A viewer is given less access to the conventional aspects of a film that, according to theory of mind, enable the fullest form of identification and therefore empathic engagement.

---

253 Bordwell and Thompson, Minding Movies, 100, cited in Gallese and Guerra, “Embodying Movies,” 194.
Concurrently, we also have less access to the visual aspects that the mirror mechanism draws on.

The neuroscientific foundations of EST are, however, not entirely reliant on the input of the mirror neuron mechanism. Gallese and Guerra note that the mirror mechanism is only one process of embodied simulation, and that other processes contribute to a more expansive understanding of the viewer-image relationship. The two that are most relevant in relation to found footage horror are those that have emerged from studies into canonical neurons – neurons located in the premotor and posterior parietal cortex.

Canonical neurons are activated in the observation of an object: according to Gallese and Guerra, “[s]eeing a manipulable object selectively recruits the same motor resources typically employed during the planning and execution of actions targeting the same object.”\(^{254}\) They use the term “peri-personal space” to describe the “space surrounding our body.” Importantly, they define peri-personal space as multisensory (visual, tactile, auditory and proprioceptive), somatically-centred (not encoded purely by visual processing) and concerned with our potential for movement.\(^{255}\) When an object is observed, canonical neurons “integrate visual and auditory information” about those objects by “mapping it onto the motor programs required to interact with those objects within that space.”\(^{256}\)

This process offers an alternative conception of empathic connection in our relation to found footage horror. Though these films may be largely devoid of the bodily presence of the one recording the events, the objects and spaces presented are nonetheless somatically simulated by the viewer, corporeally imbricating us with the unseen operator of the camera. This is perspective-taking not limited to that of a psychological process, but perspective-taking that imbricates the corporeal response to the objects and spaces presented in the image.

EST posits an entirely different basis for the generation of empathy than that argued for in concepts drawing on “theory of mind.” However, in the distinction between empathy generated by embodied simulation (traditionally seen as a bottom-

\(^{254}\) Gallese and Guerra, “Embodying Movies,” 185.

\(^{255}\) Ibid., 186.

\(^{256}\) Ibid., 186.
up approach) or empathy generated by perspective-sharing of the emotions of the other (alternatively, a top-down approach), it is valuable to examine the interrelation between the two. Patricia Pisters suggests that “two camps” have emerged in the understanding of empathy and emotional engagement, each drawing respectively from the phenomenological and cognitive schools of thought; however, Pisters attempts to reconcile the two. Drawing on the empirical studies of neuronal activity in the work of Gal Raz et al., Pisters proposes that the top-down and bottom up neuronal processes used to explain empathic engagement are best considered as reciprocal networked circuits, and that more value can be gained by asking “when and why one networked circuit is more dominant than the other, and how these networks might influence one another.”

According to Pister’s approach, while the close up of the face may more fully activate the empathic structures that underlie EST, there may also be simultaneously a cognitive consideration of the character’s potential future based on their actions, which would involve activation of the prefrontal-temporo-parietal circuit of the brain, an area identified with the kind of cognitive processes that underpin “theory of mind” in cinema.

The close-up of the face and its expressive capabilities, it has been argued, are vital to both processes. Deleuze recognised this, arguing, “the close-up makes the face the pure building material of the affect.” Plantinga contends that the close-up of the actor’s face not only reveals emotion, but has the “capacity to elicit emotion through processes such as facial feedback, affective mimicry, and emotional contagion,” processes that embodied simulation theory attempts to address. However, it is difficult to reconcile the intensity of experience of the found footage horror film with these traditional notions of empathic connection being primarily fostered by the affective qualities of the facial close-up, particularly given our often limited access to the face of the character wielding the camera. For example, Aaron’s presence in front of the camera in Creep is restricted to roughly twenty minutes of its eighty-five

---

258 Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement Image, 103.
260 It is also worth noting the critique that the performances given in found footage horror films, like the performances in many horror films are, at times, somewhat lacking, which raises further questions about how “facial feedback, affective mimicry, and emotional contagion” can be at the foundations of an intense engagement.
minute running time. How do *Creep*, and other found footage horror films, employ the particularities of their form to overcome this apparent limitation?

**“Becoming-with” the film**

While EST acknowledges the somatic basis of our engagement with the image and reconceptualises empathy, thinking of cinema as a dynamic exchange between the film object and viewing subject provides a framework that allows us to explain the intensity of spectatorial experience in a way that addresses potential insufficiencies in identification with character or narrative. Barker claims that limiting our emotional response to character-centric forms of “mimicry” removes the possibility of the resonance of “textural, spatial and temporal” cinematic structures with the “textural, spatial and temporal” structures of the viewer’s experience.  

While Barker looks to mimesis in term of a copy or mirroring between cinematic world and viewer as a method of explaining how these resonances come about, it is perhaps more productive to examine Miriam Hansen’s concept of mimetic innervation, a concept she draws from Walter Benjamin. Mimetic innervation is, Hansen emphasises, a two-way process: “a decentering and extension of the human sensorium … into the world … and an introjection, ingestion or incorporation” of the film into the body.  

This two-way process shares similarities with Deleuze’s approach to cinema. Deleuzian (and Deleuzian-Guattarian) theory enables us to more expansively address the capacities of cinematic spectatorship, by examining spectatorship as a process of flux. Deleuze’s insistence on challenging the dominant image of thought is vitally important in relation to his work on cinema. Deleuze posits that artistic domains like cinema are inherently capable of challenging the dominant image of thought, and are often the first site to respond to dramatic social change; it is then philosophy’s role to investigate these shifts. Gregory Flaxman sees Deleuze’s cinematic theories as a means of processing and understanding how, in today’s hyper-visual modern world, we feel

---

we have become “unwilling repositories of and accomplices in a plan to populate the world with mindless images.” Flaxman asks:

How can we understand, evaluate, and finally value images when the entire culture seems to have gone visual? Are there differences among images or has their propagation flattened out all distinctions? Is there still a reason to esteem cinematographic images apart from those we see on television or in tabloids?

Given that found footage horror films are, in some senses, repositories of mindless images in the way Flaxman describes, in that they are sometimes presented as recordings of events that are apparently unmediated (like the surveillance recordings of the Paranormal Activity films), how are they still capable of generating affective intensities? One way of rethinking our engagement with the image is the notion, proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, of assemblages: “complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning.”

Deleuze rethinks our engagement with images beyond the concept of a viewer-image binary. His concept of “assemblage” is a more productive way to think of the relationship between spectator and film. Powell develops this thought and demonstrates how a Deleuzian model opens up understandings to a wider continuum of assemblages. She argues for the co-relation of ‘molar’ and ‘molecular’ frameworks in the experience of spectatorship. The terms ‘molar’ and ‘molecular’ are derived from Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of all bodies existing simultaneously on two planes of existence: the molar corresponds to the rigid segmentation found in hierarchical or bureaucratic institutions; the molecular corresponds to the fluid, intersecting characteristic of “unconscious micropercepts, unconscious affects, rarefied divisions.” This notion sees the intensive vibrations that are brought about by visual, aural and other stimuli of film, and its material force on the sensorium, as able to

---

263 Flaxman, The Brain Is The Screen, 9.
264 Ibid., 9.
266 Powell, Deleuze and Horror Film, 66.
267 Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 220.
stimulate a kind of thought that moves towards a Bergsonian “intuition”: much like existence on the molecular plane, this intuition is a mode through which one would receive access to the undifferentiated flow of life, its indivisible affect, as opposed to that which is produced by the sensory-motor schema, which operates on the molar plane. This concept of sensory-motor schema emerges from Bergson’s understanding of human perception and action. For Bergson, in order to act upon its environment, a body must separate from the undifferentiated flow of perception only that which interests it, upon which it can then choose to act. This reduces multifaceted and intricate relations between objects and images to causal and spatial links, leading to a linear cause-and-effect logic.

Deleuze, however, examines the limits of Bergson’s concept, and argues that the transformative power of cinema specifically arises from an ability to dislocate or subvert the sensory-motor schema, which in turn produces non-cognitive affective intensities that can persist beyond the conscious consideration of narrative or identification. While cognitivism sees cinema as naturally conducive to human systems of meaning-making, in turn naturalising how these systems work, Deleuze instead proposes an acentred and nonhuman perspective that interrogates the deterministic, analogous link between our schemata of thought and the classical patterns of narrative cinema. He argues that cinema is capable of destabilising the normative flow of time, and thus the sensory-motor schema of human thought where perception leads to action, which in turn destabilises what we consider the ‘natural’ order of events presented by this image relay.

The concept of “becoming-with,” drawn from Deleuze and Guattari, is an alternative to fixed categories or subjectivities. It involves the dynamic process of change, flight or movement within any assemblage: in this case, the assemblage between film and viewer. This allows for the film and viewer to be considered as a “constantly changing assembly of forces” as opposed to isolated entities. As Elizabeth Grosz posits:

270 Ibid., 58.
In Deleuze and Guattari’s work, the subject is not an “entity” or thing, or relation between mind (interior) and body (exterior). Instead, it must be understood as a series of flows, energies, movements and capacities, a series of fragments of segments capable of being linked together in ways other than those that congeal it into an identity.\textsuperscript{272}

While the dynamic exchange between film object and viewing subject has been examined from various perspectives in this thesis, such as that proposed by embodied spectatorship theory in Chapter Two, Deleuze presents a way of interrogating the concept by challenging the proposed distinction between subjective and objective images, which is especially relevant in relation to found footage horror cinema. Although point of view shots have traditionally been presented as providing a viewing subject ‘subjective’ access to the so-called ‘objective’ world of the film, Deleuze’s concept of the perception-image offers another way of rethinking the differences between them.

**Deleuzian ‘spectatorship’**

Any attempt to draw Deleuze into the fray of spectatorship theory requires that we reconcile the common assertion that Deleuze’s *Cinema* books have little interest in the notion of spectatorship with this expanded understanding of Deleuze’s perception-image. Scholars such as Ronald Bogue and Felicity Colman argue that much of Deleuze’s focus in the *Cinema* books is on film content, as opposed to the viewing experience, and scholars such as Laura Marks even contend that “Deleuzian cinematic theory is not a theory of spectatorship.”\textsuperscript{273} Similarly, Mark Hansen contends that Deleuze’s blurring of the boundary between film and spectator is problematic for spectatorship theory in any Deleuzian context. He claims that a Deleuzian spectator is one who is entirely subjected to the cinema, in which the spectator loses the characteristics that would define subjecthood.\textsuperscript{274} Richard Rushton, however, takes issue with this characterisation, arguing that Mark Hansen misidentifies cinema’s

\textsuperscript{272} Grosz, “A Thousand Tiny Sexes,” 199.
\textsuperscript{273} Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema*; Colman, *Deleuze & Cinema*; Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 150.
\textsuperscript{274} Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, 6-7.
“affectivities” as “entirely within the films themselves” rather than also in the spectatorial body.\textsuperscript{275}

Acknowledging that Deleuze’s approach to cinema does challenge the established notions of unified subjectivity that were foundational for the film theory of the 1970s and 1980s, Rushton asserts that there is a dearth of scholarship that examines a Deleuzian alternative in terms of the actual experience of film spectatorship. As previously explained, for Deleuze, the problematic of subjectivity is considered as “a process of becoming”: manifesting as a qualitative multiplicity, subjectivity in a Deleuzo-Guattarian sense is not a presupposed identity but something produced in a process of individuation which is always collective.\textsuperscript{276} Del Río clarifies the distinction between the phenomenological mode and what Deleuze proposes:

While for Merleau-Ponty movement and affect are subjective phenomena arising out of an intentional and individuated rapport with the world, Deleuze regards the kinetic and the affective as material flows whose individuation and exchange do not rest upon subjectified intentions, but rather upon the workings of a non-organic, anonymous vitality.\textsuperscript{277}

Deleuze’s concept challenges the Kantian understandings of the foundations of subjectivity. Colebrook explains the distinction between a Kantian and Deleuzian notion of subjectivity thus:

For Kant, our experienced world of time and space is possible only because there is a subject who experiences and who connects (or synthesises) received impressions into a coherent order. For Deleuze, by contrast, there is not a subject who synthesises. Rather, there are syntheses from which subjects are formed; these subjects are not persons but points of relative stability resulting from connection, what Deleuze refers to as ‘larval subjects.’\textsuperscript{278}

\textsuperscript{275} Rushton, “Passions and Actions,” 125.
\textsuperscript{276} Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus}, 9.
\textsuperscript{277} Del Río, \textit{Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance}, 115.
\textsuperscript{278} Colebrook, “Disjunctive Synthesis,” 80.
The quandary posed by this Deleuzian notion of subjectivity in relation to cinema becomes thus: if there is not a unified subject who encounters the film, who or what does?

**The Perception-Image**

Found footage horror films are a pivotal site to examine Deleuze’s concept of the perception-image, given their interplay of subjective and objective camera. To investigate this claim, we need to first lay out the foundations of how previous scholars, drawing on Deleuze, have used the perception-image as a pathway to consider alternative answers to the question of who or what encounters the film in the act of spectatorship. Richard Rushton, Teresa Rizzo, and Louis-Georges Schwartz have each attempted to reconcile Deleuzian theory with the presence of a spectator through the concept of the perception image: in Rizzo’s terms, “the possibility that the perception-image produces a cinematic subject or specific cinematic consciousness that invites the viewer to connect with it.”

The concept of the perception-image, developed in *Cinema 1*, is drawn primarily from Deleuze’s consideration of the theoretical work of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Jean Mitry, and their attempts to explicate cinema’s unique capacity for the expression of a subjective and objective perspective within a single shot. Deleuze, in attempting to isolate the “felt-quality” of these particular types of images, utilises two distinct terms from Pasolini and Mitry: Pasolini’s definition of the phenomenon of ‘free indirect image’ or ‘free indirect camera,’ and Mitry’s terminology of a ‘semi-subjective shot.’

In Pasolini’s conception, ‘free indirect camera’ draws from the linguistic style of free indirect discourse, which oscillates between subjective voice of character and objective voice of narrator. Deleuze describes free indirect discourse as “carrying out two inseparable acts of subjectivation simultaneously”: these acts are a bi-fold

---

279 Rizzo, *Deleuze and Film*, 28.
constitution of the character in the first person combined indivisibly with the
constitution of the narrator.\textsuperscript{282}

This can be illustrated cinematically in the ambiguity of film shots that are
presented as neither completely originating from the point of view of the character,
nor from an omniscient position that appears external to the characters. Instead, we
are presented with images wherein the subjective and objective perspectives are
revealed to be merely provisional, or where perspective can shift almost effortlessly
within a shot. What this produces, Rushton argues, is the capacity for a complex
interaction between spectator and screen. Rushton chooses the word interaction
specifically to highlight his contention that “cinema is interactive. It is a composite of
subject and object in which each determines, interrogates and investigates the
other.”\textsuperscript{283} Rizzo posits that the “felt-quality” of the perception-image “implies a film-
viewer.” Quoting Deleuze – “the perception-image is endowed with a felt quality that
gives the impression of ‘being-with’ characters” – Rizzo argues that this “felt quality”
necessitates the generation of a kind of embodied consciousness.\textsuperscript{284} She also points
out that, unlike the inscribed positioning of the transcendental subject proposed by
Baudry and Metz, where the subject is an idealised bodiless entity pre-existing at the
centre of a world of vision, the “act of differentiation central to the perception-image
implies a subject that is in a state of becoming.”\textsuperscript{285}

Schwartz describes Deleuze’s extension of Pasolini’s “free indirect
cinematographic discourse” as a technique which enables a director to reproduce a
variety of voices and perspectives, in a manner that taps into the essential qualities of
cinema, producing a kind of cinematic consciousness: “[b]y making Pasolini identify
free indirect images with the essence of cinema, Deleuze forges an ontological link
between cinema and subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{286} This conception of a cinematic consciousness
arises from the potential for fluctuation between subjective and objective perspectives
within a shot. Rushton, in his critique of Mark Hansen, expands on this concept of
cinematic consciousness in greater detail, elucidating the specifics of how this idea

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{282} Deleuze, \textit{Cinema 1: The Movement Image}, 73.
\item \textsuperscript{283} Rushton, “Passions and Actions,” 126.
\item \textsuperscript{284} Rizzo, \textit{Deleuze and Film}, 29.
\item \textsuperscript{285} Ibid., 32.
\item \textsuperscript{286} Schwartz, “Typewriter,” 122.
\end{itemize}
integrates with the experiential spectator. For Rushton, Deleuze’s work “effectively
draws a map of the way the spectator works with cinematic images and sounds.” Rushton proposes this cinematic consciousness as the meeting point of the “empirical-
bodily” aspects of the spectator and the transcendental aspects of spectatorship. It
should be noted that this is a different conception of transcendental than that offered
by Metz’s apparatus theory. Instead, the transcendental aspect of film viewing, for
Rushton, is the Deleuzian potential for objective perception in the cinema: Deleuze
defines this through negation, by simply differentiating it from subjective shots that
are implied as a particular character’s point of view. Deleuze writes: “[w]e should be
able to say, in fact, that the image is objective when the thing or the set are seen from
the viewpoint of someone who remains external to that set,” although he does assert
that this definition is provisional (a shot may be later revealed to be internal to the
set).

Rushton draws his frame of the transcendental aspects of spectatorship from
Deleuze’s concept of the Cogito. In *Cinema 1*, in a rumination on the free indirect
image, Deleuze writes:

> Can we not find this dividing-in-two, or this differentiation of the subject in
language, in thought and in art? It is the *Cogito*: an empirical subject cannot be
born into the world without simultaneously being reflected in a transcendental
subject which thinks it and in which it thinks itself. And the *Cogito* of art: there
is no subject which acts without another which watches it act, and which grasps
it as acted, itself assuming the freedom of which it deprives the former.

Rushton proposes that this bifurcation corresponds to a concept of spectatorship.
Importantly, this bifurcation is more specifically an integration. It is, in Deleuzian
terms, the Cogito, which recognises that there are objective and subjective dimensions

287 Rushton, “Passions and Actions,” 127.
288 “Empirical-bodily” is a Kantian term Rushton uses to describe the production of knowledge primarily
from sensory experience in the interaction between the body and world (as opposed to transcendental
knowledge, which is purely conceptual), Rushton, “Passions and Actions,” 128.
289 Metz proposes the spectator’s identification with the camera as the formation of a “transcendental
291 Ibid., 73.
of experience. Rushton uses the term “empirical-bodily aspects” of the spectator as a way of describing the body’s response to the affects and intensities of cinema, although he defines this as an “automatic” and “mechanical” response, in order to separate it from the transcendental aspect, which is more circumspect. The transcendental aspect of the spectator, for Rushton, works in the same manner as Deleuze’s transcendental subject, which “‘sits back’ and observes, monitors or watches the automatic, empirical aspect of the subject.”

Rushton’s interpretation of the Deleuzian perception-image proposes that spectatorship, for Deleuze, is always doubled in this way: “one part of the spectator receives and responds to images automatically, while another aspect of the spectator monitors these automatic responses.” In Rushton’s reading of Deleuze, in the cinema of the movement-image sensation and thought are always intertwined. Rushton argues that the experience of an image should always be considered as an integration of the bodily-empirical and transcendental aspects of the spectator.

Crucially, while certain images appear to be subjective, as though from a subjective point of view, this subjectivity is completely determined by the camera. We can return here to the character of Aaron approaching Peachfuzz in the aforementioned scene in Creep; our feelings of subjectivity emerge from the way the scene is composed, with the camera mimicking Aaron’s gradual descent down the stairs. As Rushton goes on to explain:

Any subjectivity that I may experience in respect of what I see on the screen is imposed on me by the camera – all I can do is receive it. In this way, so-called subjective shots in the cinema are wholly determined by the cinematic object: they are objective images imposed on a spectator-subject.

Moreover, in Rushton’s conception, objective images, despite their apparent objectivity, still require that the spectator bring something to the table. He draws on Edward Branigan’s argument that spectators repeatedly make theoretical leaps in understanding narrative or constructing hypotheses about potential or past

---

292 Rushton, “Passions and Actions,” 127
293 Ibid., 127.
294 Ibid., 129.
occurrences, as they place the filmic material into a structure, a consequence of the
fact that there are parts of the film’s world that they are unable to view.295 Rushton,
drawing on Branigan, describes this act as the construction of a “potentially objective
diegetic world.”296 While this objective filmic world is composed of all of the elements
that are captured by the camera and presented to the spectator, it is the
transcendental spectator-subject’s subjective capacities that manifest the conceptual
contents of films that are, in Branigan’s terms, “independent of certain angles of
view.”297 Rushton writes:

These are the images or concepts of a film that simply would not exist were it
not for the fact that there is someone to watch, listen to and make sense of
them. It is nothing less than what the spectator, at any point during the viewing
of a film, adds to that film. This is manifestly a transcendental level of
understanding: what a subject adds to the viewing experience in order to grant
that experience a potential objectivity.”298

Rushton clarifies this by adding that it is not just the past events of the film itself that
contribute to this transcendental level of understanding, but “the whole of one’s past,”
meaning all the wealth of our experiences of an objective world outside of the film,
including our experiences watching other films. He draws on Deleuze’s understanding
of this transcendental processing of images as wholly passive, and not the result of the
subject’s conscious effort. Rushton writes: “[transcendental processes] emerge
without the active or conscious provocation of the subject. In other words, these
transcendental conditions happen to the subject, rather than being caused by the
subject” (italics his). This is part of Deleuze’s larger challenge to the way
representational structures construct a subject.

Rushton’s interpretation of Deleuze’s perception-image offers an expanded
way of interpreting how found footage horror’s so-called “subjective” images do not
simply encourage a form of “perspective taking”: they are affective moments of sense
data that are corporeally experienced and yet they are also reliant on the

295 Branigan, Narrative Comprehension and Film, 165.
297 Branigan, Narrative Comprehension and Film, 165.
298 Rushton, “Passions and Actions,” 133.
“transcendental” aspects of the spectator to fill out this “objective” presence with their subjective capacities. However, this is not achieved through deliberate appraisal, as the cognitivist model argues.

The following example of two shots from the contemporary classic, *No Country For Old Men* (2007), further illustrates this concept. Towards the film’s conclusion, remorseless killer Anton Chigurh (played by Javier Bardem) visits Carla Jean (Kelly Macdonald), the wife of slain protagonist Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin). Early in the film, Chigurh promises Moss he will kill Carla Jean if Moss refuses to hand himself over to the killer. The implication of the visit to Carla Jean is that Chigurh has come to fulfil his promise, yet, as he has done previously in the film, he gives Carla Jean the opportunity to win the flip of a coin to extricate herself from the situation. “The coin don’t have no say, it’s just you,” she proffers. The scene cuts to a shadowy, almost subjective shot (from Carla Jean’s perspective) of Chigurh as he responds: “I got here the same way the coin did.” The scene then cuts to an idyllic exterior long-shot of Carla Jean’s house as two young boys pass by on bicycles. Chigurh steps out of the front door, checks the soles of his shoes, and proceeds down the front path.

Branigan’s argument implies that the spectator will infer or intimate what has occurred in the cut between the two shots on the basis of the diegetic world being an *objective* place. We do not infer that in an instant Chigurh was transported from Carla Jean’s couch to the front door – we instead gather that something occurred in the space in between, and based on the previous actions of Chigurh, the strong likelihood that Carla Jean is dead. To unpack how this demonstrates the difference between the empirical and transcendental aspects of the Deleuzian spectator, we can say that our ability to realise that the second shot occurs chronologically after the first is an “empirical” process.299 This ability to position events in time occurs due to what Deleuze calls the “passive synthesis of habit.” This is the first of three syntheses of time, a concept developed from the Kantian notion of intuition, which explains how we intuit the passage of time between the two moments automatically.300

There is also another element at play here: the whole coherence of the objective world that constitutes the diegetic space of the film. Knowing what we know

---

299 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 81.
300 Ibid., 79.
about Chigurh’s actions in the world of the film, the previous outcomes of his coin-flips, and his implacability, the temporal elision between the two shots is imbued with this knowledge. Also contributing is our experience or memory of previous similar narratives, and our experience or memory of the world outside of the film. This is a function, in Deleuzian terms, of the “second passive synthesis of memory,” in which, as Rushton points out, “the present can only function as ‘present’ on the basis of a past which conditions it as present.”301

Taking these as transcendental conditions, as Deleuze proposes, in that they establish a relation between the two shots, leads to an acknowledgement that the relation is not objective, in the sense of being an element of the film that is actualised without the input of a viewer. Branigan asserts as such, when he argues: “the spectator completes the action; or rather, the spectator constructs a virtual time in which the action is realised.”302

Returning to the film Creep, there are some different nuances of this process in action. As Aaron gradually becomes aware of Josef’s deception, each of the scenes begins to have a different resonance in the present. What may have been innocuous in the previous context becomes shaded with sinister potential. At the end of their day together, Josef reveals that he had been surreptitiously watching Aaron and taking photos of him when Aaron had first arrived, before they had even met. This revelation is the first glimpse into how disturbed Josef is, and while it is not a particularly menacing reveal, its consequences carry over into the following scene.

301 Rushton, “Passions and Actions,” 132.
302 Branigan, Narrative Comprehension and Film, 182.
It is night, and the duo return to Josef’s cabin. Climbing the precipitous stairs, the camera halts one flight below Josef, and he is haloed by the yellow light but his face remains in darkness [Figure 12]. While this is clearly a subjective shot, in that it is designed to place us in the exact position of Aaron’s optical perceptual experience, it is also clearly not our body as spectator that is present recording it. This is what Mitry defined as the “semi-subjective”: subjective in style, but with a manner of objectivity, in that the spectator cannot change it or interact with it. This does not negate our embodied experience of the image, only our capacities for interaction. The transcendental aspect of our experience of this moment, however, is everything that we already bring to the moment that grants it possible objectivity: our understanding of ‘human nature,’ our memories, our unique or collective fears. To reiterate, this is not a conscious decision to activate thought in response to the image, but simply the conditions that allow an experience to be experienced. To return to Deleuze, “an empirical subject cannot be born into the world without simultaneously being reflected in a transcendental subject.”

---

303 It is worth noting that this is the primary image used in the marketing of the film.
304 Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement Image, 73.
Whereas Mark Hansen proposes that Deleuze’s understanding of cinema elides the body of the spectator, Rushton instead recapitulates Deleuze’s Cogito of art, where this division between the empirical and the transcendental aspects of the subject “never goes to the limit. It is rather an oscillation of the person between two points of view on himself, a hither-and-thither of the spirit... a being-with.” As Rushton states, Deleuzian cinematic subjectivities are “composites of subject and object in states of deformation and reformation which respond to and act upon the fluctuations of empirical reception and transcendental structuration.”

For Rushton, Deleuze’s perception-image does return the body to experience, as it sees no fundamental schism between sensation and thought in the cinematic experience.

**Found footage horror and ‘camera consciousness’**

Where does this bring us to in a consideration of the genre of found footage horror? What becomes abundantly evident is that the concept of the subjective camera is not quite so black-and-white as may be assumed. Where the camera often stands in for the optical perceptual experience of a character, and, thus, is designed to reproduce the subjective aspects of that character’s experience, often it is a character in itself, often it simply feels like a character itself, and at other times it can be seemingly external to the subjective world of the characters. Creep exemplifies this capacity for the camera to become character, in the scenes in which the camera is recording but is not operated by Aaron, such as the sequence in which Aaron confesses to camera that Josef’s masked alter-ego, Peachfuzz, is haunting his nightmares. The third capacity, of seeming objectivity, is more evident when the diegetic camera is used for surveillance in a manner which is seemingly neutral and unmediated by the characters, such as the examples previously described in the Paranormal Activity series, and the ‘grave digging’ sequence in Creep. This sequence cleverly takes advantage of the supposition that we are watching an objective record of the events: after the seemingly violent confrontation between Aaron and Josef described in this chapter’s opening, and the ominous cut to black, we then cut to a static shot of Josef moving through frame, lugging what appears to be a body in garbage bags, and digging what appears to be a

---

305 Rushton, “Passions and Actions,” 133.
grave. It is only after a few drawn-out moments that Aaron reveals that it is he who is recording himself watching this footage on his home TV – and that it is the contents of a video that had been mailed to him several days later by Josef (leaving the unresolved question of what – or who – was in the bags) [Figure 13]. The ambivalent nature of the identity of the viewer/recorder in this sequence illustrates how found footage often ‘plays’ with notions of subjective and objective vision.

Figure 13: Josef takes out the trash in Creep

What this ‘play’ achieves, in a sense, is further variation on the perception-image’s capacities: Rizzo describes this as a movement “away from a centred universal form of human subjectivity to a cinematic experience based on interaction, variation and change.” The effect of this dynamic oscillation between points of view further highlights the question of whether empathic engagement can be solely established either, as theory of mind posits, through our access to a character’s subjectivity, or through the immersive properties of the physiological response of a “liberated” embodied simulation. Instead, a consideration of how we experience found footage adds nuance to each of these accounts, through the way the shifts in point of view promote a co-existence of perspectives.

Regarding Pasolini’s free indirect camera, Deleuze writes:

A character acts on the screen, and is assumed to see the world in a certain way. But simultaneously the camera sees him, and sees his world, from another point of view which thinks, reflects and transforms the viewpoint of the character [...] the camera does not simply give us the vision of the character

---

Rizzo, Deleuze and Film, 34.
and of his world; it imposes another vision in which the first is transformed and reflected.\textsuperscript{307}

However, found footage horror film necessarily works differently to this. The camera \textit{does}, in a sense, give us the vision of the character and his world as they record it; they literally “see” the world in a certain way, which we are often privy to. But in doing so, it does not abrogate the possibility for this vision to be transformed or reflected in another vision, as it is never fully the “subjective” experience of the observer – it is always mediated by the diegetic presence of the camera. Although there is no ‘second camera’ (in the Deleuzian sense), no other point-of-view seeing the world, there is the presence of the camera, as so-called objective recording device within the diegetic world of the film, independent of the character’s consciousness, which becomes in a sense the second vision which can still transform and reflect the first. It does so in the way Mitry describes, by not “mingl[ing]” with the character, but also not being “outside.”\textsuperscript{308}

This dual operation can be seen in the way the diegetic camera is often employed in found footage horror films. Deleuze refers to the following as one of “stylistic procedures” analysed by Pasolini which reveal the cinematographic Cogito:

> ‘insistent’ or ‘obsessive’ framing, which makes the camera await the entry of a character into the frame, wait for him to do and say something then exit, while it continues to frame the space which has once again become empty, once more leaving the scene to its pure and absolute signification as scene.\textsuperscript{309}

This feature can still be considered an indicator of an “independent aesthetic consciousness,” even if it can be attributed to the diegetic presence of a camera, including one that is not being operated by one of the protagonists. This “obsessive” framing is often present in the found footage horror subgenre and largely occurs without the presence of a diegetic camera operator. For instance, in \textit{Creep}, we are presented with the generic convention of the horror film villain watching his potential victim, seen by the audience, but unseen by his prey. However this moment is felt

\textsuperscript{307} Deleuze, \textit{Cinema 1: The Movement Image}, 74.
differently in found footage than in conventional horror film. The running camera, deposited on the bed by Aaron as he searches his house for intrusion, captures Josef’s appearance at the entrance to the house, and his subsequent malevolent disappearance [Figure 14]. This is not a subjective image, nor a wholly objective image. The camera is not, as Deleuze defines objective, “external to the set.” This type of framing is also demonstrated in the continually recording surveillance cameras of *Paranormal Activity*, as discussed in Chapter One.

Figure 14: Josef stalks the entrance in *Creep*
It is arguable that this conception is not entirely equivalent to Deleuze’s argument, wherein “the perception image finds it status [...] from the moment that it reflects its content in a camera-consciousness which has become autonomous.” While the camera-consciousness of found footage horror is not completely autonomous, it repeatedly infiltrates the image in subtle ways, as described above.

Camera consciousness, for Deleuze, is a concept that encompasses in part, but not in full, the consciousness of any viewer, the viewpoint of a centred subjectivity, and the transcendental expression of truth apprehended by technological means. It is perhaps better described, as Spencer Shaw does, as “a consciousness expressed through the flux and transformation of an ever evolving temporal artwork that assimilates all centers and incorporates them into an indivisible flow.” Deleuzian philosophy may appear, in this conception, to be in opposition to an embodied human spectator, particularly when Deleuze writes: “[t]he sole cinematographic consciousness is not us, the spectator, nor the hero. It is the camera – sometimes human, sometimes inhuman or superhuman.” However, what the idea of ‘camera consciousness’ allows for is the existence of different perspectives and different voices, be they human or inhuman. In his chapter on the perception-image, Deleuze labels this process a “circuit,” where “objective and subjective images lose their distinction” and “contaminate” each other. The result, he contends, is a cinematographic Mitsein (being-with), a concept which draws on the Heideggerian term for how others are always implicated in our existence. This “being-with,” in Rizzo’s interpretation of Deleuze, is produced by the “oscillation of different perspectives” and “points to a subjectivity that is always in motion, always becoming, and always differing from itself.” This Deleuzian circuit contests the logic of a cinematic apparatus that generates a universal subject, in favour of a form of subjectivity that is always in flux, and therefore opens cinema to have radical potential in terms of challenging the politics inherent in such a limited conception of the subject. In this understanding, cinema can be a difference-making machine, and the perception-

310 Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement Image, 74.
311 Shaw, Film Consciousness, 165.
312 Mitsein is human existence in so far as it is constituted by relationship or community with others; a being-with.
image, Deleuze contends, as a component of the movement-image, produces this “universal variation.”

While cognitivism understands cinema through the implicit division between viewer and film, Deleuze instead proposes that cinema is capable of destabilising the normative division between objective and subjective perception, and thus any hierarchical conception of film as object and viewer as subject. This concept has particular political relevance, as the intensities brought about by this “molecular” thought bring into question the notion of a presupposed fixed identity, allowing for mutability in what are perceived as rigid hierarchies of the identity of the filmic subject (such as gender and race). It also allows us to further develop conceptions of spectatorship that consider our affective and intellectual experiences of the image as more closely intertwined.

Deleuze and “representation”

An expanded understanding of spectatorship emerges from this consideration of found footage horror films as exemplars containing a perception-image that allows for the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity. Found footage horror films complicate the process of identification and empathy and question representational models. They present a clear challenge to a unitary identification with any character or with the recording camera as an objective ‘eye’ on the filmic world, instead allowing for a mutability in our experience of the image.

In Difference and Repetition, Deleuze critiques representational thinking for its capacity to limit difference. For Deleuze, representation is characterized by four aspects: identity, opposition, analogy and resemblance. Within such a narrow band of definable aspects, potential for difference is abrogated, as difference becomes determined only by the manner in which the object of representation is related to its conceived identity, a conjured opposition, a decided analogy or a perceived similarity. This is especially important in relation to representational models that have been applied to cinema, which are, as Del Río observes:

313 Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement Image, 64.
314 Deleuze, Difference and Repetition.
Either unwilling or insufficient to address the way in which the experience of the moving image can at times escape binary determinations and established signifying codes. Driven by notions of representation, semiotic, psychoanalytic, and ideological analyses unwittingly furthered oppositional binaries that the cinema itself has consistently proven quite capable of undoing, binaries such as reality/illusion, subject/object, thought/emotion, activity/passivity, and so on. The imposition of a totalizing picture of reality as structured meaning carried out by the representational approach left little, if anything, to the unstructured sensations that are likewise set in motion in the film-viewing experience.315

Similarly, Pisters locates the importance of Deleuze’s “rhizomatic” challenge to representation in how it contests the model of the eye as the most important factor for perceiving and judging difference. She notes how traditional film theory “conceives [of] the image as a representation that can function as a (distorted or illusionary) mirror for identity construction and subjectivity.”316 In this model, representation is seen as a process that is intimately linked to a valorisation of the “I” behind the “eye.”317 Pisters points to how sight has been esteemed above all other sensory aspects of experience within the representational model, in which “I see” necessarily leads on to “I think,” “I judge,” “I compare.” The alternative conception, proposed by Deleuze, is that of the brain as the screen. This is cinema, in the words of Powell, as something which both “expresses” and “induces” thought.318

This concept of the “brain-screen” is particularly relevant to the specific cinematic engagement with diegetic screens and cameras. As Robert Pepperell argues, the screen of the mind and the screens of the world are neither distinct nor unified. The dominant traditions of internalism, which locates the screen entirely in the mind, and externalism, which sees screens as only in the world outside the mind, are insufficient when considered as independent of each other. Pepperell proposes instead a “dialectic” state, which acknowledges the simultaneous distinction and unity

315 Del Rio, Deleuze and The Cinemas of Performance, 2.
317 Ibid., 7.
318 Powell, Deleuze, Altered States and Film, 4.
of the two. The brain, in this model, is the membrane between the inside screen and the outside screen.

The intertwined intellectual and affective responses of the embodied brain present a more feasible model for how we perceive ourselves as subjects. In this model, images bring about a complex interaction between body and brain, perception and memory: images have the capacity to be directly affective without being subsumed by our cognitive drive to construct meaning from their relations. Pisters agrees, contending that, under this Deleuzian reconfiguration, the distinction between subjective and objective becomes blurred. She argues that “we have entered an age [in which] a new camera consciousness makes clear distinction between the subjective and the objective impossible; the past and the present, the virtual and the actual have become indistinguishable.”

Through an analysis of the Kathryn Bigelow film, Strange Days, (itself not a found footage horror film, although still pertinent to this philosophical consideration), Pisters examines the subjective use of camera in relation to Deleuze’s cinematic theory. Strange Days features several sequences that are presented as recorded versions of first-person perceptual experience: everything that the character visually perceived was recorded by a headset device known in the movies as a SQUID (a creation of science fiction, but not out of the question considering the recent advances in recording technologies). From her analysis, Pisters identifies the inherent weakness of an equivalence between purely subjective camera (such as that of Lady in the Lake) and how spectatorial identification occurs, even if such a system was considered a legitimate way to understand the subjective camera in the way Bordwell and Thompson claim that “optical” point of view shots generally equate to perceptual subjectivity. Pisters argues for an expanded account of self, according to which:

[S]pectators no longer can confirm their identity by identifying with subjects on screen but have to negotiate between the images presented to their minds and the memories induced by their own bodies. Body, brain and perception work

---

320 Pisters, The Matrix of Visual Culture, 43-44.
321 Ibid., 23-44.
322 Bordwell and Thompson, Film Art, 91.
together to establish a sense of self in each point of time, which differs according to the demands of the specific situation.”

Pisters attributes this direct challenge to the notion of the transcendental subject of apparatus theory to the shifting contemporary image culture, and in particular the volatility of camera-consciousness. The reconfigured camera-consciousness Pisters identifies in *Strange Days*, much like found footage horror, produces an encounter that is defined by the “diminished distance between who is seeing and what is seen, through the physical and intensive implication of the spectator;” what emerges from this encounter between viewer and image is a type of thought that differs from representational thinking, one that resonates intensively and extensively.

**Foraging through found footage: Panksepp’s SEEKING instinct**

The variation of the body, brain and perception according to the demands of the situation, that Pisters argues for above, leads to the biological process of vision and the underlying, pre-cognitive instincts that direct it, which offers supplementary methods of explaining the mind/body and perception link. The work of neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp is valuable here, as his SEEKING instinct offers a reading of the process of vision as one that occurs before the formation of language or the symbolic. The SEEKING system (insistently capitalised, to indicate it has been evolutionarily ‘built’ into the nervous system at a fundamental level) is the “emotional instinct” to seek resources that Panksepp has identified across all mammalian species. Importantly, according to Panksepp, this instinct is located in the primordial area of the brain and is a “primary” response to environment, in that it is not an outcome or somato-sensorial symptom of perception. Rather, it is an element of the “core” self as an emotional self, where emotion drives cognition; as Panskepp writes: “[a]ll sustained cognition is affectively directed and motivated, often invisibly in a fashion that promotes the illusion of cognitive autonomy from emotion.” These affects are not equivalent to...
emotions in the way that cognitivist film theorists would classify them: they are instead core drivers, equivalent to instincts, that are later codified by the neo-cortex as more determined emotional responses. Panksepp argues that this process occurs on several levels: the primary level is the emotional, sub-cortical level (originating in the most ancient parts of our evolutionary neurobiology), while at the tertiary level cognition is also engaged by this instinct, and these affects become classified as emotions in the way cognitivists would understand them. It is at the tertiary level that Panksepp argues that SEEKING is at its highest intensity, becoming “obsessive” and “question-asking.”

To further clarify, the SEEKING-EXPECTANCY system is the most important of what Panksepp terms the “ancient social-emotional systems” (which include ANGER, FEAR, PANIC/GRIEF, MATERNAL CARE, PLEASURE/LUST and PLAY), because it impels all mammals to enter their environment and hunt for resources or information that will enable them to survive. Promoted by the neurochemical deployment of dopamine, this instinct drives foraging, investigation, curiosity and expectation.

Film theorists have previously examined Panksepp’s contentions: Grodal, for instance, identifies the SEEKING system as intrinsic to the spectator’s “prime fascination” with detective fiction or the excitement viewers have in watching characters overcome adversity. This instinct to learn ‘what happens next’ in the example Grodal gives is certainly tied to SEEKING, but only at the tertiary level; it is a deliberate cognitive process. Karin Luisa Badt further expands this hypothesis beyond the boundaries of puzzle films or narrative tales of adversity, arguing that “the SEEKING system is engaged when a human being watches any film,” and that “SEEKING may explain our emotionally charged attention to the screen at the pre-story primary process level (the emotional, sub-cortical level, as Panksepp defines emotion), as well as at the tertiary level.” In doing so, she attempts to overturn the dichotomy between emotional reading of the image and cognitive reading of the image, or what Panksepp labels “the illusion of cognitive autonomy from emotion.”

---

Badt writes: “Our eyes and bodies are primed to take emotional excitement from a plethora of new environmental cues as our ‘survival’ instinct sets in gear, at its most basic level: to seek and scan what is around us.”331 She contends that, because cinema is an “accelerated and moving representation of environments,” it intensifies this seeking and scanning experience, not only at the level of narrative, but also in relation to “shapes, lights, colours and movement.”332 Thus, in Badt’s assessment, Panksepp’s SEEKING system allows us to understand how both levels are concurrently engaged with the image.

Badt’s concept of a cinematic application of SEEKING offers a valuable new way to consider the experience of found footage horror films, with their constantly searching and scanning cameras. On one level, the activity of the cameras in these films could be interpreted as a diegetic extension of how our instincts guide us to interact with an environment. The cameras simulate the tertiary level of foraging for new information that will enable survival, and they do so very specifically under the threat of potential doom; for example, Aaron’s handheld camera tracking slowly down the stairs is, at the macro-level of narrative, tapping into an instinctual response to the environment.333 However, at the primary level, in relation to affect and attention, SEEKING can entrance or engage us with aspects of the image that have little to no relation to narrative. This is especially relevant to horror, where the fearful potential for the out-of-frame to intrude remains with us, often unconsciously so, and leads us to apprehensively assess the borders of the image. This is a fear that may never be catalysed by the narrative.

Panksepp’s theoretical groundwork does not undermine the Deleuzian Cogito of art discussed earlier in this chapter: it simply explains that, at a neurobiological level, the “empirical subject” is distinct from the “transcendental subject.” In fact, the “fluctuations of empirical reception and transcendental structuration” that Rushton proposes could be considered the outcome of tertiary cognitive processes redefining or codifying primary affect. SEEKING is, in Deleuzian terms, an aspect of “molecular”

331 Badt, “A Dialogue with Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp on the SEEKING system,” 75.
332 Ibid., 75.
333 There is productive room here for future research into Panksepp’s FEAR instinct and its potential relation to horror cinema.
thought, in the way in which it is grounded in the affective and intensive qualities of experience. It could also be argued that the cognitive processes of “theory of mind” and the corporeal responsiveness of embodied simulation are also recognised in Panksepp’s differentiation of emotion-affective processing: embodied simulation would be a process that arguably has been learnt through instrumental or operant conditioning to the point where it is an “emotional habit,” in Panksepp’s terms, while “theory of mind” could be considered a tertiary process, a cognitive executive function that is still guided by affect.

When exposed to a found footage horror film, the modern spectator immediately identifies the generic markers of ‘subjective’ footage, but the effects of these films go beyond the capacities of what should then be considered a “fake documentary.” As Rizzo contends, the felt-quality in the fluctuation of the two modes of experience of the perception-image requires thinking outside of the boundaries of being made subject by the film, and instead examining how the specifics of the experience manifest for the viewer. While a viewer watches the film Creep unfold as Aaron records it, specifically through his act of recording it, their perception never fully correlates with either his perception, or that of the recording camera. The spectator is presented with a somewhat subjective view of this world, but they bring to their experience of it an interoceptive response and a transcendental understanding, in the Deleuzian sense, which is crucially integrated with their empirical-bodily affectivity. This transcendental aspect does not remain at a distance, but is what the viewer adds to the experience to grant it potential objectivity. The combination of the two aspects allows for a more holistic understanding of potential subjectivity and objectivity as components of any image. In doing so, it requires a re-examination of any analysis of found-footage horror film that simply parallels the onscreen content with the subjectivity of the characters. It also prompts us to reconceive notions of film-object and spectator-subject as Rushton does, as ever-evolving “composites,” always in “states of deformation and reformation.”

334 Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement Image, 74.
335 Interoceptive refers to stimuli or somatic sensation that is produced by the body.
Redefining the viewer’s engagement with the audio-visual image at a pre-cognitive level illustrates the fruits of Panksepp’s theory in relation to cinema. The SEEKING instinct, as Panksepp defines it, is particularly relevant to the found footage horror film, as both its form and content replicate the perceptual process of foraging. Under this conception, the function of the first-person camera is no longer equated purely with a type of subjective identification; it goes beyond this, implicating instinctive perceptual processes, which then become integrated with a cognitive appraisal of the narrative. For, while a viewer may empathically engage with narrative and character, these are tertiary processes of ‘meaning-making’ that are retroactively fashioned after the primary affective response. It is the primary affective response that is most fully informed by exteroceptive multi-sensory stimuli, such as movement, colour, light and sound, and it is this response that more comprehensively accounts for the spectator’s intensely immersive engagement with the audio-visual image of found footage horror.

Returning briefly to Creep allows an examination of this point. Watching Aaron following Josef up the stairs to the cabin, the spectator’s reception of the image and sound is operating on multiple levels. At what Panksepp defines as the primary level, they are scanning the screen in a manner that accords with the foraging instinct in non-filmic perception: all of their sensory inputs are not only working in concert, but are, as proposed by Sobchack’s “cinesthetic subject,” co-operative and commutable.

Aurally, s/he processes the atmospheric noises of the night: crickets chirping, distant barking, a faint hum of indistinct car noise. The spectator is also pre-cognitively processing the acoustics of the voices of both Aaron and Josef, in terms of pitch, timbre, and amplitude. Visually, there is an awareness of the tremor at the edge of frame that denotes slight optical-perceptual movement. There is also a visual engagement with the hazy yellow colour and quality of the single source light, its reflection of the stairs, and the opacity of the spaces it cannot reach. Josef’s face is one of these on-screen spaces, and the viewer is visually compelled to scan this space, seeking the normal affectively charged contents of the facial register that are not present.

At another level, the viewer’s perceptual resources are prompting an embodied simulation of our presence within the space of the diegetic environment and an
interaction with its objects: their perception of the image is being translated onto their sensory-motor and viscero-motor neural pathways, producing corresponding physiological responses. At yet another level, s/he is drawn into the moment through how Carroll’s erotetic model posits that we process narrative, by posing questions that require answers: What does Josef want from Aaron? How can Aaron extricate himself from this situation? Finally, there is the specific manner in which this is presented as a record of an objectively-existing situation through its documentary-like form, combined with the subjective nature of the recording (the viewer is, in a certain sense, perceiving the scene in an almost identical way to Aaron). However, as previously established, the movement between these two poles can be most productively considered as an oscillation, as opposed to an immutable dichotomy.

Crucially, it is the formal properties of found footage which are most productive of the process of SEEKING. As the subjective camera itself echoes the instinctive foraging process, it produces a doubling of sorts for the spectator. Indeed, when Aaron follows Josef down the stairs and is confronted by Peachfuzz, as described in this chapter’s opening, this doubling comes to the fore. While Josef’s operation of the camera reproduces his perceptual experience of new environmental cues, moment by moment, so too does the viewer capitulate to the images presented: we do not so much cognitively ask, “what happens next,” as much as we interface with the sensory-affective aspects of the film at a core level of experiential processing, moment to moment.

Both Deleuze’s perception-image and Panksepp’s SEEKING system offer alternative but complementary frameworks for considering how we are drawn into a film, in ways that challenge the theoretical orthodoxy of primary or secondary identification. Found footage horror film often works against the bases of these forms of identification, by reducing the presence of the on-screen body and foregrounding the “foraging” camera. By examining a synthesis of the perception-image and the SEEKING system, this chapter has offered a more expansive model to account for how a spectator becomes entangled with the image. This model is less reliant on the presence of an on-screen body to account for the integration between viewer and image, and proposes that cinema has capacities that can facilitate a “becoming-with” that exceeds the limits of concepts such as identification.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Evolving Screen Forms of New Media Horror

In a darkened office I sit alone at my desk. Lit only by the wan flicker of the computer monitor, I’m searching for answers through the byzantine labyrinth of an online video library. Some are archival records of what happened, some are messages in response. With no way to identify the authenticity of each video, I am left to piece the puzzle together for myself. I press play on the next video, titled Conversion.337

This one is a video response. A message. On screen, accompanied by a familiar electronic hum, the flicker of black and white bars reminds me of analog static. In the noise, as though drifting to the surface, an anthropomorphic shape appears. Suddenly both are gone, replaced on screen with a code – one of many – among coloured geometric shapes. It reads: ENTRY # 000.129519 [Figure 15]. The numbers mean nothing to me, but tantalisingly hint that this is but one piece in a larger jigsaw puzzle.

337 To view, go to bit.ly/mhconversion.
The code too is soon replaced by a new image: an array of coloured digital vectors and a crudely animated spectral white face in the corner of the frame. The audio sounds like the whimper of a dying carnival, and a mutter of indistinguishable voices washes in and out like ocean waves. Behind the image appears the face of a familiar man, someone who is key to solving the puzzle but equally inscrutable in his actions and behaviour. His voice has been muted. On screen, amid the digital hiss of an image saturated with ruptures and static, a new message:

WHO ARE THE LIARS?

Despite knowing this query is directed to someone other than me, the question speaks to my own growing distrust of the people who have created and uploaded the videos, yet also of the images themselves. On screen, other recognisable figures appear, snatches from previous videos that have been compressed, garbled, digitally disfigured.

The video asks: ARE YOU ONE OF THEM. And then threatens: REMEMBER TO LOOK BEHIND YOU [Figure 16].
A ghost-like body of static recedes into the darkness on screen. The soundtrack becomes a plangent growl that shifts in pitch as the image continues to break down. The growl recedes, replaced by a deep hum as more perplexing batches of numbers flash on to the screen. While my mind struggles to solve the puzzle, my body is already offering its own inchoate answer to the question posed by the unnerving sounds and images.

The video finishes. Youtube cues the next link: Entry #75. Sitting in the dark, I consider, just for a moment, looking behind me – but I remain still, body taut, nerves jangling, eyes riveted to the screen as the next video begins to play.

In the remaining two chapters I will build on an understanding of the primacy of the sensory-affective components of the image, examining how horror’s continued evolution within new media forms, such as streaming video and virtual reality, emphasises these properties, leading to the production of a heightened experience for the spectator. As discussed in Chapter Two, horror has an almost parasitic relationship to developing technologies, inevitably ‘bleeding through’ into new media artefacts in ways that fearfully question the speed of change and subsequent societal and cultural consequences that new technologies bring. These artefacts are often employed as a location for new forms of fictional storytelling, but they also often utilise the ambiguous truth status of the image in a similar manner to the found footage horror films examined Chapter Two.

This chapter looks at several new media artefacts as exemplars for this interface between horror and digital media: a selection of ‘non-fiction’ Youtube videos I describe as “post-cinematic” horror shorts, and the Youtube found footage horror series, Marble Hornets. It also examines the 2014 film, Unfriended, for its innovative central conceit: that the film takes place entirely on a computer screen. From this examination, the following questions arise: what are the particular effects of the distinctive camera/body and screen/body relation of these new media artefacts?; does the digital aesthetic and delivery modality of new media generate a unique bodily intensity?; do these newer forms allow for an ‘aesthetic of distortion’ at both a visual and aural level that is more productive of fear than conventional horror film, and if so, why?; is it perhaps the specific sensory-affective attributes of destabilised sounds and
images, and the synaesthetic and haptic qualities that accompany them, that are key to this shifting audio-visual experience for the spectator?

While the earlier chapters discussed in detail the affective visual and aural properties of the out-of-frame, and the potential of a subjective/objective interplay in the way found footage utilises point-of-view, this chapter will focus on several non-narrative or non-semantic constituents of the new media image that may also bring about an intensification of the viewing experience. These elements include the hapticity of the image, its peripheral or background elements, the unintended or intended distortion or breakdown of the audio-visual image, and the frames-within-frames that new media configurations allow.

What hides behind the stream: Post-cinematic hauntings of the digital domain

As previously noted, the inescapable presence of the Internet in almost all aspects of our daily lives, and its concurrent torrential stream of information, have served to exacerbate modern concerns for the truth status of the image. It is therefore unsurprising that Youtube and other video streaming sites have become locations where the status of the supernatural is brought into question, and where it is granted a provisional form of existence through its presence in the visual archive. These manifestations, often catalysed through an interface with the medium itself, are historically connected with the emergence of information technologies, wherein the presence of the paranormal in media often articulates our evolving relationship to media technologies. Importantly, as digital videos are freed from their indexical link to real objects, they become, in Steven Shaviro’s terms, less about bodies and images as semantic content and more about “the articulation and composition of forces.”\textsuperscript{338} As such, they become perfect sites for the emergence of inhuman and incorporeal paranormal phenomena. However, our experience of these videos is exquisitely human, in that we are affectively imbricated with these images at a corporeal level, which further complicates our relationship with their content and its believed

\textsuperscript{338} Shaviro, \textit{Post-Cinematic Affect}, 17.
authenticity or inauthenticity. These videos manifest the liminal state of the meeting point between incredulity and the affective force of the audio-visual image.

Two particular ‘non-fiction’ Youtube horror videos provide us with a location to examine this contention. The first came to light not in video form, but as a story posted to the website 4Chan in October 2009. The apocryphal tale detailed an unreleased Mickey Mouse cartoon produced by Disney in the 1930s, found by a reviewer who was compiling a complete collection of Disney’s work. The cartoon was composed of a continuous loop of Mickey walking on a footpath. What was odd about the animation, the post suggested, was that Mickey’s demeanour was so morose. It got stranger still: after the loop supposedly ended, there were several minutes of black screen and then Mickey returned unexpectedly. No-one had realised there was additional footage until the original had been digitised.

However, there was something odd about this new footage. The author of the post described what it was they found so shocking about it:

The sound was different [...] It wasn’t a language, but more like a gurgled cry. As the noise got more indistinguishable and loud over the next minute, the picture began to get weird. The sidewalk started to go in directions that seemed impossible based on the physics of Mickey’s walking. And the dismal face of the mouse was slowly curling into a smirk. The murmur soon turned into a bloodcurdling scream [...] Colours were happening that shouldn’t have been possible at the time. Mickey’s face began to fall apart.

---

339 The original post has been removed from the 4Chan archive.
340 The entire content of the original post: “So do any of you remember those Mickey Mouse cartoons from the 1930s? The ones that were just put out on DVD a few years ago? Well, I hear there is one that was unreleased to even the most avid classic Disney fans. According to sources, it’s nothing special. It’s just a continuous loop (like The Flinstones) of Mickey walking past 6 buildings that goes on for two or three minutes before fading out. Unlike the cutesy tunes put in though, the song on this cartoon was not a song at all, just a constant banging on a piano as if the keys [sic] for a minute and a half before going to white noise for the remainder of the film. It wasn’t the jolly old Mickey we’ve come to love either, Mickey wasn’t dancing, not even smiling, just kind of walking as if you or I were walking, with a normal facial expression, but for some reason his head tilted side to side as he kept this dismal look. Up until a year or two ago, everyone believed that after it cut to black [sic] and that was it. When Leonard Maltin was reviewing the cartoon to be put in the complete series, he decided it was too junk to be on the DVD, but wanted to have a digital copy due to the fact that it was a creation of Walt’s. When he had a digitized version up on his computer to look at the file, he noticed something. The cartoon was actually 9 minutes and 4 seconds long. This is what my source emailed to me, in full (he is a personal assistant of one of the higher executives at Disney, and acquaintance of Mr. Maltin himself). After it cut
It was not only Mickey’s face that disintegrated — the entire image degenerated into indefinable visual noise. The story continues with the outlandish claim that, after the final Mickey Mouse logo appeared on screen, there was an additional thirty seconds, and that, after seeing this content, the only viewer immediately stole a security guard’s firearm and shot and killed himself. The storyteller of the original post labelled the clip “Suicidemouse” and demanded that “if you ever find a copy of the film, I want you never to view it.... When a Disney death is covered up as well as this, it means this has to be something huge.”

In November 2009 a video was uploaded to Youtube by a user called Nec1. It was accompanied by the same text in the description, and seemed to be an accurate account of the first section of the video described. In the video, Mickey does indeed walk morosely in front of a repetitive background, and, after a pause of several minutes of black, the video concludes with the degeneration of the image, accompanied by hellish screaming and a final eerie piece of music [Figure 17].

do black, it stayed like that until the 6th minute, before going back into Mickey walking. The sound was different this time. It was a murmur. It wasn’t a language, but more like a gurgled cry. As the noise got more indistinguishable and loud over the next minute, the picture began to get weird. The sidewalk started to go in directions that seemed impossible based on the physics of Mickey’s walking. And the dismal face of the mouse was slowly curling into a smirk. On the 7th minute, the murmur turned into a bloodcurdling scream (the kind of scream painful to hear) and the picture was getting more obscure. Colours were happening that shouldn’t have been possible at the time. Mickey face began to fall apart. his eyes rolled on the bottom of his chin like two marbles in a fishbowl, and his curled smile was pointing upward on the left side of his face. The buildings became rubble floating in mid-air and the sidewalk was still impossibly navigating in warped directions, a few seeming inconceivable with what we, as humans, know about direction. Mr. Maltin got disturbed and left the room, sending an employee to finish the video and take notes of everything happening up until the last second, and afterward immediately store the disc of the cartoon into the vault. This distorted screaming lasted until 8 minutes and a few seconds in, and then it abruptly cuts to the Mickey Mouse face at the credits of the end of every video with what sounded like a broken music box playing in the background. This happened for about 30 seconds, and whatever was in that remaining 30 seconds I haven’t been able to get a sliver of information. From a security guard working under me who was making rounds outside of that room, I was told that after the last frame, the employee stumbled out of the room with pale skin, saying ‘real suffering is not known’ seven times, before speedily taking the guards pistol and offing himself on the spot. The thing I could get out of Leonard Maltin was that the last frame was a piece of Russian text that roughly said ‘the sights of hell bring its viewers back in’. As far as I know, no one else has seen it, but there have been dozens of attempts at getting the file on Rapidshare by employees inside the studios, all of whom have been promptly terminated from their jobs. Whether it got online or not is up for debate, but if rumours serve me right, it’s online somewhere under “suicidemouse.avi”. If you ever find a copy of the film, I want you to never view it, and to contact me by phone immediately, regardless of the time. When a Disney Death is covered up as well as this, it means this has to be something huge.”

341 To view the Nec1 video, go to bit.ly/thesusicidemouse.
Discordant and unsettling, it is, however, unclear if Nec1’s video is the authentic *Suicidemouse*, as detailed on 4Chan. This would be further complicated by later uploads, claiming to be the real *Suicidemouse*, which present similar imagery with varying visual corruption, and an altogether new hellish soundscape of terrified wailing.\(^{342}\)

While there may be some value in unveiling the true origin or identity of the *Suicidemouse*, there is also much to be learned by interrogating just what is so hellish about Mickey Mouse’s “descent to hell,” as it has been described by some commentators. By examining this video, and the other exemplars presented in this chapter that engage with the tropes of non-fiction, it becomes clear that the horrific resonance of these videos emerges from the way they are intensely charged with a particular affective force that resides in their unique capacities as unconventional audio-visual horror artefacts that are only tangentially connected to narrative, or divorced from it almost entirely.

\(^{342}\) To view another variation, go to bit.ly/theothersuicidemouse.
Another such video is that known as 11bx1371. Uploaded to Youtube in May 2015, the mysterious and disconcerting short sparked immediate conversation about its origins and meanings, a conversation that was only heightened by the unusual circumstances surrounding it: after it was uploaded it was also posted to a Swedish tech blogger, who published an article about its sinister contents and enigmatic origins. Running just under two minutes, it is a black and white video featuring a caped figure wearing a gas mask that has a distinctly beak-like shape. The video is accompanied by a garbled, swirling cacophony of aural noise. In the video, the Birdman (as he came to be labelled by commentators) stands in front of a window inside what appears to be a dilapidated building. Through jump-cuts and flashes of onscreen numbers and codes, the Birdman appears to be sending a cryptic message. At one point, he holds up his gloved hand and inside his palm a circular object appears to blink out its own message [Figure 18]. The video experiments with unconventional shot duration, intercutting long takes and the Birdman’s static presence with jump cuts, digital noise, glitches and overlays, while an atonal digital growl continues throughout.

Figure 18: 11bx1371’s ‘Birdman’

343 To view, go to bit.ly/11bx1371.
From the moment of the video’s upload, its apocryphal origins have been widely debated online, until recent revelations appeared to unveil it as a deliberately provocative art project by a filmmaker named Parker Wright. Wright had crafted 11bx1371 as an enigma that was no doubt designed to hook the curiosity of the denizens of websites like Reddit – an online space where participants take great pleasure in deconstructing such puzzles and debating the meaning behind the sinister and inscrutable sound and imagery. In the case of 11bx1371, the challenge was quickly accepted and, over the weeks and months that followed its posting, much was uncovered: the location was identified as an abandoned asylum near Otwock in Poland and certain cryptographic codes were found embedded in the image and in the movements of the so-called Birdman.

Perhaps the most breathtaking revelation was what was excavated from the video’s audio files by the process of spectrogrammetry and uploaded to Youtube: in the dissonant noise of the audio track was visual data that had obviously been converted to audio waves [Figure 19].\(^{345}\) This data was far from innocuous. Accompanying the written message, “You are already dead,” were several graphic images of bodies and faces, later revealed to be stills sourced from various existing horror films.\(^{346}\)

---

\(^{344}\) For some discussion of the hunt for the creator of 11bx1371, and a discussion with Parker Wright, see https://www.dailydot.com/debug/11b-x-1371-11b-3-1369-parker-wright/.

\(^{345}\) To view, go to bit.ly/11bx1371spectro; A spectrogram is a visual representation of the spectrum of frequencies of sound.

\(^{346}\) It must be acknowledged here that there is a possibility that this spectrogrammetric analysis is simply another part of the larger ‘myth-building’ that occurs around these types of video; it is not only the authenticity of these videos themselves that is ambiguous, but also the para-factual material that surrounds it.
The web of intrigue and investigation that surrounded 11bx1371, and the revelations it unveiled, are not uncommon for the types of Youtube videos examined in this chapter, which can be labelled “post-cinematic horror shorts.” This terminology is drawing on recent scholarship in the field of new media that has seen the term “post-cinematic” begin to take hold as a way of describing the particular qualities or characteristics of hybrid media artefacts that have metamorphosed from cinematic origins.347 Shane Denson and Julia Leyda identify the following as qualities of the post-cinematic work: they are “digital, interactive, networked, ludic, miniaturized, mobile, social, processual, algorithmic, aggregative, environmental, or convergent, among other things.”348 Each of these qualities would be an adequate adjective to describe the space of the post-cinematic horror short, and Suicidemouse and 11bx1371 as exemplars of this category.

Short horror videos abound on internet video streaming sites. These range from excellent and notable fictional short horror narratives through to videos that are implicitly or explicitly presented as non-fiction.349 This chapter focuses on the latter, for several reasons. These videos are a potent site to examine the shifting experiences of spectatorship, in that they are presented as oppositional artefacts to horror shorts that present themselves as entertainment narratives. These videos instead revel in the uncertainty behind their authenticity and origins, and are diverse and heterogenous in

---

347 See the collection Post-Cinema: Theorising 21st-Century Film, eds. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda.
349 For a Youtube playlist of fictional horror narratives, go to bit.ly/thefearfactory. For an example Youtube playlist of “non-fiction” horror, go to bit.ly/nonfictionhorror.
their foundations, content and locations. They can often be found in curated collections or playlists, with descriptions like “The Most Mysterious Unexplained Videos on Youtube,” or “Top 15 Scariest Youtube Videos.” They range from those that explicitly reference the supernatural or the occult, to those that are oblique and inscrutable in their subject, yet irrefutably horrifying in their affect. These videos generally fall into the following categories: found footage in the cinematic style of *The Blair Witch Project* or *Paranormal Activity* (like that discussed in Chapter One); puzzle videos (such as *11bx1371*, and similar videos such as *Webdriver Torso* and *Unfavourable Semicircle*); lost episodes (such as *Suicidemouse*); re-edits of existing footage; “haunted” forms of existing media; or abstract art projects.\(^350\)

A common question that emerges from examining these videos, in a socio-cultural sense, is their truth value. Bombarded as we are with the ever-rising flood of information in the social media environment, these horror shorts often become lightning rods for debate about the validity of their purported contents. The debate itself is a form of provisional existence: presented in many cases as a documentary record, these short films at least raise the question of the existence of the supernatural they purport to capture, from ghosts, to aliens, to Bigfoot, to the truly indefinable and unexplainable. Similarly, puzzle films like *11bx1371* often provoke a similar pursuit, although in this case it is of the underlying meaning of the video, with competing explanations attempting to codify its purpose: *11bx1371*, for example, was at times labelled a recruitment puzzle, a viral marketing campaign, part of an alternate reality game, an abstract work designed to ‘troll’ (to generate a response), and even the work of a genuinely deranged mind.

The paranormal activity in these videos is often imbricated with the technology of Youtube itself, such as in the example of *Username: 666*, a screen recording in which the repeated attempts to open a Youtube user page specifically named with that staple of occult numeric mysticism leads to the page eventually devolving into grotesque and hellish imagery [Figure 20].\(^351\) Perhaps more frightening than the

---

\(^{350}\) ‘Lost episodes’ is a term used to describe the ‘recovery’ of previously unseen versions of existing properties, often with new supernatural resonance.

\(^{351}\) To view, go to bit.ly/666vid.
images themselves is that they cannot be escaped, with the web page refusing to shutdown, despite the repeated attempts of the operator.

Other examples have integrated existing mythologies of supernatural manifestations with the technological. One such illustration of this is the *Cursed Kleenex Commercial*. Clearly drawing on the folkloric tale of Bloody Mary, in which the apparition of a woman can be summoned by calling her name three times before a mirror, this haunting manifests as a digital distortion that occurs when the video is played at exactly midnight. In the Youtube horror short that captures this manifestation, a user films their computer screen as they watch the video, once at 11:59 p.m. and then immediately after, as their clock ticks over to 0:00. In the second play through, the video and audio begin to disintegrate, black distortion corrupting the image and jump cuts altering the edit. The face and body of the commercial actress become spectral and ghoulish, her eyes reduced to black orbs. The image becomes locked at the final stage, another set of eyes appearing to emerge from the screen to stare back at the viewer, before the recorded Youtube video displays: “An error

---

To view, go to bit.ly/kleenexcursue.

Like Bloody Mary, the haunting is able to be ‘summoned’ through a specific process of actions; the action in this case is playing the video at exactly midnight.
occurred. Please try again later” (a message that does not occur on the first play) [Figure 21]. What is already a peculiar and somewhat disquieting commercial becomes, through this apparent ‘haunting’ and the specificities of its effects on the sound and image, something that affects the viewer in a different way. Disquiet gives way to bodily discomfort. Dread rises to the surface, in much the same way that the corruption appears to emerge from underneath the image and overlay it.

![Cursed Kleenex Commercial Changing At Midnight (WARNING - SCARY!)](image)

**Figure 21: Cursed Kleenex Commercial**

Why does it feel that, for ordinary users, the more contemporary the technology the more vivid the experience of its haunting? For Sconce, the ineffable “presence” that new forms of communications technology appear to have to their earliest operators becomes a potent catalyst for fantastic or supernatural narratives to be constructed around them. In this understanding, Youtube becomes just one station in the long line of our mutual embrace of and superstitious distrust of new technology. Horror scholar Steffan Hantke builds on this understanding, describing how techno-horror performs “the cultural labour of articulating, illustrating and dramatizing [...] anxieties and feeding the larger debate on the uses and benefits of digital technologies.”

---

354 Sconce, *Haunted Media.*  
355 Hantke, ”Network Anxiety,” 19.
Rather than examining in greater detail the way technologies become infused with paranormal presences, it is more productive to turn our attention to how one of the effects of these videos, despite their variations, is to destabilise the viewer’s incredulity, which opens the possibility for a deeper connection to the sound and image. Chapters Two and Three argued that the experience of found footage horror cannot be constrained to “imaginative” spectatorial identification with its participants or narrative. In a similar way, the disparate audio-visual artefacts of non-fiction Youtube horror share common features that question the imposed ‘black and white’ binary of fiction and non-fiction (or the related authenticity values of fake and real), relocating the viewing experience to a more grey-state of uneasy ambiguity. This returns to an examination of what else may constitute Bordwell’s proposed “firewall” between our cognitive processes and the lower-level sensory-affective processes that can overwhelm this intellectual distance from the image.

As previously mentioned, the verisimilitude of the manifestation of the supernatural in media artefacts has often been central to an examination of these artefacts, with proponents arguing that film or audio records are key sources of evidence, while sceptics rightfully question the assumption that a mediated image can offer any guarantee of the authenticity of its source. These questions have been famously explored in public life many times over the last fifty years, with the debate over the Patterson-Gimlin Bigfoot footage and the Loch Ness Monster being two notable examples. Yet with the evolution of digital image technology, the indexical link between image and referent has been further weakened – in a world where each pixel can be manipulated and where entire images can be constructed with no referent in the real world, the veracity of any image can be questioned.

If, however, the authenticity of all digital audio-visual content is always in question, how is it that the short horror videos of Youtube can still be so disturbing? Shouldn’t our contemporary scepticism of the image overpower its capacity to affect us? Certainly, if a modern equivalent to the Patterson-Gimlin footage was released today, much of the analysis would involve parsing its footage for digital manipulation, and the default stance, regardless of how real it appeared, would be that it was a hoax. Yet there are certain aesthetic qualities that many of these videos hold that have the potential to complicate this sceptical response.
The question of how digital media has problematised our understanding of the truth status of the image has been considered by a variety of scholars. Richard Grusin, riffing on Tom Gunning’s scholarship on early cinema, coined the term “cinema of interactions” for how the modern digital media aesthetic encourages viewers to “feel or act as if the inanimate is animate,” despite our understanding that the mediated or programmed image is most definitely “inanimate.” Grusin argues that not only is this change one of aesthetic properties, but also that, from the perspective of how we interact with technologies, we “customarily act in ways that suggest [digital media artefacts] are real.” This, he contends, emerges from the manner in which the cinema is no longer solely the experience of watching a film in a darkened theatre, but a continuum of remediated interactive experiences that extends out onto televisions, computers, smartphones and the web. As presented in Chapter Two, the act of treating media artefacts as ‘real’ has also been examined specifically within horror studies, with some scholars positing that there is a certain level of ‘active fantasy’ in the viewer’s consideration of most horror texts.

Both of these positions, while cogent and well-argued, speak more broadly to the ways in which digital media aesthetics and practices have altered our socio-cultural relationships to the works. What they fail to delve into, however, is the specific qualities of the sound and image that sustain this ‘seeming-real’: intensities whose affective charge offers us a way to understand how these horror shorts can work despite paucity of narrative and limited duration. By repositioning our analysis so that it goes further than just examining these shorts in their socio-cultural context, and instead, examines what else might carry this affective charge, we can extend and develop our understanding of the shifting experience of contemporary spectatorship.

One quality of audio-visual media that has shifted in works such as the exemplars presented here is what Steven Shaviro labels the “post-continuity” aspect of post-cinematic works. Shaviro defines this as a “preoccupation with immediate effects [that] trumps any concern for broader continuity—whether on the immediate shot-by-shot level, or on that of the overall narrative.” Here Shaviro draws attention to how

---

357 Ibid., 3.
the “spatiotemporal matrix” of any audio-visual experience is composed of both narrative and its sensorial and affective dimensions. This is as true of classical cinema as it is of the new media artefacts, but what is different about these short videos is their emphasis on heightening the sensory at the potential cost of narrative cohesion. To borrow Shaviro’s term, the “spatiotemporal matrix” is far more fluid and unfettered by the demands of narrative. Scenes can be composed of indiscernible geography, and the temporal flow can appear to halt, judder, reverse or speed up.

This movement away from a focus on the representational aspects of the horror film or video, towards an understanding that accounts for the experiential depth of an embodied interaction with the sound and image is an essential foundation for this thesis. This conception affords an opportunity to interrogate the capacities of horror across a disparate range of narratives and narrative depths, and to extend beyond the limitations of hermeneutic approaches that may dismiss the relatively abstract content of some of these Youtube horror shorts as meaningless.

Returning to Suicidemouse, this is demonstrated in the manner in which the clip is almost entirely composed of a simplistic animation of Mickey Mouse walking. As the clip continues, it emphasises the elements that obscure the visual content: the images become jittery, blurred, unstable, the image at times seeming to contain a double exposure that is indeterminable. Correspondingly, the audio also becomes almost completely divorced from the images. What begins as an unusual but not anachronous score devolves into an almost suffocating loop of a scream, the effect of which seems to grow rather than dissipate with each loop.

Similarly, 11bx1371 also accentuates aspects that fit the criteria of Shaviro’s “post-continuity” terminology: while there is apparently a coded message, the emphasis of the video is on elements that obscure the message, such as the correspondingly oppressive audio, jittery images, and the relative stasis of the Birdman. The video communicates to us on a visceral level far more than any coded message that can be unpacked from it.

This visceral response arises from the intensified sensory aspects of videos like 11bx1371 and Suicidemouse. This is especially evident in the aural component of

359 Ibid., 6.
videos like these. As previously mentioned, the unveiling of the horror imagery that was encoded inside 11bx1371’s audio track was a dramatic revelation: on one level, purely for the shock that there was a hidden stream of information behind the images. One another level, if we extend this concept in a metaphorical sense, we can ask what else is there that resides ‘unseen’ in these videos that can only be examined by moving away from conceptions that see the affective capacity of these videos residing in their imagery. For, while there is something undeniably eerie and sinister in the corruption of the image, like that demonstrated in the *Cursed Kleenex Commercial*, these videos also contain a decay or contamination of the audio files which has its own macabre resonance. While there is a unifying element to this quality of decay across both the visual and aural components of many of these videos, there is more to be gained in going beyond a focus on the ways in which the aural and visual properties of the videos are analogous. One such vital extended consideration is how the aural components of these post-cinematic horror shorts intensify their affective power through their untethered relationship to the images. This is a return to Chion’s concepts of the “acousmatic” and “acousmêtre,” where sound and vision are strategically detached from each other. In the case of a disembodied voice, such as the scream of *Suicidemouse*, its location out of frame bestows on it an intensification of threat or dread.

To recapitulate, this affective power is constituted by the asubjective, non-conscious, and intensive qualities of experience: what has not been quantified and encapsulated as emotional response, but what is instead present as an excess, an overflow, that which cannot be codified. This distinction is important to consider because it may in part explain the residue of unease that remains after watching these videos, even for sceptical viewers. For, while we can easily articulate and categorise our belief in the image, on a scale from complete disbelief to conviction, and our concomitant emotional response, from boredom to fascination, there is a surplus that remains, and that surplus resides in our bodily response. This surplus also feeds into our sense of realism. To return to the argument of Ndalianis discussed in Chapter Two, the realism of ‘incredible’ horror emerges from sensory rather than intellectual knowledge: this sensory knowledge forges the (often unwilling) link between incredulity and a feeling of authenticity.
The soundscapes of post-cinematic horror

The soundscapes of these works operate differently to classical horror cinema soundscapes, by undermining the primacy of the image and intentionally destabilising our habituated sensory-motor schema – the circuit of perception-affection-action which Deleuze identified as pivotal to the classical Hollywood narrative style. Marshall McLuhan argues that all new inventions and technologies invariably demand “new ratios” among our sense organs. One such altered new sense ratio in post-cinematic works is that of sound to vision. McLuhan goes so far as to argue that new media works promote a sensory shift that is “audiletactile”: because the visual components of new media artefacts are multiplied and fragmented, our sensory response is no longer centred on the eye, and our hearing and sense of touch are heightened.

Considering film images primarily as symbolic visual representations enables a hierarchy of the senses, according to which vision is privileged above all. These works subvert this understanding; the post-cinematic horror short could arguably belong to what Shaviro identifies as the new “economy of the senses” that has arisen from the evolution in technology from analog to digital modes of production. Within the continuum upon which this new economy exists, the role of sound has dramatically shifted – from classical cinema’s subordination of sound to image, we have shifted to a realm where the sonic intensities of post-cinematic works are often intentionally dissonant with the image.

In classical narrative cinema, sound provides what Chion labels “added value” to the image: its purpose is to support the image, so that the sound “naturally’ comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself.” Chion points out that, in this situation, a scene’s meaning is thought to be derived from its imagery, and sound is merely additive. For post-cinematic media, this handling of sound is no longer the default operation. Whereas the operation of sound was once covert, it now can operate overtly. Its dissonance, contradiction or disunity to the image is allowed for in the process Chion describes as synchresis: the immediate establishment of a

---

360 McLuhan, Understanding Media, 66.
361 Ibid., 67.
363 Chion, Audio-Vision, 5.
tight relation of interdependence between images and sounds that occur simultaneously, even when in reality they may have scarcely any relationship.\textsuperscript{364} This new relation can be especially affectively charged when the sounds are what biological scientists label non-linear sounds: sounds that are physiologically extreme, discomforting or jarring, due to our genetically hardwired fear response. The characteristics of these sounds include non-harmonics, irregular volume shifts, static, sudden pitch change, or frequency based effects: all aural qualities that are engaged in a concentrated form in post-cinematic horror shorts.\textsuperscript{365}

The soundscapes of the post-cinematic horror short are notable for how oppressive and inexorable they feel. Anthony Storr contends that sound has a greater capacity than images to elicit physical responses, in that it is far more difficult to dispel sound as easily as the closing of one’s eyes can deny an image.\textsuperscript{366} The sounds in these videos are, however, not the conventional sounds of classical horror narrative, where score is more commonly used to establish slow building tension and ‘stings’ of volume or frequency can be used to produce a physiological shock response. They are not limited by an attempt to be complementary to the image – instead, they are but one element of a heterogenous ensemble. Chion goes so far as to insist that, with the embrace of multilayered audio tracks (or polyphony), “the visual image is just one more layer and not necessarily the primary one.”\textsuperscript{367} He chooses the term “rendering” to describe how, in the complex intertwining of all of the senses in the articulation of a film’s auditory and visual texture, sensations are conveyed that are effective regardless of their fidelity to an actual reproduction of the scene’s reality. For Chion, this explains how the interrelation of sound and image can “give us a vast array of luminous, spatial, thermal and tactile sensations that extend far beyond realist reproduction.”\textsuperscript{368} This understanding offers us a way of accounting for the added sensory dimensions of the sounds in Suicidemouse or 11bx1371, and how these may produce a sense of bodily heaviness, or of suffocation.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{364} Chion, \textit{Film, a Sound Art}, 492.
  \item \textsuperscript{365} Blumstein, Davitian & Kaye, “Do Film Soundtracks Contain Nonlinear Analogues to Influence Emotion?”
  \item \textsuperscript{366} Storr, \textit{Music and the Mind}, 100-101.
  \item \textsuperscript{367} Chion, \textit{Film, a Sound Art}, 119.
  \item \textsuperscript{368} Ibid., 240.
\end{itemize}
Through this analysis, it is evident that post-cinematic horror shorts utilise their specific modalities of delivery and aesthetics to operate very differently to conventional horror narrative. These shorts are more characteristic of the affective web that traverses the process of digital information production, circulation and distribution, in that they both rearticulate the tensions that underscore our complex relationship with technological change and also actively produce dynamic affective responses in the moment of experience. However, in order to further develop our understanding of how the particular aesthetics and modalities of new media can be integrated with a somewhat more conventional horror narrative, it is productive to examine a project which operates in the same terrain of streaming internet video, but in doing so harkens back to the generic codes of found footage horror.

**Always watching: *Marble Hornets* and the evolving screen forms of new media horror**

This chapter began with an experiential description of watching a Youtube video titled *Conversion*. Although it is but one of the 131 videos that comprise the web horror series *Marble Hornets*, the description of this particular video and its spectatorial affect attempts to capture the distinct tenor and atmosphere of the series. Made by a core group of three amateur filmmakers, the *Marble Hornets* videos were sporadically uploaded to a Youtube account of the same name between 2009 and 2014. The series explicitly engaged with the tropes of found footage horror, in that it claimed to be the product of twenty-something Jay’s investigation into his filmmaker friend Alex Kralie’s discarded tapes: an unfinished student film project named *Marble Hornets*. When Alex suddenly and inexplicably ceased working on the project, Jay convinced Alex to allow him to have the tapes, agreeing in return to never mention the tapes again. Subsequently, Alex mysteriously transferred schools and severed contact with Jay. The main gambit of the series is that each video uploaded is a discovery from Jay’s exploration of the archive that may shed light on Alex’s disappearance. Gradually it

---

369 The entire archive is available at: https://www.youtube.com/user/MarbleHornets.
becomes clear that Alex’s filmmaking endeavour is ‘haunted’ by a possibly malevolent entity – an unnaturally tall, thin faceless man in a black suit, who is only ever referred to as The Operator [Figure 22]. Those familiar with horror figures will identify him as a version of The Slender Man, a relatively new mythological figure created by artist Eric Knudsen in 2009. The Slender Man mythology germinated in internet forums but soon took on a life of its own, spreading to short stories, films, and video games. Within Marble Hornets, this enigmatic and frightening figure, in the form of The Operator, first appears only in glimpses but soon begins to have definite and damaging effects on all of those involved in the film.

Figure 22: The Slender Man (or The Operator)

---

370 Knudsen, “Victor Surge, Deviant Art.”
371 The Slender Man mythology was also central to the case of an attempted murder in Waukesha, Wisconsin in 2014, when, in an attempt to prove their worth as proxies to The Slender Man, two 12 year-old girls allegedly enticed a third 12 year-old girl to follow them into the woods and stabbed her multiple times. She has since recovered, and her attackers are awaiting trial.
As the *Marble Hornets* videos were gradually released to Youtube, the creators added an innovative twist to the storytelling, in the form of response videos posted from an enigmatic and unknown second ‘narrator’ called ToTheArk. These occasional reply videos were less interested in unveiling the mystery than in fostering questions that required compulsive further investigation: the video *Conversion*, described in the prologue to this chapter, is a quintessential example. Composed mainly of elaborate visual codes and puzzles, the ToTheArk videos are the most viscerally affective and at times the most terrifying aspect of the series. It comes as no surprise, then, that ToTheArk becomes entwined with the central narrative as not only a commenter but as someone prompting the central characters. For a follower of the series, the interplay between the two sets of videos, and the resulting immersive engagement for those who sought to solve the puzzle, offers a clear demonstration of how new media structures present exciting narrative potential for filmmakers. However, this is but one of the ways in which *Marble Hornets* might be said to alter the dynamics of spectatorship.

Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener contend that “[d]igital cinema... lays out several paths into the future, where films will come in all lengths and genres, are shown on screens of all sizes, are available in all program formats and at a cost that is determined by the value we put on the occasion, not by the price of the product.” Situated in the intersection between digital cinema aesthetics, new media and horror, *Marble Hornets* initiates provocative questions about the post-cinematic experience of spectatorship, particularly regarding the status and cinematic capacities of the ‘third’ and ‘fourth’ screens of media theory, the computer and the smartphone or tablet (positioned historically after the ‘first’ and ‘second’ screens of the cinema and television). In order to examine these questions most effectively, however, it is crucial to consider them through the frame of the horror genre’s inextricable connection to the body of the viewer, as argued in the previous chapters.

The ‘monster’ of *Marble Hornets*, The Operator, is, like many found footage horror ‘monsters,’ captured only in tantalising glimpses. It appears to have no ability to communicate, outside of the interference it causes to video and audio recordings, and

---

372 To view the ToTheArk videos, go to https://www.youtube.com/user/totheark.
373 Elsaesser and Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, 176.
its motivations are largely inscrutable. Its appearance and influence generate an unusual ‘sickness’, the symptoms of which include a hacking cough, recurrent bouts of amnesia, and an escalated level of aggression in those who are exposed to it, but it rarely acts directly against the protagonists. When it does appear, it is often out of focus, obscured behind visual layers, or at the edges of frame [Figures 23 and 24].

Figure 23: The ‘obscured’ Operator of *Marble Hornets* #1

Figure 24: The ‘obscured’ Operator of *Marble Hornets* #2
The Operator is, in a visual sense, largely indecipherable; as we are unable to ever clearly see The Operator, we are unable to understand its motives or its meaning. While this visual impenetrability does fit with Carroll’s contention that horror proceeds from our pursuit of the “unknowable,” it does not explain the deeply felt bodily intensity of experience in the moments that border The Operator’s appearance, and in response to the ToTheArk videos. This suggests that the horror of these short films resides not primarily in The Operator’s presence, but in its combination with the digital aesthetic and the delivery modality of the computer screen or smart phone. This consideration actively questions a hierarchy of perception and cognition that places the semantic content of the image at its centre. Instead, it reframes horror as primarily a sensory-affective experience. It returns to the embodied manner in which we first experience the image as the driver of the viewer/image interface. It is not through an appraisal of the image’s semantic content when viewing new media artefacts such as Marble Hornets and the post-cinematic horror short that affective responses emerge. It is through the process of how these works implicate the body of the spectator in a palpable way.

The embodied experience of new media artefacts

The implication of the body of the viewer is especially true of new media artefacts that are primarily experienced via smartphone, tablet or computer screens, which is how most consumers of Marble Hornets engage with the series. While each of these mediums generates its own relations of embodied experience, there are similarities between the three. Ingrid Richardson draws attention to how these screens produce distinct differences from traditional televisual and cinematic screens, in terms of “proximity, orientation and mobility.” She also contends that these screens draw us into the image, arguing that “we are no longer ‘lean-back’ spectators or observers but ‘lean-forward’ users.” Our interaction with the images on these screens involves physical engagement, whether it be through the tactile manipulation of the smart

374 Richardson, “Faces, Interfaces, Screens,” 8.
375 Ibid., 3.
phone screen or the instrumental use of the mouse or keyboard of the computer. As such, it produces a unique type of engagement. That is not to say that an embodied experience of the cinematic image requires spectatorial movement, but that, in their requisite physical engagement, new media forms produce an altered body-tool relation which has effects on the corporeal schematic that usually dominates the experience of cinema.

Found footage horror, particularly those films viewed on the smartphone or computer screen, capitalises on and distorts this relationship through its presentation of horrific imagery on devices which we are familiar with as recording devices. While conventional films such as \textit{REC} (2007) present a recording of an explicit confrontation with the monster as the site of their horrifying imagery, \textit{Marble Hornets} depicts a rupture of the image itself, which potentially surpasses the power of the unambiguous presence of the monster as a semantic presence. \textit{Marble Hornets} becomes the site of a liminal space for a spectator, in which our conceptions of cinematic reality and unreality are unmoored by the complex relations we have with screens and cameras.

\textbf{The spectatorial body and the camera of Marble Hornets}

The internet – particularly Youtube – is one of the most recent sites to be infiltrated by the spectral stain that arises in all new technologies. \textit{Marble Hornets} capitalises on this in a manner that conventional cinematic found footage horror film cannot. It does so in three specific ways – by exploiting the particular kinaesthetic qualities that advances in digital camera technology allow, by manipulating the sound and image to increase its sensorial properties, and by employing the hypertextual, non-hierarchical nature of new media to alter the spectator’s experience of duration and proximity.

The dynamics of the camera movement in projects like \textit{Marble Hornets} have specific kinaesthetic qualities that are the result of advances in camera technology. \textit{Marble Hornets}, like all found footage, exists only through the pervasive presence of cameras within the diegetic world. Excluding the ToTheArk video responses mentioned earlier, everything we see throughout the series is captured by a camera either carried or mounted to the body of one of the protagonists. One of the biggest innovations of digital cinema is the mobility and economy of camera size, and economy of camera
price, that allows for greater access to recording devices for filmmakers and more
dynamic uses of camera within the construction of the film. Horror is one genre where
filmmakers actively experiment with this new flexibility in order to best intensify the
spectatorial experience: we see this in films such as _Blair Witch_ (2016), the sequel to
_The Blair Witch Project_, in which the protagonists take to wearing portable Bluetooth
earpiece cameras [Figure 25]. The protagonists in this film also utilise a drone camera
to produce inventive cinematic images, such as that which shows the drone’s ascent
away from the group, revealing in a single unedited shot their complete isolation and
the density of the woods surrounding them.

![Figure 25: Bluetooth Earpiece Camera in *Blair Witch*](image)

As paranoia grips the protagonists of _Marble Hornets_, they take to recording
everything. While the use of the handheld camera is not particularly innovative in and
of itself, having origins in the Direct Cinema movement of the late 1950s, the manner
in which _Marble Hornets_ engages with its particular rhythms and movement has
different effects. As previously discussed, the genre of found footage has often played with loss of focus, incongruent framing and camera shake in an effort to conjure verisimilitude that evokes the documentary mode. *Marble Hornets* extends this technique: as the characters become compelled by an obsessive need to record, they begin wearing body-mounted cameras that are positioned at the sternum and record the world from a fish-eye perspective. The particular cadence of movement produced by the bodily-attached camera in *Marble Hornets* has different effects, while promoting the same sense of realism. The qualities of its distorted, wide angle view on the world, and the way its passage through spaces is united with the rhythmic movement of the body of the protagonist is different to the handheld camera: the image seems to more fully unite with the body of the protagonist, moving in conjunction not only with his passage through space, but with his breathing and the dynamics of his movement. For example, his body falling to the ground is not simply represented by the camera being dropped or hitting the ground, as it would in some found footage horror films – the image is presented from the point of view of the body, in all the specificities of its fall. This unity heightens the sensory engagement of the viewer – not just of vision, but of the kinaesthetic qualities that vision is associated with – to the point where the spectator’s body and its position in the world feels disrupted. Powell contends that this increase in sensory participation comes arises from pre-cognitive affect in our mechanisms of perception, arguing that horror’s “undermining of normative perspective” intensifies participation at the sensory level.\(^{376}\) These images, of the body-mounted camera, are not “normative perspectives,” but they too intensify sensory integration between viewer and image.

To clarify, this heightened sensory engagement produced by the body-mounted camera is not akin to a visual identification with the camera as identical to the spectator’s eye, but instead the ability of the image to engage all the senses and stimulate our entire corporeal presence through the particularities of camera movement through environment.

On the contrary, bodily mounted cameras stymie the visual identification with the eye and produce an experience of camera movement that dramatically

\(^{376}\) Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film*, 5.
reconfigures the body-image relationship; in Entry #83, for example, the character Tim is racked with coughing fits that harken the presence of The Operator [Figure: 26]. His inability to stand and his struggle to breathe are visually reproduced by the camera more fully synchronising with the body of the performer, a body that the viewer becomes implicated with as they kinaesthetically synchronise with the movement of the image.

![Figure 26: Camera attached to sternum in Marble Hornets](image)

In *The Address of the Eye*, Sobchack offers perhaps the most comprehensive theorisation for how this synchronisation occurs, positing a reciprocal relationship between the viewer body and a filmic ‘body,’ through an analysis of philosopher Don Ihde’s embodiment relations. Here Sobchack examines how the tools of cinema, camera and projector are intricately connected to the perception of filmmaker and spectator. Utilising the work of Merleau-Ponty, Ihde uses the term “embodiment relations” to label the imbrication of tools into our corporeality, and the way in which the artefacts of the world become part of our bodily experience. In an embodiment

---

377 To view, go to bit.ly/Entry83.
relation, Ihde argues, “I take the technologies into my experiencing in a particular way by way of perceiving through such technologies and through the reflexive transformation of my perceptual and body sense.” This leads to a symbiosis between user and artefact through action. The focus of Ihde’s observations here is primarily the connection between perception and its object in the use of scientific instruments like the microscope or telescope. Sobchack, applying Ihde’s philosophical investigation to cinema, notes a distinct conceptual difference when she writes:

The single technological relations of individual embodied persons to instruments that Ihde describes are necessary but not sufficient to the film experience. They are imbricated in, but cannot, in themselves or in their sum, account for the doubled and inclusive machine-mediation of the film experience, an experience that results in the constitution of a reversibly perceptive and expressive text and in intersubjective communication.

Sobchack further extrapolates the dynamics of relations between spectator-world-filmmaker as produced through the tools of camera and projector in a manner that exceeds the scope of this chapter. However, her investigation of embodiment relations in regards to cinema helps to rethink how our embodiment relations with smartphones or computers can contribute to a dynamic bodily synchronisation with the image, particularly when the series is viewed on a smartphone or computer screen. This occurs primarily due to the fact that many modern users of these technologies have a different experience of these devices than the conventional experience of watching a television or theatrical screen. These devices are not only viewing tools, but are often recording tools, and it is possible that a bleed-through occurs between the various existing relationships a person has with these technologies, and the viewing experience.

Sobchack touches upon how technologies of recording can reproduce the experience of an act of perception, although the “technology” she refers to is camera and projector, when she writes:

---

378 Ihde, Technology and the Lifeworld, 72.
Insofar as it concerns the technology of the cinema, this embodiment relation between perceiver and machine genuinely extends the intentionality of both filmmaker and spectator into the respective worlds that provide each with objects of perception. It is this extension of the incarnate intentionality of the person that results in a sense of *realism* in the cinema…. What is experienced as the sense of realism *in* the phenomenon is genuinely lived *as* the experience of a real or existential act of perception.\(^{380}\)

Sobchack goes on to refer to the camera’s potential for “amplification of perceptual experience,” identifying the camera’s potential to produce an experience of perception of the world that is “unavailable to human vision,” yet one that we still experience similarly to our direct lived-body engagement with phenomena.\(^{381}\) *Marble Hornets* employs this amplification of perceptual experience through its body-mounted cameras: despite our relatively static position as viewers there is a particular quality to the on-screen movement that transfers as a kinaesthetic sense. When this occurs, we move, fall, crouch, hide, run, and struggle to breathe, all without ever leaving our seats. Sobchack refers to this as the spectator’s body “kinetically ‘listening’ to the movement of another,” “another” here referring to the filmic body.\(^ {382}\)

Barker offers another way to appreciate how film images translate to the spectatorial body. Using “gesture” as a term to codify expressive bodily movement that is directed towards the world, she argues that films also contain gestures in the form of cinematic devices or techniques.\(^ {383}\) Employing Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980) as an example, she argues that the “repeated, slow moving surreptitious camera movement… demands a reply of some kind from the attentive spectator’s body. It evokes a corresponding but not predetermined gesture from our bodies.”\(^ {384}\) In a similar manner, *Marble Hornets* has its own set of repeated gestures of camera movement: in the early episodes, the handheld camera and its ability to zoom becomes like a searching eye, seeking clues or details in the image. In the latter

---

\(^{380}\) Ibid., 181.
\(^{381}\) Ibid., 183.
\(^{382}\) Ibid., 186.
\(^{383}\) Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 78.
\(^{384}\) Ibid., 78.
episodes the body mounted camera and its particular rhythms becomes a particular type of passage through the world: apprehensive, paranoid, ever-vigilant.

It is not only the particular type of movement exemplified by the cameras of *Marble Hornets* that produces a specific bodily intensity for the viewer – it is also the qualities of the image itself. Digital cinema presents the horror genre with an extended playground of methods to heighten intensity, especially through digital manipulation of the image. *Marble Hornets* illustrates this in two ways: firstly, through the digital ruptures caused by the presence of The Operator; and secondly, through the form of the ToTheArk videos, which threaten the viewer through their destabilisation of sound and image.

Throughout the series, the majority of the videos recorded by Alex Kralie for his student project and, later, the videos of Jay and Tim’s investigations, contain the trace of some form of digital decay, be it static, loss of tracking, desaturation or hyper-saturation of colour, loss of audio or distortion of audio, or digital bleed-through of the image. The cause of this, within the world of the story, is the presence of The Operator, whose manifestation appears to degrade or warp recordings. As a result, pivotal moments of narrative revelation are often lost or obscured by the degradation of the digital record. Capturing a clear image of The Operator on camera appears impossible and direct confrontations between the characters and The Operator, such as in *Entry #43*, when Alex approaches it in the woods, are lost in a fog of image decay as the image polarises and fades away.\(^{385}\)

Dialogue is also lost in a similar manner, drowned out by bursts of discordant noise or unexplainably muted. In *Entry #83* these tears in the image and audio become literal tears in space and time, as The Operator’s presence appears to produce a temporal and spatial warp that envelopes the fleeing Tim.\(^{386}\)

The contention that certain filmic images destabilise or frustrate the conventional links that hold action and situation together is one that Deleuze first posited in *Cinema 2*. Deleuze contends that a rupture and imagistic shift arose, after World War II, in films such as those made by the Italian neorealist and French New Wave filmmakers. These films emerged as a counter-response to cinema’s general

---

\(^{385}\) To view, go to bit.ly/Entry43.

\(^{386}\) To view, go to bit.ly/Entry83.
movement towards the rigidity of cliché and repetition. Ronald Bogue identifies these clichés in the manner in which Hollywood created “an integrated system of practices [...] that ensures a seamless and continuous presentation of action within a single time and space.” He argues that a “commonsense, rational sensori-motor schema informs the Hollywood system.”

Marble Hornets, as an outlier to the Hollywood system in its independent production and release, is more freely able to transgress the limits of this “rational” system in favour of images and sounds that are counter to or excessive to a “seamless” presentation. As such, it shares qualities with what Deleuze identifies as a mutation that occurred in neo-realist cinema that challenges the chain of situations and actions that continually create the same types of images. Deleuze labels this mutation the “time-image.” The cinema of the time-image, he argues, is more productive of “opsigns” and “sonsigns”: pure optical and audio images that facilitate the potential collapse of the sensory-motor process, in that they interrupt the coherent flow from situation to action or action to situation.

The post-cinematic elements of Marble Hornets videos can also more fully experiment with the elements that Deleuze sees at the heart of the time-image: the dispersive situation, characterised by multiple characters and less defined narrative arcs; the voyage form, where the protagonist’s journey is meandering, somewhat aimless; the production of any-spaces-whatever, which are locations that are not intimately tied to narrative or locations that are undefined; and the capacity for the action to be disengaged from the situation.

While it would be incorrect to equate the post-cinematic horror short with the “time-image” in any wholesale way, Deleuze’s description of the new sensory-motor schema presented by the post-war art cinema can expand our understanding of the how Marble Hornets somewhat indistinct approach to characterisation and narrative has unique effects on the spectator. The characters of Deleuze’s time-image cinema are, like those of Marble Hornets, often trapped in a disjointed or opaque world where their perceptions and actions are no longer in synchronisation. For Deleuze, it is “the purely optical and sound situation which takes the place of the faltering sensory-motor

---

387 Bogue, Deleuze on Cinema, 109.
388 Ibid., 6.
situations” in this kind of cinema, a statement that could also apply to the irruption of the ToTheArk videos.  

In the cinema of the time-image, traditional notions of identification with a character can be inverted, so that the character themselves becomes a kind of viewer of the diegetic world they inhabit. Deleuze describes the situation of this character in this way:

He shifts, runs and becomes animated in vain, the situation he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action. He records rather than reacts. He is prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in action.

This is an apposite description of the constantly recording protagonists of *Marble Hornets*, and provides another way to comprehend the extended duration of some its images, and how this duration is all too often disturbed by dissonant sound and image. Powell finds, in the genre of horror, a natural state for these dissonant experiences of image and sound. The affect of horror, for Powell, can originate in the incongruous colours, distorted sounds and hallucinatory images of the genre. Each of these contributes to an experience of spectatorship as a Deleuzian assemblage between viewer and text, an assemblage that is, in Deleuzian terms, molecular and corporeal. This allows for an experience that can transcend the normative, static structure of the “molar plane” – the register of film that, in Del Río’s interpretation, is analogous to traditional narrative – as opposed to the “molecular plane,” which she argues is home to the affective-performative register of cinema. This affective-performative register, for Del Río, focuses on the way “bodily forces or affects are thoroughly creative and performative in their ceaseless activity of drawing and redrawing connections with each other through a process of self-modification or becoming.”

---

390 Ibid., 3.  
391 Ibid., 3.  
392 Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film*, 11.  
393 Del Río, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*, 16.  
394 Ibid., 3.
The molar plane of horror film corresponds to the reified structures of conventional narrative that promote a film’s purpose as a logical progression of cause and effect leading to a satisfactory narrative conclusion. In brief sketch, the presence of the monster would destabilise the environment of the main characters, a disruption that would be stabilised by the struggle against and eventual destruction of the monster (however, often with the possibility of the monster’s rebirth or resurrection). Each scene in this model performs a vital role in the narrative chain that leads to this conclusion. *Marble Hornets* subverts these conventions through its repeated presentation of actions and situations that frustrate the sensory-motor schema of conventional narrative in favour of the disjointed and uncoordinated (in)actions and situations of the time-image.

**The aesthetics of distortion: Synaesthetic qualities of sound and image**

Beyond simply the frustration of narrative progression or resolution, these digital ruptures produce an intensification of our bodily engagement through synaesthetic means. Synaesthesia is defined as “a neurological phenomenon that occurs when a stimulus in one sense modality immediately evokes a sensation in another sense modality.” Applying this synaesthetic capacity to cinema, Marks claims that vision itself can be tactile, “as though one were touching a film with one's eyes”: she terms this process “haptic visuality.” Marks draws her theoretical frame from art historian Alois Riegl’s interrogation of the hierarchy of perception.

This notion of haptic visuality is central to the claim that images of this kind can exceed the boundaries of Heller-Nicholas’ “active horror fantasy,” which includes a conscious or unconscious denial of the verisimilitude of the image. Vision, particularly in the horror film, can produce an immersion in the filmic space: its atmosphere, its spatial relations, and its texture. Rather than processing a film purely on the level of comprehension of narrative and character, haptic visuality involves a sensorial relationship that brings into play a synaesthetic exchange between light, colour, sound, mood and texture.

---

396 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, xi.
The defining feature of haptic imagery is its reciprocal nature: Marks refers to the “erotic” quality of the “intersubjective relationship” that occurs “between beholder and image” when the viewer “relinquishes her own sense of separateness from the image,” producing an intimate meeting between viewer and work of art that questions any clear delineation between the two. This hapticity is not solely a link between image and body, but also extends to a kind of inhabitation of filmic geography. Giuliana Bruno labels this intersubjective form of space a “geopsychic architexture.”

Entry #40 of *Marble Hornets* serves as a cogent example of this creation of space through images that stimulate our sense of tactility, creating a “geopsychic architexture” of location that is immersive and potent for the viewer. The combination of Jay’s movement through the environment, the aural landscape of the various surfaces underfoot, the hyper-saturated colour and, towards the end of the video, the textural contrast between the organic and the man-made, allows the viewer to inhabit this location in a sensory way. These images are clear examples of Mark’s definition of haptic visuality, where a viewer’s interest is not so much in the textual elements of the image but in the textural. As Marks says, “[h]aptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture.” She argues that these types of images draw on the viewer’s resources of memory and imagination, two capacities that are especially powerful in the realm of horror.

Found footage horror films in particular use an aesthetic of distortion for thematic purposes, drawing on the way haptic imagery “puts the object into question, calling on the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction.” This is most evident in the ToTheArk videos, where the filmmakers have intentionally “corrupted” the images to produce vividly textural and macabre imagery [Figures 27, 28 and 29].

---

398 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 182-183.
400 To view, go to bit.ly/Entry40.
401 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 162.
402 Marks, *Touch*, 16.
Figure 27: Marble Hornets: File #1

Figure 28: Marble Hornets: File #2
The sensory engagement heightened by the visual “tears” in the image, the auditory “tears” that accompany them, and the viewer’s synaesthetic responses to the imagery draws them into a new kind of relationship where control over their experience of the film through mastery of plot and narrative may be disrupted. By dislocating the image from its semantic role, the relationship between film and viewer is disrupted. As these videos reject the patterns of cause-and-effect motivated by narrative demands, they potentially heighten the viewer’s entanglement, and thus arguably their tension and fear. This de-emphasis on the visual component of the videos is a movement away from ocularcentric logic, where an understanding of the image is designed to be clear and unambiguous, to a sensory logic, one that accentuates the other senses in order to generate fear. As a result of this move away from the viewer’s central engagement with the series as one of comprehending the semantics of the image, the image no longer becomes simply an enigma, puzzle, or code that requires solving; the videos are instead ‘opened up’ and are able to generate an affective response regardless of the viewer’s facility to decode them.

The auditory distortions mentioned above are not the only method *Marble Hornets* employs to capitalise on the audio-visual capacities of new media artefacts. A consideration of the interrelation of sound and image requires that we question any
hierarchical arrangement between the two. When Chion contends that “there is no soundtrack,” he is arguing that a film’s images cannot be studied independently of its sound, and vice versa. Like the post-cinematic horror shorts, *Marble Hornets* engages sound as but one element of a heterogeneous ensemble. Returning to Chion’s insistence that polyphony challenges the hierarchy of the visual, it can be argued that an audience’s “rendering” of the scene involves a complex intertwining of each of the senses in the articulation of both film’s auditory and visual texture. Irrespective of their fidelity to a reproduction of the scene’s reality, the sensations produced are congruent to the experience of viewing. The synaesthetic foundations of “haptic visuality” can be expanded to explain how these auditory components intertwine with our other sensory responses. Chion proposes the term, “trans-sensory perceptions,” for perceptions that “belong to no one particular sense but that may travel via one sensory channel or another without their content or their effect being limited to this one sense.” In this understanding, the aural dimensions of these videos are not only heard, but have the capacity to be translated into other sensory dimensions.

As the post-cinematic horror short demonstrates, it is not uncommon in new media for distorted sounds, particularly those that operate at either extreme of high or low frequencies, to work in combination with the image and activate a marked corporeal response. However, while the use of specific sounds or sound frequencies can produce the desired physiological response of shock, such as that of the “sting” scare of conventional horror film, it cannot account for the nuanced multifaceted sensory response that the ToTheArk videos such as *Decay* produce: a low rumble underscores an undulating irruption of inorganic or mechanical noise that “renders” sensations of materiality, heaviness and potential danger in its combination with the image. Returning to Chion’s “trans-sensory perceptions,” this may be due to what he terms the essential trans-sensory dimension: rhythm, within which he includes audio texture and grain. Rhythm is the earliest sensory perception (Chion points to

---

403 Chion, *Film, a Sound Art*, xi.
404 Ibid., 496.
405 To view, go to bit.ly/mhdecay.
406 Chion, *Film, a Sound Art*, 496.
the rhythms experienced by the foetus in utero) and is perceived by each of the sensory channels.

This rhythmic quality is also evident when we look at the videos recorded by the protagonists. One example is Entry #60, where Jay investigates a tunnel under an original Marble Hornets filming location. The claustrophobic crawl space is lit only in glimpses by passing torch light, and the echo of Jay’s breathing and the clatter of his passage constitute much of the sequence. This rhythmic combination is interrupted by Marble Hornets’ version of the ‘sting’ scare: the audio-visual distortion that signals the arrival of The Operator. However, prior to The Operator’s arrival, the soundscape of this sequence is a fitting example of the particular auditory rhythms that are unique to this form of found footage, where diegetic sound is the predominant auditory accompaniment to the image. This auditory texture would, in conventional cinema, most often be added to with either score or effects that would further paint in the soundscape. The unadorned verisimilitude of found footage, with its lack of score or sound effects, is more fully accepted by the viewer, given its fidelity to the large proportion of existing non-fictional streaming video content, and the viewer’s familiarity with this, particularly when viewed on a computer or phone screen.

New modalities, new tensions

Any argument that advocates the equivalence of third and fourth screen media to cinema has in the past been met with resistance and conjecture by many critics. Raymond Bellour contends that “neither television nor computers, not the Internet, mobile phones or a giant personal screen can take the place of cinema.” Hanich argues that the theatrical experience is crucial, in that it “dialogically intertwines” an individual’s immersion with the collective experience, producing a pleasurable fear in the meeting point of individuality and collectivity. It is important to acknowledge that these new experiences do not replace cinema, but instead utilise the respective technologies of the computer and the smartphone to create a unique experience of

---

407 To view, go to bit.ly/Entry60.
409 Hanich, Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers, 248-249.
spectatorship that shares characteristics with traditional horror spectatorship, but has capacities the conventional theatrical experience cannot afford.

The form of the Internet video archive and its potential for user interaction is one capacity that has been skilfully utilised by the Marble Hornets creators. Smartphones and computers, while limited in terms of being experienced by a unified collective in a shared space, open up new methods of communal media experience through online social interactivity. The genetic elements of Marble Hornets were formed in the online community of the Something Awful website, and the interactivity and formation of community of that site carried over in the DNA of the initial Marble Hornets video posts, which led to the creation of new networks in order to speculate on both the meaning and the authenticity of the videos.

The videos themselves also promote greater individual immersion, through the spectator’s control over duration, proximity, and chronology. With its intentionally fractured chronology, Marble Hornets is an apposite example of this interactive potential for re-mix and the concomitant increase in spectatorial immersion. The Marble Hornets wiki promotes several playlists of the series, including “release order,” “a tentative chronology,” and “suggested order” (which places the response videos in context). Each variation of the series not only produces new understandings of the narrative content, but in the dynamics of its grouping, a new affective resonance can form between the videos: for example, the infected imagery of a shadow passing a doorway in the entry, Admission, carries over into Entry #23, where every doorway in the dilapidated house seems to portend doom.

Duration and proximity are also altered through this modality. Sequences can be re-watched on loop, a compulsion that is inevitable when visual clues are hidden in the dense digital textures, and when the presence of The Operator threatens to infect every frame. The many online communities that were drawn into the mystery, much like the characters, encouraged avid viewers of the series to capture and parse still frames, searching for answers. Watching the videos on smartphone or computer screen offers the spectator the opportunity to literally ‘lean in’ to the image, a compulsion that arises for many viewers in the temporal elongation of scenes of dread (the flipside of this lean-in is the discomfort experienced by those for whom the palpability of dread is too extreme, which results in aversion). The opening prologue of
this chapter is intended as a vivid example of how and why this compulsion to lean in is
generated as much by the video’s sensory aspects as its narrative content: watching on
my computer screen, I am not only figuratively drawn into the image but often find
myself drawing closer in physical proximity, the intensified sound and image luring me in.

Each of these observations about *Marble Hornets*’ distinctive properties draws
attention to how, in relation to corporeal engagement, form is as crucial as content.
Adrian Martin argues that the categorical distinction of representational and non-
representational elements in film is false and misleading. He contends that our
spectatorial engagement with “colour, texture, movement, rhythm, melody [and]
camera work” is as important as setting, story, dialogue and plot. He writes:

> There is another register of feeling in our contact with the arts (and especially
> film). It is the moment when, in the imaginary experience of viewing, hearing
> and being absorbed in something that is unfolding, we pass out of ourselves,
> just a precious little bit for a precious little while. We become rivers, pylons,
> doors, tin cans. And we join, also, with the flux of the non-representational: the
> colours, shapes and edits, those gestures of the film itself as a living, breathing,
> pulsating organism.410

This “living, breathing, pulsating organism” can sometimes be horrific. It can
destabilise our comfortable distance from the image and bring us closer than we want
to be. It can both fascinate and repel us, and it can affect us in viscerally intense ways:
in our muscular response, our breathing, at the level of our skin. Heller-Nicholas argues
that some of the power of *Marble Hornets* resides in its “mistrust of language –
paralysed by paranoia, its protagonists are notoriously incapable of discussing even
with each other the terrifying supernatural forces that plague them.”411 This recourse
to something other than language to understand the events of the series is echoed in
the experience of the spectator. With only vague and unsettling hints at the origins of
The Operator and its true connection to the myriad occurrences of the series, the
viewer processes the images of *Marble Hornets* in a different way: at the level of the

410 Martin, “Delirious Enchantment.”
411 Heller-Nicholas, “Gothic Textures In Found Footage Horror Film.”
body, and its powerful and unruly response to the sensory excess of the series and the immersive properties of the modality through which it is delivered. *Marble Hornets* demonstrates how the combination of digital cinema aesthetics and new media structures of content delivery can combine to accentuate the existing powers of the sub-genre of found footage horror. As a series, it pushes back against the homogenising forces of Hollywood horror filmmaking and illustrates the potential of cinema narrative that is unshackled from conventional structure. The modalities of the third and fourth screens offer a fascinating potential for genre filmmakers who wish to challenge these existing paradigms.

*Unfriended*

Found footage, unlike conventional horror, can work just as effectively on alternative screens, such as computer screens or television screens, as it does in the theatrical environment. In fact, examples such as Levan Gabriadze’s *Unfriended* (2014) work more effectively when they share the same delivery modality as their diegetic source: in the case of *Unfriended*, the entire film takes place on a computer screen, as friends involved in a group chat are tormented by a supernatural force that appears to be able to infiltrate their electronic devices. Watching *Unfriended* on a computer screen heightens its effectiveness for a viewer, as the film soon convincingly replaces the screen of the real world with its filmic version.

From its very first moments, *Unfriended* signals that it too is engaging with an aesthetics of distortion, in the corruption of the pre-credits Universal logo, a deformation that occurs on both a visual and aural level. The familiar musical refrain first crackles, and then is further warped by what sounds like an otherworldly chorus of moaning voices, punctuated by a higher-pitched growl. On a visual level, the galactic background echoes fractal art, as the black space is riven with bleeding colours. It is an image that clearly echoes both the ToTheArk videos of *Marble Hornets* and the post-cinematic horror shorts discussed earlier.

The screen fades to black and we are then immediately presented with the film’s central visual conceit: that it takes place (almost entirely) on a computer screen. Unlike the premise of found footage, this is not a recording of a computer screen that
is being later assembled by an unseen hand. Instead, it is offered as a presentation: the live actions of teenager Blaire’s negotiations of the various computer screens that gradually come to be digitally haunted by the ghostly manifestation of her dead friend Laura Barns. We see Laura’s death, by her own hand, in the very first scene of the movie, as a recording that was illicitly uploaded to video website, Liveleak.

![Incoming Skype call in Unfriended](image)

Figure 30: Incoming Skype call in *Unfriended*

The haunting, like many supernatural cinematic narratives, is almost innocuous at its inception. It begins as a Facebook message from the deceased girl, leading Blaire to immediately suspect she is being pranked by one of her friends. The friends, who appear on screen in various configurations via a Skype conference call, are initially unaware of the incipient taunting by the dead girl, but they too are gradually made aware through the presence of an unknown entity in their conference call: an intruder using the Skype account of the deceased Laura Barns, and whose onscreen avatar is that of the blank icon [Figure 30]. Almost playful in its initial manifestations, Laura’s intrusion eventually spills outside of the confines of the screen, as the spirit enacts its vengeance one by one on Blair and her friends for their role in the cyberbullying that led to Laura committing suicide.
The film’s form exists on a spectrum between pleasurable and frustrating, most likely dependent on the viewer’s exposure to the technologies it integrates into its narrative. As a regular user of Skype, chat messaging, and social media, I was drawn into the film early, through the almost rhythmic quality to the way Blair skips between windows and attempts to interrogate the puzzle of Laura’s first cryptic message. The term, ‘Easter Eggs,’ has been coined to describe the way in which postmodern texts ‘hide’ visual clues or insider knowledge in the frame, and part of the appeal of *Unfriended* is also the manner in which the film encourages us to search the various foreground and background screen windows for further clues as to who or what is responsible for the messages. The film also preys in various ways upon our post-modern anxieties about technology being infiltrated or hacked by agents outside of our control: directly, in the appearance of onscreen advertisements that ask explicitly “Who is following me? Find out now!” and indirectly, in the way in which Blair’s computer auto-fills text fields or answers a Skype conference call without her intervention (among many other examples).

“Dude, weird computer shit happens to me all the time,” says Jess later in the film, as the group of friends attempts to uncover the identity of the interloper on their group chat. On one level, *Unfriended*, like the other projects discussed above, is interrogating our unease and anxieties about technology’s relentless progression and our inability to understand both its function and its dysfunction. In this understanding, technohorror works explicitly to exploit the omnipresent potential of the ‘glitch’, by presenting its origins as malevolent and supernatural: faced with an inability to understand the cause or to “debug” it (as Ken tries to do with his software patch), the character’s attempts to escape it are also futile. Every malfunction of the computer is a metaphorical representation of the haunting.

However, like the aforementioned projects in this chapter, there is also a particular affective resonance in the corruption and distortion of the sound and image in *Unfriended* that furthers our imbrication with the work. This distortion manifests visually in the following ways: a ghostly static or ‘haloing’ effect that surrounds the characters; distortion and pixellation of the faces; and frozen frames [Figure 31]. Aurally, it is present through a pervasive background hum that rises and falls, depending on the tension, and a static crackle that indicates the intensity of Laura’s
manifestation (echoing here The Operator’s effects on the sound recording technology of *Marble Hornets*).

![Figure 31: Facial distortion in *Unfriended*](image)

While *Unfriended* works effectively as a theatrical experience, and performed reasonably well at the box office, the full potential of its skilful manipulation and degradation of the sound and image becomes particularly evident when viewing *Unfriended* on a computer or laptop (which for those who have not seen the film is my recommended modality of viewing). On a laptop, the screen of the film becomes the viewer’s screen. Visually, the frame becomes filled with mini-frames, each with their own narrative visual content, a configuration that is more akin to the television or computer screen. The moving cursor becomes a narrator of sorts for the viewer, drawing their attention from frame to frame (although they often escape to its periphery) [Figure 32].

When these frames begin to become ‘infected’ with the haunting, and begin to display the visual traits described above, the viewer’s response while watching on a computer is distinct from the theatrical experience. The ‘infection’ no longer works only as a metaphor, but now carries over to a specific contamination of *their* viewing device, the one resting on their laps or at the edge of their fingers.
Unfriended also employs a visual technique that uniquely capitalises on this specific type of engagement: the frozen frame. Unlike classical Hollywood film, where the frozen frame occurs for the totality of the image and denotes a pause in time, Unfriended’s frames-within-frames allows for one frame to be ‘frozen’ while the others continue to be animated by sound and movement. This frozen image again utilises our familiarity with ‘frozen’ computer windows but to macabre effect: while we wait for the character within the frame to become reanimated, the eerie stillness draws us closer at a phenomenological level. Our intentionality becomes riveted to the one still section of an otherwise still ‘alive’ scene. In a clever moment, Unfriended recognises this and builds on this tension: when the Skype call to Val becomes ‘frozen’ on her alarmed face, Jess attempts to call her to circumvent the supposedly broken connection – only to find that that, in the corner of the image, Val’s ringing cellphone gradually buzzes into frame as it vibrates on the table. This disjunction, between movement and stasis within the one frame, is horrifying.
Unfriended does at times fall victim to recapitulating horror tropes on top of its moments of ingenuity, such as the jump scare when the image becomes unfrozen (for example, Kennington’s death), but for the most part it is formally inventive.\textsuperscript{412}

Millennial media consumers live in a multi-window world. By expanding the frame to include not only the specific aesthetics of the post-cinematic horror shorts discussed at the beginning of this chapter, but their primary location (the computer screen) and its own multi-window properties, Unfriended has expanded its affective capacities.

**On the threshold**

In ‘Sunset with Chainsaw,’ Evan Calder-Williams stakes out the political relevance of reading horror outside of an allegorical interpretation, arguing that such a reading forecloses “more provocative possibilities of interpretation,” particularly around those visual environments that are more “aberrant.”\textsuperscript{413} He argues for resisting the “who-is-threatening-whom mode of reading,” in favour of “letting our eyes be drawn to background patterns and flows, to aberrations of form and intrusive details,” as a means of considering the amorphous and unconstrained qualities of the economic and social order.\textsuperscript{414}

“Aberrations of form” are at the heart of this chapter. By examining the experimentations with form that these new media horror works present, specifically the manner in which they all seem to undermine the primacy of the image, both in its regular operation as part of the sensory-motor schema, and in its supposed hierarchical relationship to sound, we can better understand how their evolution has led to an intensified corporeal response in the viewer. Each of the works described in this chapter is engaging with form in a manner that deprioritises its visual content, emphasising an expanded sensory engagement that is less reliant on semantic decoding.

\textsuperscript{412} The character Kennington’s frozen image is interrupted by a direct cut to his body being physically pummelled by an unseen supernatural attacker, and moments later, the revelation that he is compelled to place his hand into the whirring blades of a blender, leading to his death.

\textsuperscript{413} Calder-Williams, “Sunset with Chainsaw,” 28.

\textsuperscript{414} Ibid., 33.
The renewed emphasis on expanded sensory engagement has been key to understanding how these works provoke such intense bodily reciprocity with sound and image. A new “economy of the senses,” as Shaviro describes it, comes to the fore in these works, producing an engagement with the work that surpasses the relative shortcomings of its horrific contents. The stress is on heightening the sensory aspects: as a result, the cross-modal synaesthetic qualities of experience are more vividly awakened, wherein a sound can transmute an image, rather than simply being an “add-on.” Similarly, the aesthetics of distortion promote a heightening of the haptic dimensions of the sound and image. In horror, this suddenly alien sense of tactility, where we are unfamiliar with it, can be far more frightening than a well-composed “bogeyman.”

Earlier in this chapter, I used the term “liminal state” to describe this spectatorial engagement. Turning to the etymological root of liminal, we find the Latin turn limen, meaning threshold. This is apt, as the experience of these horror works places us on the threshold – between that which we think does not threaten us, when our body tells us otherwise.
CHAPTER FIVE:

The Spectator-Interactor of Virtual Reality Horror

I am sitting before a computer in a darkened room. I pick up the black headset: attached to the computer by a knot of cables, it feels like a stocky version of ski-googles. Inside are two separate glass lenses, one for each eye. I slide the headset over my eyes. Headphones cover my ears. Wearing both, I feel a little like I’ve slipped under the surface of some obsidian lake, into the dark water. I press play.

The darkness dissipates, replaced by a gauze-like film covering the only light source. I hear distant footsteps, but also something much closer. It’s approaching from in front. I hear its heavy breath and instinctively hold my breath.... then the gauze is withdrawn, the blindfold removed. Immediately there is a sense of presence to this world: visually, aurally, bodily.

My first instinct is primal, to observe my surroundings for threat. Freed to look in any direction, I peek over both shoulders, up at the roof, down at the floor. I’m in a dark catacomb-like chamber. Whoever removed my blindfold is now retreating away from me, a shadowy figure. He pauses in the entrance doorway, silhouetted by light, and then closes the door. The experience of these events is unlike watching them occur on a screen – instead, I am in this space, in a moment of encounter.

The sound of slow running water suggests that perhaps I am underground. Suddenly, unintelligible whispers orbit me, voices without a source. I twist and turn, trying to pinpoint their origin. They fade away.

Time stretches as the water continues its gurgle. The stasis is broken by flashing fluorescents, illuminating the room in blasts of white. I can now see that I am in the centre of what appears to be a circular room, with four arched doorways leading to a larger surrounding chamber. My reconnaissance is interrupted by what the strobing light suddenly reveals – a woman, in the chamber with me, facing the wall.

As the light flickers and strobes, she disappears – and reappears fractions of a second later, closer now, facing me. Approaching, and then retreating. She lurches and
trembles. The light continues to obfuscate her movements. The whispers return, ominous and threatening. The light goes out....

When it returns, they are screaming at me – not just one woman, but three, madly shrieking. And then, just as suddenly, they are gone again, obscured by darkness. In the eerie gloom another figure appears now, more nightmarish in its abstraction. It appears to be a child, with the head of a pig, holding a dead fox. He is looking directly at me. Again, darkness conceals his departure.

My angst and growing bodily discomfort are prolonged by seconds of darkness and then, slowly, the light in the surrounding alcoves returns. More footsteps. Accompanied by a pulsing score, a man in a dark suit enters the room. The most disturbing thing is his movement: languorous and somehow dreamlike. I can see that he is shadowed by another version of himself, his movements echoed by this ghostly halo. He too is able to instantaneously shift his position in the room. He dances, dances, and then reaches out toward me, hands reaching for my eyes.

Another cut to black. When the strobe-like lighting returns, both the man and the woman are sitting beside me: the man to my left, the woman to my right, each staring at me with blank indifference [Figure 33]. There is a slightly maniacal chuckle, and then a child’s voice says: “She’s coming.” The others remain mute. The light continues to strobe, as I relentlessly scan for the promised arrival.
A screeching metallic door directs my attention to the end of the room. From the silhouette, I can determine it is someone wearing a dress. She enters the room, letting the door thud closed behind her [Figure 34]. The presence of the visitor has also captured the attention of the others. In glimpses it appears to me to be a little girl, but then, fractions of a second later, a woman. The sporadic illumination refuses any attempts to resolutely classify her. She begins to walk slowly towards me.

Figure 34: The little girl in 11:57

Accompanied by a shrill scream, she abruptly rushes forward, and now finally I can see her features, although I wish I couldn’t – pallid face, white hair, black cavities for eyes, a yawning black mouth, and a blood-spattered white gown. She strikes and I tip over, falling horizontally to the ground. It’s an eerie sensation, a type of kinaesthetic reaction where my real-world senses are incongruent with my visual processes and my appraisal of danger. Still sitting in my chair in the real world, I feel, just for a moment, like I have fallen, and my body tenses for the expected impact with the floor.

Now lying on my side in the virtual world, I can still tilt my head, and out of the corner of my eye I can see the woman slink away into the darkened alcoves surrounding this chamber. A strobe light continues to flash. The pulsing score returns, as the end credits appear before me. Yet even with the intrusion of non-diegetic credits, the music harkens me to continue looking, to continue to be on guard.
Rightfully so – if I hadn’t continued scanning the room, I wouldn’t have seen her return, moments later, from behind [Figure 35]. The white-faced woman approaches, crouches down, and stretches her pale fingers towards my face...

Figure 35: The woman returns in 11:57

The meeting place of virtual reality and horror cinema

The sequence described above is an experience of the short film 11:57, a pioneering cinematic virtual reality horror project from the Sid Lee Collective. Although only four and a half minutes in length, it demonstrates some of the embryonic strengths and the possible pitfalls of the synthesis of cinema and virtual reality. The previous chapters have focused on how the reduced presence of on-screen bodies in certain horror texts does not necessarily negate the generation of affect, and can in turn lead to the employment of textual strategies that amplify the affective possibilities of the genre.

Virtual reality cinema works somewhat differently to these texts: by its general visual negation of the actual spectatorial body, which is instead replaced with a virtual bodily presence that is also experienced in an intensified manner.

Horror as a genre is the prevailing location of much of the contemporary experimentation in merging cinematic storytelling with this new technology, perhaps due to how its explicit sensory engagement and immediately immersive quality allow a circumvention of the conventional hierarchical importance of narrative. In many of
these short projects, the filmmakers forgo narrative depth in favour of intensity of immersion and affect. However, this approach may be problematic for the long-term future of virtual reality cinema, as will be discussed. This chapter will also focus on the following questions: what are the potential ramifications to the experience of horror spectatorship in the burgeoning world of VR filmmaking; does VR as an environment open up new capacities for cinematic storytelling; if so, how do these new capacities alter our understandings of our embodied relationship to sound and image?; what are the implications of the new cinematic space constructed in VR for cinematic experience, both positive and negative? These questions will be examined through an analysis of the short 360-degree video VR films, 11:57, The Black Mass Experience, Catatonic, and Escape The Living Dead. It should also be acknowledged that the technologies discussed in this chapter are in flux, with rapid developments occurring across a variety of related fields, including haptics, volumetric capture, artificial intelligence and hyper-narratives. This chapter is in some ways a speculative consideration of where the art-form may go, as well as an analysis of how early virtual reality filmmakers are attempting to formulate a new cinematic grammar.

The integration of virtual reality and cinema has been the elusive dream for cinephiles and technophiles since the first wave of virtual reality in the early 1990s. It is, however, only recently that the technology for both production and reception of virtual reality has developed to the point where this integration has been achieved, and many independent content developers have begun to experiment specifically with virtual reality filmmaking. On a larger scale, while they have yet to produce significant content, companies such as Disney and filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg are already staking bold financial investments in the continued development of these tools for filmmakers. As early as 2002, Jeffrey Shaw argued that “the hegemony of Hollywood’s movie-making modalities is increasingly being challenged by the radical new potentialities of the digital media technologies.” He then located these challenges in video games, location-based entertainment, and contemporary new media art. These challenges have now evolved into the fuller explorations into virtual reality filmmaking that several large Hollywood studios are currently undertaking.

415 Shaw and Weibel, Future Cinema, 19.
Experimentation in the field continues at a rapid pace, with Disney and Lucasfilm currently developing multiple virtual reality projects set in the *Star Wars* universe. There has also been speculation that Steven Spielberg is making a project solely for VR, with hints that this may tie in with his adaptation of *Ready Player One*, an upcoming sci-fi project in which much of the narrative occurs in a VR world called Oasis.\(^{416}\)

The technological advances that have hastened this development are intimately tied to enhancements in the quality of the verisimilitude in the VR experience. They include an improved graphics frame rate, increased capacity for bodily tracking, reduction in movement latency, accommodation of sensory modalities such as touch (haptics integrated into gloves and controllers, for example), improvement in the quality of the images (in terms of brightness, colour, contrast and resolution), enlarged field of view and visual fidelity of the rendered scene.\(^{417}\)

The immersive properties of the current wave of virtual reality technology are second to none. High-end headsets such as the Oculus Rift and HTC Vive allow for what is known as 6DoF [Figure 36] – six degrees of freedom of movement in a three-dimensional space (although even the limited properties of a viewer such as the Google Cardboard, which utilises a mobile phone as a VR screen, and works only in three degrees of freedom of movement, can have dramatic effects for a first-time viewer of virtual reality).

![Figure 36: Six Degrees of Freedom of Movement](image)

---

\(^{416}\) Roettgers, “HTC Wants to Use Steven Spielberg’s ‘Ready Player One’ to Sell Virtual Reality to the Masses.”

\(^{417}\) Slater, “Place Illusion and Plausibility Can Lead to Realistic Behaviour in Immersive Virtual Environments,” 2.
Sabine Himmelsbach wrote in 2002:

> Virtual reality seeks to create a synthesis of observer and computer-generated visual environment, converting data into sense experience. The distance between visual space and observer is abolished. The latter is now literally in the picture.\(^{418}\)

This observation still holds true for virtual reality cinema. There are, however, two distinct types of experience within this domain, which are predominantly separated by the degree of movement offered. The first is generally labelled 360-degree video. This is video filmed by a 360-degree camera with “ambisonic” sound recording (a technique that uses a spherical microphone to capture the same range of sound), where the viewer is placed in the position of this camera in the environment it has recorded [Figure 37]. In this configuration, there is no facility for 6DoF.

![Figure 37: Jaunt’s high-end 360-degree camera](image)

The second type of production is what is commonly known as “room-scale” design, which is a paradigm for VR which allows the users to freely move through a limited space, with their real-life motion reflected in the VR environment. Although the term refers to “room-scale,” these spaces vary in dimension. Cinema in this environment requires direct integration with game engines, which facilitate the 6DoF movement

within the filmic world. These projects often integrate 360-degree video with other cinematic elements, such as computer-generated imagery (CGI), and often involve interactive elements. An apt example here is VR Noir, a VR project produced by the Australian Film Television and Radio School in 2016. [Figure 38]. It features acting sequences that were shot on a stereoscopic camera rig (to create the illusion of depth) that have been integrated into a six-dimensional CGI environment. The focus of the first part of this chapter is primarily 360-degree video; however, the chapter will explore how room-scale productions address some of the limitations of the 360-degree video, particularly in relation to horror projects.

One common aspect within the limited albeit varied field of 360-degree VR films currently available, even in those that poorly utilise the mode, is the remarkable potential presented by a somewhat ‘frameless’ experience of a filmic world, and the enhanced corporeality this experience brings to the fore. ‘Frameless’ here refers to the perceptual freedom given to the virtual reality spectator: in the diegetic world of virtual reality, the spectator is free to direct his or her own attention at any time to any point in the entire range of vision. For the genre of horror, this freedom has tremendous significance, as it intensifies the push-pull imperative of the desire to look versus the trepidation about doing so, discussed earlier in this thesis. To recapitulate, in conventional horror cinema the composition of the frame is a delimiting device,
used to elicit our attention to both what is shown and what threatens to be shown. Through the judicious manipulation of on-screen and off-screen content, filmmakers can create and amplify various forms of cinematic fear. Virtual reality, on the other hand, induces a mode of image perception that is essentially a brain-body simulation of the perceptual choices of the viewer: the vision supplied to us through the binocularity of the headset mimics the manner in which perception works in the world outside of VR. For a filmmaker, this produces a filmic world that is, in essence, ‘frameless’: now that the viewer can look anywhere when confronted with a horrifying situation, the question becomes *where do they look?* Not surprisingly, this newfound freedom can conflict with the requirements of a rigidly constructed narrative, which is dependent on directing the spectator’s attention. Therefore it requires VR filmmakers to rethink one dominant paradigm of constructing the cinematic image: harnessing spectatorial gaze.

Instead of the process of manipulating the spectator’s attention to certain aspects of the frame, or the imposed dialectics of the linking of images via the process of montage, virtual reality activates our bodies as spectators in a new and revolutionary way, due to the unique interface of our bodies with this type of digital image. As much as it shares the ethic of astonishment with Tom Gunning’s “cinema of attractions,” VR transforms this astonishment into a recalibration of our bodily experience as viewers.⁴¹⁹ This bodily experience is radically different to conventional cinema, in that it foregrounds our bodily presence and impels us to ‘interact’ with the image, through bodily movement.

The genre of horror is a fertile field for the study of this recalibration, because, as previously established in this thesis, horror film’s various affects are catalysed in the fluid, dynamic relationship between our bodies, the image and our viewing environment. This interchange is prompted not only in the reception of a cinematic story, but in how cinema, in the words of Rutherford, mobilises “the corporeality, the embodied responsiveness of the spectator.”⁴²⁰ Examining the viewer’s skin in a metaphoric sense, Rutherford delineates the boundary between spectator and image

---

⁴¹⁹ Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment.”
⁴²⁰ Rutherford, “Cinema and Embodied Affect.”
as akin to a “permeable membrane.” Virtual reality accentuates the permeability of this membrane, eliciting a heightened form of embodied experience. Jessica Brillhart, Google’s chief virtual reality filmmaker, cites Dziga Vertov’s 1929 description of the cinema’s “fresh perception” of the world: “I’m an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility.” Brillhart takes issue with Vertov’s assertion of disembodiment resulting from a melding of viewer and camera. In her speculative article on the future of VR, she states that “VR isn’t a disembodied medium at all. It’s quite the opposite, because its whole end-goal is embodiment.” Brillhart links this to how VR emphasises the intersubjectivity of the viewer’s experience of the VR world, as opposed to the reception of a pre-established narrative. In Brillhart’s opinion, VR filmmakers should be less interested in compelling the viewer to follow a sequential and linear narrative and more interested in creating cinematic moments that can be more freely inhabited by the viewer.

As this thesis contends, horror in conventional cinema also intensifies these bodily dimensions of spectatorship, albeit in a different way. Hanich proposes that the bodily response is foregrounded in horror in order to counter the “disembodiment and acceleration” that modernity has wrought. For Hanich, the pursuit of a “deep” experience, of both time and of our lived body in time and space, can be effectively met by the manner in which horror film generates a specific phenomenological spatiality and temporality of the lived body. This is also evident in the experience of cinematic virtual reality horror.

Hanich’s work on the paradoxical pleasure of horror and its ability to alter our experience of space and time, discussed in Chapter Two, presents a theoretical frame to examine how both horror cinema and virtual reality may best integrate their respective technologies. According to Hanich’s paradigm, the intensification of bodily experience is intimately connected with the way horror film reconfigures

---

423 Brillhart, “These Uncomfortably Exciting Times.”
conventional everyday experience of time and space to one that expands or contracts these respective elements.

**Virtual reality and presence**

The articulation of a unique spatiality and temporality of the lived body is evident in the experience of virtual reality horror. The emphasis on corporeal interaction within the technology places the embodied viewer as the locus of the experience, open to a wide array of sensory influences. These sensory influences can be visual (what the spectator sees), aural (what is heard), haptic (sense of touch, temperature or pressure), proprioceptive (to do with the body’s configuration in space) or vestibular (orientation, balance and movement). That these influences produce a corporeal response, despite their virtuality, is due to the body and brain’s partial inability to distinguish many of these sensory engagements from their real-world counterparts. While the body of the VR participant is rarely reproduced as a visual avatar within VR cinema, the indissoluble connection between movement and perception elicits both a conscious and unconscious awareness of the viewer’s bodily presence within the virtual space. Even in the absence of a virtual body within the virtual environment, there is a bodily sense of ‘being in’ the virtual environment, rather than where the participant’s body is actually located. Theorists use the term “presence” to describe this sense of being there.

Mel Slater offers one conceptual account for how this occurs, in his examination of this foundational presence. While Slater draws attention to how “sensorimotor contingencies that approximate those of physical reality can give rise to the illusion that you are located inside the rendered virtual environment,” he distinguishes presence, the “qualia of having a sensation of being in a real place,” into two distinct concepts: place illusion and plausibility illusion.

This conception separates “the strong illusion of being in a place in spite of the sure knowledge that you are not there” (place illusion) from “the illusion that what is

---

425 Slater and Wilbur, “A Framework for Immersive Virtual Environments.”
427 Slater, “Place Illusion and Plausibility Can Lead to Realistic Behaviour in Immersive Virtual Environments,” 1.
apparently happening is really happening” (plausibility illusion). This spectrum of illusion contributes to the sense of immersion. For Slater, “the body is a focal point where [place illusion] and [plausibility illusion] are fused.” However, for Slater, the fullest extent of this fusion requires synchrony between a virtual body and the real-world body: that a visual avatar in the virtual environment can fully replicate the body of the actual participant.

Kent Bye builds on Slater’s concepts with his “elemental theory of presence.” Bye offers four types of presence that contribute to plausibility (and thus immersion): active presence, which is the creation of immersion through the use of handheld tools or devices in the VR experience; emotional presence, which occurs through the evocation of an emotional response; social presence, which is the active engagement with others in the VR space; and embodied presence, which is, for Bye, an acknowledgment of the existence of the real body within the VR space. Bye argues that, by reducing one or more of these presences, the others are amplified, and that because 360-degree video reduces active and embodied presence, it strengthens the emotional and social presences.

Both Slater’s and Bye’s concepts presented above are somewhat reliant on intensified embodiment as a result of a visual correspondence between the virtual body and the real body: that the body presented in the virtual environment matches the body outside of it. However, this understanding does not correlate with my experience of cinematic virtual reality; regardless of the presence of a virtual avatar, my bodily response is intensely attuned to the virtual environment of these cinematic experiences. The general ‘presence’ of the experience is sufficiently strong despite the lack of a virtual bodily avatar. While the presences that Bye argues for do have effects in intensifying immersion, to predicate the intensity of embodied presence on the presence of the body of a virtual avatar seems to echo the earlier understandings of cinematic affect that focus on the bodily presence of the protagonist, such as those presented by Reyes.

---

428 Ibid., 5-9.
429 Ibid., 10.
430 Ibid., 10.
432 Ibid.
A deeper consideration of the experience of virtual reality cinema and its specific production of affect yields understandings that develop the broader arc of this thesis: that spectatorship occurs at the nexus of body, thought and image. Virtual reality cinema highlights the limitations in placing an emphasis on narrative progression as the primary driver for our interface with the image. The limitations of narrative in these projects, due to the exigencies of their production and the constraints of their short durations, reveal that it is not so much control of spectatorial attention that allows for virtual reality cinema’s transformative dimension: it is its corporeal-affective dimensions. In its dépaysement of perception, cinematic virtual reality paradoxically implicates the body of the spectator more fully than previous imaging technologies. It affectively charges the (unseen) body. This is not to say that conventional cinema does not carry its own affective charge, but what is vitally different is that VR cannot use the same techniques of narrative or identification to forge affective bonds with the viewer in the way Plantinga presents, which raises questions regarding how necessary these are to the production of affect. In the place of these techniques of narrative and identification, VR cinema instead seems to revel in the bodily surplus that emerges from this nexus of body, thought and image.

The horror short films of early cinematic virtual reality are a particularly productive site for the examination of this process, because they highlight the narrative limitations of the mode. Like many of the texts examined in the previous chapters, these virtual reality horror films also place great emphasis on what is not seen, on the potential for the monster to appear. They also heighten the non-visual sensory qualities of the experience to produce the kind of intensified interaction between spectatorial body and image argued for in previous chapters. This concept would seem to run counter to the ocularcentric nature of a head-mounted display that replicates vision, with its implication that the spectatorial body is somehow excluded or forgotten when we take away the actual presence of the body that occurs in real-world visual perception. However, it is precisely this disjunction which highlights virtual reality’s action on the body. Far from media becoming simply “eye-wash,” as

---

Dépaysement, a French term to describe “the feeling that comes from not being in one’s home country,” used here to refer to a form of disorientation.
posthumanist theorists such as Friedrich Kittler suggest, all of the senses in virtual reality are activated in concert, bringing the spectatorial body to the fore.\footnote{Kittler, \textit{Gramophone, Film, Typewriter}, 1-2.}

Analysing various works of virtual reality horror cinema allows us to further unpack the fallacy that vision is virtual reality’s primary sensory mode. This move continues to develop an understanding of why it is not so much that which is seen (the ghoulish woman of \textit{11:57}, for example), but the viewer’s entire embodied experience of the image that carries its power.

**Virtual reality and Cinema: Strange bedfellows?**

If cinema is said to have a spectrum that ranges from Lumiè\`ere’s first celluloid images to the optical-digital hybrid of the contemporary Hollywood high concept-film (such as Ang Lee’s \textit{Billy Lynn’s Long Half-Time Walk}) to the completely digital worlds of modern animation or animation/live-action hybrids (such as Robert Zemeckis’ \textit{The Polar Express}), then it is arguable that cinematic virtual reality is a new divergent branch that, while not necessarily part of this continued evolution, perhaps harkens back to the early magnetism of the turn of the century novelty that Tom Gunning terms “the cinema of attractions.”\footnote{Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment,” 121.} Traced to the period between 1895 and 1904, this cinema capitalised on what Gunning called “an aesthetic of astonishment”: its ethic was direct and exhibitionist, the pleasure it produced for audiences often deriving from “the energy released by the play between the shock caused by (an) illusion of danger and delight in its pure illusion.”\footnote{Ibid., 129.} Gunning argues that, while they were not aware of how the illusions of cinema were created, the audiences of this period were more sophisticated than some conventional claims, and took great pleasure in both the illusion itself and the knowledge that it was manufactured. Virtual reality also seems drawn to this combination of illusory danger and delight, with many early projects centred around simulations of situations or experiences that are unattainable to most: for example, climbing Mount Everest, flying in a wingsuit, or rock climbing in Yellowstone National Park.\footnote{In the VR experiences \textit{Everest VR}, \textit{The Drop}, and \textit{Yellowstone VR}.}
The early iteration of cinema that Gunning details was far less subject to the demands of narrative that would later hold sway over the medium, much like the simulations described above and the more narratively complex horror shorts discussed in this chapter. Gunning draws a comparison between early cinema and trompe l’oeil, the art technique of “aesthetic illusion”: for many of its exemplars the raison d’être of trompe l’oeil was the simple capacity to confound or amaze, using optical tricks that exceeded reason.\footnote{Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment,” 117.} Martin Battersby argues that one of the aims of trompe l’oeil is the emergence of “a feeling of disgust in the mind of the beholder,” arising from “a conflict of messages” about the realism of the image.\footnote{Battersby, \textit{Trompe L’oeil}, 19, cited in Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment,” 117.} The initial cinematic virtual reality horror shorts, such as \textit{11:57}, appear to be driven by a very similar imperative, as they wrestle with how to best utilise the medium: the pursuit of plausibility, as Slater labels it. Many of these early films appear to be focused primarily on the verisimilitude of the virtual world, where the principal engagement is crafted around making the virtual world as real as possible, with the implicit understanding that if the situation is horrific enough, its production of “place illusion” will be spectacle enough to thrill the spectator.

Bruce Isaacs argues that the move towards new variations of spectacle are pivotal to cinema’s future relevance, stating that, “[i]f cinema is to maintain its life for the foreseeable future, if it is to invigorate an image of the world growing ever distant from the celluloid century of the medium, the image must continue to manifest as astonishment, as novelty object.”\footnote{Isaacs, \textit{The Orientation of Future Cinema}, 5.} The meeting point of cinema and virtual reality is one such instance of a “novelty object,” one that may perhaps develop into an art form of its own. But is the spectacle of this new form sufficient to sustain it beyond the foreseeable future? Does cinematic virtual reality require something more in order for it to flourish as an art form?

Although published more than fifty years before the emergence of VR, Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” offers insight into the capacities of virtual reality as an artform, particularly when framed by the understanding of Mark Hansen, who argues that the “aura” that Benjamin attributed...
to a singular, unique piece of art now “belongs indelibly to [the] singular actualisation of data in embodied experience.” For Hansen, an auratic presence emerges from how the body acts as sole creator and “en-framer” of the image, and it is this process itself that validates the aesthetic value of art forms like virtual reality. Hansen’s position supports the argument that the intersection of cinema and virtual reality requires that we consider each medium not as a fundamentally different form that requires interweaving, but as a unique and particularly potent form of its own that activates a singular embodied event each time it is experienced.

The two distinct components of the term ‘cinematic virtual reality,’ cinema and virtual reality, have been synthesised by these early projects in a variety of ways. Given the ongoing process of experimentation in the field, it is unclear exactly which elements of the ‘cinematic’ will be appropriated and which will be left behind, although there are some early indications. Examining the sparse but fascinating world of the early virtual reality filmmakers who are pioneering this new form offers some tentative answers to these questions. To begin with, the majority of 360-degree video projects are relatively simple at the level of narrative. They are primarily constituted as a record of an environment or consecutive environments in three hundred and sixty degrees, in which the spectator as percipient takes the place of the camera. The camera, when moving, is often diegetically motivated (for example, in Escape The Living Dead, the camera/protagonist is fleeing a zombie invasion on the back of a moving utility). The spectator is generally expected to remain seated or standing in a relatively static position, although they can turn their head to look in any direction. Predominantly, the spectator is addressed as though they were a participant in the diegetic world. These current films also have a limited duration (generally 5-10 minutes), although there are some projects currently in production that are experimenting with longer durations, including those that are feature length.

11:57 is an apposite example of the restricted mobility brought about by the technical limitations of some of the early ‘live action’ 360-degree video projects, as it places the viewer immobilised in a chair in the centre of the experiential world. This is primarily due to the fact that the camera is static, recording from a single locked

---

441 Hansen, New Philosophy for New Media, 3.
position in a three hundred and sixty-degree radius. While experiencing 11:57, viewers are afforded the capacity to look away from where the action takes place, although auditory cues continually position the various interlopers and their actions to within a roughly one hundred and thirty-degree arc from centre facing forward. The spectator is addressed by the diegetic characters as though they are a participant in the diegetic world: the man and woman sitting beside the spectator look at her when they speak, as do the various silent interlopers who enter the room.

*Catatonic*, another short VR 360-degree video, also works to this template, placing the shackled spectator in a wheelchair as s/he is taken through a sinister psychiatric ward [Figure 39]. The narrative is comparatively simple: the spectator is taunted by the ghoulish residents and the clearly insane doctor-in-charge, and then is killed by a medication overdose delivered by the doctor. In *Catatonic*, the viewer is free to examine the rooms they pass through, but has no control over their passage through the hospital or its duration. What makes *Catatonic* relatively unique, however, is its use of jump-cut editing within its various scenes; breaking with the convention that the spectator’s experience is of a unified and coherent segment of time, *Catatonic* splices together disparate moments in the same location to unnerve the viewer and engage the startle effect of cinematic shock.

Figure 39: *Catatonic* VR
*Escape The Living Dead* follows many of the same formal rules as the works described above: in the beginning of this film, the spectator is situated on the back of a moving utility that is driving away from a horde of suburban zombies [Figure 40]. Again the spectator is free to look in any direction, but the position they view this scene from is locked to a singular location on the back of the truck; nevertheless, the movement of the truck through the scene turns this static position into a mobile passage through the VR environment. The narrative is more complex, as the story sees the spectator’s filmic avatar bitten by a zombie, at which point the scene changes and the viewer becomes a roaming member of the zombie horde. As with the other exemplars above, the diegetic characters address the spectator as though s/he is a participant in the world of the film (even when they become a zombie). The major formal exception to the other two projects in *Escape The Living Dead* is that it offers a “god’s eye” view of the climactic scene: an explosion that is detonated to wipe out the zombie horde that the viewer is now a member of.

![Figure 40: Escape The Living Dead (Jaunt)](image)

This brief cataloguing of common elements allows us to see that the filmic grammar of these 360-degree videos is, at the current moment, rather elementary. Outside of the genre of horror, certain documentary VR filmmakers working in 360-degree video have
pushed back at these formal choices, by employing many varied scenes and locations, transitions, unmotivated movement through the scene (such as drone footage) and a choice to not directly address the spectator, but these elements are exceptions and not the rule.¹⁴⁴²

Filmmakers working with “room-scale” or interactive productions also appear less beholden to these formal choices. A problematic common choice in the formal aspects of these videos is an implied equivalence between the VR spectator and the camera in the diegetic world. In making this choice, these films are constrained to narratives where the viewer is forced to be a participant, but one who is largely passive, apart from the capacity to choose where to look. This creative choice has been challenged in 360-degree video projects, such as Jaunt’s The Game, where a woman’s abduction and subsequent captivity by sinister forces is shown from a variety of objective camera positions; no effort is made to construct a connection between the camera and a subjective position in the diegetic world. However, the issue with the way The Game utilises this technique is that the camera placement appears to be simply replicating how this short film would be filmed conventionally, and there is little benefit to the capacity for 360-degree vision.

Another key common factor is that the examples above are still, like much of conventional cinema, materially shot and created in the lens-based real world. This is another vital element to consider in terms of virtual reality’s position in the spectrum that is cinema. Rodowick offers a deliberate and thoughtful examination of the dynamic relation between digital images and the history of film forms, in which he argues that “periods of intense technological change” allow us to ask the touchstone question of film studies, that raised specifically in the title of André Bazin’s seminal work: “‘What is Cinema?’”¹⁴⁴³ While Bazin answered this question by focusing on film’s ability to capture the materiality of objects in duration, to “embalm time,” Rodowick instead interrogates the expanded capabilities of the digital image, and asserts that “an idea of cinema persists or subsists within the new media, rather than the latter

¹⁴⁴² For example, the work of VR filmmaker Chris Milk. Milk uses sequences in which no-one addresses the presence of the spectator, includes conventional transitions such as fade-outs, and works with a moving camera that is not diegetically motivated (see Clouds Over Sidra, Evolution of Verse and Walking New York).

¹⁴⁴³ Rodowick, The Virtual Life of Film, 9.
supplanting the former as is typically the case in a phase of technological transition."\textsuperscript{444} It is evident that this idea of cinema manifests in virtual reality’s adoption of some of the principal cultural and aesthetic models for engaging the vision and imagination of viewers: for example, basic narrative components, such as character psychology and narrative causality, temporal linearity, and realism. All of these elements, while taking place in the open realm of the virtual world, work in a similar way to how they work in conventional cinema, as devices designed to corral a viewer’s attention.

Lev Manovich goes beyond Rodowick, positing that cinema’s cultural resonance is vital to how new media artefacts are shaped and delivered. He argues:

\begin{quote}
A hundred years after cinema’s birth, cinematic ways of seeing the world, of structuring time, of narrating a story, of linking one experience to the next, have become the basic means by which computer users access and interact with all cultural data. In this respect, the computer fulfils the promise of cinema as a visual Esperanto.\textsuperscript{445}
\end{quote}

However, some theorists challenge this insistence on the primacy of the cinematic paradigm in new media: amongst them is Mark Hansen, who sees this instantiation of cinema as the dominant aesthetic medium (or, at least, cinematic conventions as the dominant principles) as over-determining and limiting. He takes issue with the supposed consensus of cinematic immobility as a default condition, arguing that new media instead have the capacity to “explode the frame” that delimits our mobility through their engagement with the motile body.\textsuperscript{446} Hansen is writing here of new media installations that are designed for the dynamic movement of spectators; however, his point is equally relevant to virtual reality. He aptly summarises why virtual reality cinema offers us a chance to rethink the construction of a cinema experience that is reliant on binding the viewer’s gaze, when he writes of the possibilities of new media and the digital image:

\begin{quote}
digital data is in the most literal sense polymorphous: lacking any inherent form or en-framing, it can be materialized in an almost limitless array of framings;
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{444} Bazin, \textit{What Is Cinema?}, 14; Rodowick, \textit{The Virtual Life of Film}, viii.
\textsuperscript{445} Manovich, \textit{The Language of New Media}, 78-79.
\textsuperscript{446} Hansen, \textit{A New Philosophy for New Media}, 35.
yet so long as it is tied to the image-frame of the cinema, this will remain an entirely untapped potential.447

This transcendence of the frame is one of the most exciting possibilities of cinema’s interface with virtual reality. It creates a clear and demanding challenge to the dominant existing paradigms of cinematic praxis within the VR environment. It is also one of the most evident challenges for the early designers of cinematic virtual reality, as they try to synthesise over a hundred years of cinematic codes and conventions with the capacities of this new regime. It is vital that, to develop the potential Hansen identifies, any synthesis of traditional cinema and virtual reality requires that filmmakers consider expanded narratives or modes that incorporate the fuller dimensions of time and space that VR cinema accentuates. This can, in part, be achieved through utilising three specific capacities available to virtual reality: the melding of spectator and interactor, the rejection of the frame, and the embrace of virtual reality’s more radical capacities.

The melding of spectator and interactor

The first wave of virtual reality horror films, although primitive in some aspects, clearly demonstrates for the spectator an ongoing evolution of a new form. The genre of horror appears to be a natural home for this experimentation. This emerges from the genre’s capacity to accentuate the respective strengths of both cinema and VR: VR heightens the immersive properties of horror cinema, while the codes and conventions of horror film establish a generic playground for VR. Filmmaker Scott Stewart, speaking at Tribeca Film Festival 2016, concurs:

The horror genre has always been on the frontlines of formal and stylistic innovation. With movies like The Blair Witch Project and Paranormal Activity, and even earlier back with Halloween and Friday the 13th, filmmakers had lower budgets and therefore had to rely on filmmaking techniques to engage an audience; they didn't do it with movie stars, pyrotechnics, and big special effects. Every generation has a movie like those, that has a huge impact on the

447 Ibid., 35.
language of not just horror but also other genres of entertainment. For this
generation, that's *Paranormal Activity* and its 'found-footage' POV technique.
VR feels like a natural extension or continuation of those kinds of first-person
narrative techniques, the whole found-footage style of horror filmmaking.
Found-footage has a first-person, you-are-the-camera-operator quality, so it's
an easy leap from there to 360° VR.\(^{448}\)

However, it is also evident that the spectatorial experience of virtual reality diverges
sharply from that of mainstream cinema, which in turn raises questions about the
limitations of conventional narrative-driven cinema in this mode. The leap Stewart
speaks of becomes a hurdle when virtual reality cinema pushes up against the
limitations of the spectator being forced to inhabit the position of the camera as a
participant or spectator in the diegetic world. How can cinematic virtual reality
overcome the limitations that emerge from this forced alignment between camera,
viewer and diegetic participant? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine
the unique temporal and spatial aspects of the expanded modes of virtual reality
cinema outside of 360-degree video, such as those offered by ‘room-scale’ production,
to determine if they offer other alternatives.

This concept can be productively investigated by considering the movement
Stewart refers to above, from conventional horror film to found footage, to cinematic
virtual reality, using the content of *11:57* as an exemplar. For example, one could
envision *11:57* presented as an orthodox cinematic short film, composed of multiple
shots and sequences to direct audience attention and to execute more effectively the
imperatives of narrative and integration of the spectator as witness to the diegetic
world (but crucially, not a participant). This could be done using the time-honoured
conventions of montage: the situation of the hypothetical protagonist and her
environment would be established through continuity editing, and the (admittedly
limited) narrative would be executed through the logic of cause and effect. As a
primitive example, the film could begin with a close up on the bound arms of the
protagonist, a mid-shot of her struggling in her chair, a close up of her eyes brimming
with panic, and a wide shot revealing the room in which she is held captive. Each of

\(^{448}\) Barrone, “Virtual Reality’s Horror Potential Is So Great That It’s Scary – Pun Intended.”
these is a conventional trope in horror that heightens engagement for the spectator through the construction of a narrative. The flickering of the lights and impending darkness could herald the threateningly close presence of the monster. However, if the conclusion of 11:57 was transposed to a conventional work, it would be inherently disappointing for an audience; it would seem thin, clichéd, unsatisfying.

Alternatively, the same material could be presented as a ‘found footage scenario’; for example, the protagonist could be wearing glasses that have a built-in camera (a narrative device used in the short film *Amateur Night*, featured in the 2012 horror anthology *V/H/S*). Essentially, in this example, the images that are presented would be from the point-of-view of our protagonist – the viewer’s experience as a spectator would be intended to mirror the perceptions of the main character [Figure 41]. In this style, the filmmaker can capitalise on a somewhat subjective mode, which in turn can implicate the spectator, as discussed in Chapter Three. Yet, in this mode, engagement with the film comes about through the filmmaker’s choices of how the character chooses to view or record the world: the filmmaker crafts the elements that the spectator will be shown and what will not be shown to construct the image in a manner that will contribute to identification with the character and best facilitate the progression of narrative.449

![Figure 41: Amateur Night in V/H/S](image)

449 For example, we don’t immediately see the outcome of the monster’s attack at the conclusion of *Amateur Night*; we are shown it through Clint’s eventual surreptitious peeking around the corner of the bed he is hiding behind, and then only in glimpses.
Virtual reality, by contrast, offers both immersion and potential interactivity. As established, the spectator in this realm is free to direct her own attention to any point in the virtual space of the experience. In 11:57, for example, viewers are given the capacity to look away from where the action takes place, although auditory cues continually position the various interlopers and their actions to within a roughly 130-degree arc from centre facing forward, motivating curiosity and attention. The other people in the diegetic world (the man and woman seated beside the viewer, shown in Figure 33), guide the viewer’s attention with their focused gaze on the room’s entrance.

The short VR horror film, The Black Mass Experience, handles things in a different way. Using the multi-dimensional ambisonic sound design, it draws the viewer away from the central position, with sounds originating at the periphery of their vision. It also uses the movements of various diegetic characters to guide the viewer’s perceptual choices: when a character runs by, the viewer’s natural curiosity will often prompt them to follow that character’s passage. It is less restrictive in terms of motivating the viewer’s gaze, but when it does stage moments, the action tends to take place within an invisible proscenium.

Where The Black Mass Experience and 11:57 both fail to capitalise on the capacities of VR in their attempts to manipulate the viewer by replicating the framing of conventional filmmaking, by using visual or auditory cues to attempt to shift the viewer’s gaze to what the filmmaker hopes they will attend to. This has a two-fold problem: firstly, if the viewer somehow misses these cues, the experience becomes partial and incomplete, losing the power of its affect; and secondly, once the viewer has learned where to direct their attention, the experience becomes largely the same as each previous iteration. The possibility of cinematic dread, while present in the first experience, evaporates to a large degree on repeated viewings. This is the crux of the second major problem: by creating a linear time frame with a strictly delineated beginning and end point, 360-degree video VR filmmakers are failing to exploit the full dimensions of VR’s revolutionary possibilities of time and space. Although they fill their filmic world with horror imagery for the viewer to be confronted with, the temporal and spatial economy of the films halts their capacity to produce deeper
intensity and immersion. Traditional 360-degree video neglects the opportunities available to turn a spectator into a spectator-interactor.

Alternative modes of VR, such as “room-scale” projects or those that are designed to encourage more complex interactivity, demonstrate how VR can take advantage of its more expansive spatial and temporal dimensions.\(^{450}\) The virtual reality experience of the game, *Alien: Isolation*, offers one such ideal example, residing as it also does in the genre of horror. It is particularly valuable to examine how *Alien: Isolation* convenes a spectator-interactor, whose experience surpasses that of the conventional cinematic spectator. It does so by the way it synthesises what could be considered a cinematic style of narrative with the greater temporal and spatial capacities of expanded VR: the viewer/gamer is a participant in an environment that changes moment to moment, and makes active choices that alter the dimensions of their experience.

Some critics argue that the supposed similarities between VR cinema and games, at the level of form, are specious. Marsha Kinders contests this, and emphasises how games can be seen as “a special kind of narrative, rather than a rival form” to cinema.\(^{451}\) What emerges from this examination is an understanding of how *Alien: Isolation* crafts its narrative to merge the interactor and spectator in a cinematic way. It achieves this synthesis through the game’s accentuation of the temporal and spatial elements that Hanich identifies as key to the various experiences of cinematic dread.

As discussed in previous chapters, dread in horror cinema is a particular type of fear, with an intensity and temporal shape that are unique. Hanich contends that, in conventional cinema, dread emanates both from our fear for “the endangered character” and our fearful expectations of an outcome that will be “shocking and/or horrifying to us” (i.e. the viewer).\(^{452}\) In the majority of 360-degree horror films, this fear is more weighted to the latter, due to the insufficient production of diegetic characters with whom the viewer can identify, and the way most of the films are

---

\(^{450}\) *VR Noir*, for example, contains a sequence where the spectator needs to actively search for the target of the investigation by scanning various apartment windows.


\(^{452}\) Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers*, 155-156.
crafted to heighten the equivalence between camera and spectator-as-diegetic-character.

VR horror cinema also operates differently to the horror cinema examples discussed earlier in this thesis, in the ways it manipulates what Hanich states are two vital principles of conventional cinematic storytelling: “maximum visibility and temporal economy.” Hanich argues that the construction of cinematic dread necessitates working against these imperatives. Chapter Two examined how found footage utilises its form to revel in the constriction of spatial information and delay of outcome, and how, in spite of this lack, it produces an intensity and increased proximity to the world of the image for the viewer. While its temporal economy is quite similar to this, VR horror cinema, by contrast, does not constrict spatial information – in fact, it does the opposite, opening up the potential for threat to the expanses of wherever the viewer chooses to look. In 360-degree video, however, once the viewer has determined the spatial co-ordinates and duration of the experience, the intensity of the experience is dramatically reduced.

11:57 and The Black Mass Experience, while effective on some levels, do not fully capitalise on the ability for VR to produce the most potent form of cinematic dread. Their temporal and spatial economy restricts the achievement of the kind of immersion Hanich argues for. The game environment, on the contrary, is able to exploit the full temporal and spatial aspects of the VR realm. In doing so, it reveals how vital a full engagement with the interactive elements of virtual reality storytelling is to the production of a compelling and deeply affective experience. The interactivity I am referring to here, it should be noted, is not reducible either to the spectator’s choice to guide the narrative in terms of a ‘forking path,’ or the utilisation of peripherals such as haptic controllers or “wands” that integrate the movement of the viewer into the virtual environment. It is instead the potential of a spatial and temporal elasticity that can then intensify the phenomenological experience of the virtual world.

The game experience of Alien: Isolation provides a template for thinking about how VR cinema may be able to integrate this spatial and temporal elasticity. Although the game requires a controller to allow the players to traverse their environment,

---

453 Ibid., 163.
Alien: Isolation affords the same freedom of perceptual direction through the VR headset as 360-degree video: while moving through the game environments, the player is free to look in whichever direction they choose, much like in cinematic virtual reality. Based on the Alien series of films, the game sees the spectator/interactor playing the daughter of Ellen Ripley, whose search for her mother is interrupted by a rescue mission on a derelict space station. While the game operates through the logic of assigning various missions to the player’s game world avatar, underneath this straightforward narrative is the portentous dread of a surprise confrontation with the titular alien. Any savvy, game-literate player would comprehend that an interaction with the alien is inevitable, yet each meeting is a jarring and fear-inducing experience in the way it is staged, and the fear registers in the body in a way that is different from both non-VR gaming and cinema.

![Alien: Isolation motion-sensor](image)

Figure 42: Alien: Isolation motion-sensor

There are two elements of the game that contribute to this intensified bodily experience. The first is the in-game use of a motion sensor device, which, when activated, appears in the player’s view like a real-world handheld tool: the game designers cleverly shift the focal plane to the device each time it is used, which replicates the perceptual directedness we have with our real-world use of tools. The
device tracks the movement of the alien and its proximity [Figure 42]. The second element is the game’s architectural design of interior space and how it is utilised in the narrative. For example, throughout the space station there are lockers, cupboards and storage spaces whose only purpose within the narrative is as a place of refuge, and, when employed as a hiding place, their claustrophobic sense of containment feels strikingly real.

Whereas the aforementioned films, such as The Black Mass Experience and 11:57, endeavour to generate fear on a relatively static spatial and temporal plane, the freedom of the interactivity in Alien: Isolation produces a dynamic spatial and temporal location, one that charges the body of the viewer in a different way. The mobility of the spectator through the haptically-charged environment facilitates a deeper form of connection to the space surrounding them: the game design brilliantly recreates textures like stagnant water, claustrophobic air vents, and the glass shield of a spacesuit facemask. While the player is given mission goals to achieve, the relative freedom with which they can move through the labyrinthine space station helps build the “geopsychic architexture” that Bruno postulates, no doubt aided by the particularly haptic qualities of the animation.454

There are moments when this experience is ruptured, however, and the intensification of cinematic shock hijacks the body – the moments when, while moving through the space station, the alien suddenly descends into the player’s field of vision from the air vents above [Figure 43]. In my first experience of this in the game, I turned in the game world and fled towards the safety of a room I had recently left, where I knew a locker offered some form of safety. Taking refuge inside the locker, I noticed my real-world breathlessness and racing heart, an experience that was to me more akin to cinema viewing than to any previous game playing. As I waited inside the locker, my vision reduced to staring through the gaps of the locker’s vents, there was a coalescence of dread. The thickening of time that Hanich discusses was, upon later reflection, evident, and although I could rationalise the fear of the computer-generated image as unnecessary, my bodily reaction denied any form of rationalisation. The previously mentioned motion sensor device, when activated, 454

---

showed the movement of a green dot heading towards my location. In the specific sense of helplessness, there was also a passive voyeurism that echoed the best cinematic horror. Yet, despite this, it was coming for me.

Figure 43: Confronting the xenomorph in *Alien: Isolation*

For what felt like far longer than the objective ten or so seconds of the experience, my vision remained glued to the entry to the room from inside the confinement of my hiding space. Suddenly, the door retracted, and the creature entered the room. It paced throughout the room, moving into the periphery of the sightlines afforded by the locker. Time continued to stretch – until a huge obsidian head appeared, directly in front of the locker, sniffing the vents. Here the game designers create a fascinating requirement for the player: the game prompts them to hold their breath (through a controller action) and draw back against the rear wall of the locker. In the VR experience, this physical recoil is already activated; I inevitably shrank away from the rows and rows of serrated teeth that remained on the other side of the vents.

The game sets up the premise that, if the player can withdraw to an acceptable degree, the alien will move on to investigate other rooms. Thankfully this is what the predator did, stalking back out into the corridor, unsatiated. Every moment after this first meeting becomes saturated with the anticipation that the alien is around the next corner, an effect that is sustained and complemented by the ambisonic sound design,
which indicates the approaching footsteps of the returning predator, along with its passage through the space station’s ventilation system. The entire territory of the space station becomes imbued with dread. This spatial restriction is, of course, but one half of the reconfigured experience – the second half is the altered experience of duration presented by the open-ended gaming environment, which is very different to the set duration of the 360-degree short films. Each confrontation with the alien has an unbounded temporal frame: if retreat is successful, it may still involve minutes of being stalked by the alien. If unsuccessful, there may only be seconds before it strikes. When Hanich argues that we indulge in horror “because it gives time temporarily back in our hands,” he draws attention to the way horror in particular can make duration palpable. This palpability counters what he labels the “fragmentation of time experience” in modern life.\textsuperscript{455} For Hanich, this time experience comes about in two forms, acceleration and deceleration, both of which Alien: Isolation puts to great use.

In conventional horror cinema, scenes of cinematic shock bring the present moment to the fore, while scenes of cinematic dread produce a density in duration, a stillness that extends enigmatically into a potential terrifying future moment. In the VR realm, this concept of dread can evolve and transform to produce an intense experience. The experience is intensified further by the extended duration of the gaming experience, wherein players can spend hours navigating the labyrinthine corridors, and the completely randomised potential for further confrontations with the alien. Each experience is unique, and uniquely embodied.

Attempts by the spectator/interactor to rationalise their fear, in that it is produced by a computer-generated image, are in part denied by the bodily intensification that occurs: an intensification produced through the manner in which VR fuses the inevitable horrific outcome for both the avatar of Amanda Ripley and the spectator-interactor who shares her vision. But it is not only this shared vision which is key: it is also the combination of the fluid duration of the experience and the continuous spatial reconfiguration which comes with the expanded freedom of interaction and movement within the diegetic world. The combinatorial power of

\textsuperscript{455} Hanich, Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers, 239.
these elements allows for Hanich’s cinematic dread to reach its apogee in the VR environment.

Currently, there is a range of developing technologies in cinematic virtual reality that could contribute to how these concepts could be adapted from the gaming space to the cinema space. Firstly, there are tools that are allow for a more natural bodily interactivity within cinematic VR, and extend the potential of the interface between body and image, such as haptic controllers and haptic bodysuits. This is a shared embryonic connection between early cinema and nascent virtual reality projects; both early cinema and virtual reality placed an emphasis on the hand-tool relations that accompanied the visual. In *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary reveals that precinematic devices, such as the thaumatrope, the phenakistoscope, the stroboscope, and the zootrope, all required some manual intervention by the viewer. Williams additionally suggests that this tactile interface was not superfluous to the process of viewing, but instead facilitated the body’s experience of itself in the process of viewing, which assisted in conferring reality on the encounter with the image.

Virtual reality, while often categorised as an ocularcentric medium, is also inextricably tied to bodily movement, given that the scope of viewing closely simulates human vision and is facilitated only by specific bodily movement (the literal act of turning around, of bending over, of tilting your head up). However, it should be noted that the emphasis on virtual reality’s corporeal interaction is not a necessity to the production of an embodied viewer; as previously discussed, cinematic embodiment occurs in a range of encounters with the cinematic image, including that of the conventional seated theatrical spectator. Instead, this recognition of virtual reality’s bodily entwinement simply suggests a different relationship to the image than that of the theatrical or seated experience, one that potentially intensifies the spectator’s corporeal response. Furthermore, future creative interventions in this field are predicted to rely more upon the integration of handheld or bodily integrated devices to allow for further viewer interactivity, ranging from game controllers through to the

---

456 Krumins, “Haptic Bodysuits and the Strange New Landscape of Immersive VR.”
458 Williams, “Corporealized Observers,” 3-41.
Oculus Touch, a handheld device which aims to integrate the spectator’s haptic responses with the image [Figure 44].

![Oculus Touch Haptic Controllers](image)

**Figure 44: Oculus Touch Haptic Controllers**

In order to integrate these elements with cinematic VR, filmmakers would require elaborate database logistics: the diegetic world would no longer be limited to a single duration and the spectator’s viewing point would no longer be limited to a static position, but would have to account for alternative spatial locations and alternative temporal frames. Whether or not this integration could occur and allow the space to remain ‘cinematic,’ in the Bazinian sense, is a complex question. Certainly, the technological advances that are required to perform the above have largely been achieved if provided the required computational processing power to stitch the elements together. This process of building a three-dimensional environment that can be inhabited, or objects within that environment, is called volumetrics, and has seen dramatic advances in the last several years. Volumetric displays form a visual representation of an object in three dimensions [Figure 45]. In virtual reality, volumetrics allow for three dimensional objects and actors to be integrated into room-scale productions, so that the viewer’s perception of the object or actor changes, based on their movement through the space. This is a further step towards overcoming the “plausibility illusion” Slater refers to; however, it does present its own challenges. Volumetric performances, for example, can easily be a paradoxical presence, for even though the presence of the actor is more realistic in terms of its dimensionality in space, it has no dynamic qualities in terms of its interaction with the

---

459 For a brief video on tactical haptics development, go to bit.ly/tacticalhaptics.
viewer; the volumetric capture is a fixed recording and cannot respond to or interact with the viewer in its current form.

Nitzan Ben-Shaul argues for what he labels “hyper-narratives” as a future form of storytelling, and echoes the claims that they will become more feasible “because of the calculative and storage power of computers and postmodern shifts in perception that expand rather than break away from the inherent faculties of narrative.” Hyper-narratives refer to the potential for what Ben-Shaul also labels “interactors” to make choices at different points within an evolving narrative, which would then open up the possibility for different “narrative trajectories.” Kinder suggests that the “behavioural active interaction” that would be required of hyper-narratives could potentially generate deeper spectatorial engagement. These kinds of advances are also hypothesised by Brillhart, who sees the rapid development of artificial intelligence as integral to the future of virtual reality narratives. Artificial intelligence, in

---

460 Ben-Shaul, Hyper-Narrative Interactive Cinema, 23.
461 Ibid., 15.
462 Kinder, “Narrative Equivocations Between Movies and Games,” The New Media Book, 125.
463 Brillhart, “These Uncomfortably Exciting Times.”
Brillhart’s assessment, would provide a foundation for both hyper-narrative and the possibility of dynamic interaction with volumetrics.

Brillhart also argues that, even without these technological advances, at its foundations virtual reality needs to operate differently to conventional cinema in terms of its storytelling principles. She writes:

[S]torytelling generally involves someone – the teller – filtering an experience and then trying to communicate that experience to someone else. That transfer will then evoke a translation in the mind of the person receiving the message. Most mediums do this. This is, for filmmaking, Vertov’s camera – the disembodied mechanical eye. To show you the world the way he sees the world. To deliver the world to you anew [...] What I have to be as a VR creator is a story enabler, not the story dictator. Allow stories to unfold in a space. Start to rely more on feeling and atmosphere than on conventional narrative. Let it be a bit more like music. Like architecture. Like dance.\textsuperscript{464}

A consideration of these principles further develops the critique of the 360-degree video VR horror works analysed above. There is in these projects an unnecessary emphasis placed on “story dictating,” as opposed to allowing the viewer to inhabit the space and time of these works in a way that adds experiential depth to the encounter. Examining the potential ‘rejection’ of the frame allows for a consideration of how “story dictating” can be transformed into “story enabl[ing].”

‘Rejecting’ the frame

Oculus, the company behind the Oculus Rift, has also envisioned that future virtual reality filmmaking would require rearticulation of cinematic storytelling techniques. Bringing together a team of animators, filmmakers and storytellers under the heading Oculus Story Studio, Oculus experimented with various techniques for its earliest projects, among them the animated film, \textit{Lost}, and condensed these lessons into the publication of a set of rules learned from their early development.\textsuperscript{465} These rules are as follows:

\begin{quote}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{464} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{465} Unseld, “Five Lessons Learned While Making Lost.”
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}
Don’t rush the pacing.

Respect the ritual of settling in and setting the scene.

Let go of forcing the viewer to look somewhere.

Be aware of spatial story density.

Simplify scope.\textsuperscript{466}

For the first point (“Don’t rush the pacing”), noting that “the density of information that is conveyed in film versus VR is clearly different,” Story Studio encouraged developers to consider the story not as “actions” a character takes, but as a “series of moments.” The second point (“Respect the ritual of settling in and setting the scene”) responds to the strangeness of the rituals of virtual reality versus cinema, in that spectators no longer have the clearly delineated experience of settling into their seats, watching the lights go down, and configuring their expectations for what they have commonly experienced. Story Studio encourages developers to build a simulacrum of this “settling in” into the experience itself. For example, rather than beginning the experience \textit{in media res}, Story Studio encourages the use of framing devices, such as that of the firefly in the opening of Oculus Story Studio’s short film \textit{Lost}: the viewer’s initial interaction with the firefly, tangential to the narrative, lets the viewer grow accustomed to shifting their gaze in the VR environment. Returning to the horror shorts, each of these handles this process in a different way: 11:57, for example, offers a form of “settling in,” by slowly illuminating the environment around the spectator, whereas \textit{Escape The Living} Dead simply deposits the viewer into the chaos of the escape, disorienting them and making them search out their environment for potential danger.

In terms of corralling a viewer’s attention to a particular part of the cinematic world, Story Studio recommends designing encounters that free up the participant to control their own gaze, rather than using heavy handed story devices to coerce the viewer’s attention. They label this step “The Letting-Go,” and argue that, without it, virtual reality storytelling feels “forced, staged and artificial.”\textsuperscript{467} This implies that, in order to take advantage of VR’s unique form, filmmakers need to ‘reject’ the frame, and rethink the process of manipulating the viewer to attend to one particular part of

\textsuperscript{466} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{467} Ibid.
the 360-degree space at one particular time. Horror as a genre requires this utilisation of the entire virtual environment, because the natural instinct of a fear response is to attend to both what is front of you and what is behind you. In one particular instance, *Catatonic* demonstrates this: when the spectator is wheeled down the hospital hallway, the rooms on both sides of the hallway all contain their own elements of interest. The viewer’s choice of which rooms to view (or refuse to view) alters their experience of the film, although none of the rooms are critical to the narrative.

The last two points (“Be aware of spatial story density” and “Simplify scope”) are both also responding to the potential and limitations of freeing the frame. Even for a static participant, as discussed above, the freedom to examine a 360-degree environment opens up the space for multi-dimensional experience. Oculus Story Studio points out that, in the real world, a multitude of events occur simultaneously, and if the story world does not reproduce this, the experience feels “empty and strangely fake.” On the flip-side of that coin, the scope provided by this increased range of vision, this inability to constrain the viewer to a frame, requires that developers and storytellers assess the technical and narrative limitations of ‘filling’ this terrain. Again, the emphasis here is on balancing the experiential elements with story elements.

These recommendations prove valuable for examining the transition from virtual reality simulations to virtual reality cinema, because they highlight the difficulties in reconciling narrative and a truly untethered and undirected experience of the image. It is not surprising that an organisation named Story Studio would valorise story as they do, but several of their recommendations speak to the expanded affective capacities of this cinematic mode. By encouraging developers not to “push the pace,” they are acknowledging the new duration of virtual reality, a novel temporality that intensifies experience. This is echoed in the suggestion to free design from manipulating the viewer’s gaze, counsel that they say originates from a need to avoid artificiality, but could alternatively be explained as promoting this intensification through duration.

---

468 Ibid.
The radical potential of virtual reality

Many of these lessons are still grounded in conventional narrative as the predominant driver for experience in this new realm, and in Cartesian space as the setting for these narratives. Mark Hansen, however, sees revolutionary possibilities in how virtual reality can go beyond the geometric space of naturalistic perception through the construction of spaces that are not mediated by a camera: for example, images or environments that are fully computer generated. This revolutionary potential challenges the sensory-motor schema of Deleuze’s movement-image. In Deleuze’s account, our bodily response is inextricably entwined with narrative progression, which is to say, narrative arises as the secondary product of our interaction with space and time. Bogue, in his account of Deleuze’s cinema works, argues that the “structures of conventional narrative” are derived from our pragmatic interaction with the world: our practical application of perception and actions to meet our “needs, desires, purposes and projects.”

This, in essence, is the real-world application of the sensory-motor schema, an application that is transposed into our interaction with cinematic images in the form of the movement-image.

Hansen takes on the seers of a post-humanistic media world with a new reading of Deleuze that reframes the relevance of the body. Referring to non-cinematic virtual reality, Hansen argues that, far from being ocularcentric, the virtual reality interface, “as the exemplary instance of the filtering of information from a universe of information,” takes place only in the body (in that the image does not exist in any objective sense). Framing his understanding around the uses and potential of new media, including virtual reality, Hansen challenges Deleuze’s disembodiment of the cinematic frame; he sees Deleuze’s neo-Bergsonian account of the cinema as a “progressive disembodying,” and argues that this move to “divorce perception entirely from (human) embodiment)” culminates in Deleuze’s time-image.

For Hansen, the body continues to be the “active framer of the image” in the digital regime. Far from eradicating the body, virtual reality demonstrates the

---

470 Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema*, 55.
472 Ibid., 6.
centrality of the body, through its newly vital role as “selective processor in the creation of images.” Drawing on the work of post-Bergsonian philosopher, Raymond Ruyer, Hansen sees the fullest creative facility of our interaction with images in the interface with “dataspaces”: spaces that challenge perception of geometric space and frustrate traditional perspectival vision. These dataspaces can only be accessed through what Ruyer labels an “absolute survey,” elucidated as “a non-dimensional grasping of a perceptual field as an integral whole or absolute surface.” In this manner, the production of space is reliant on the body-brain as an integrated and cohesive whole.

To further clarify, the “absolute survey” is the extraction of the virtual dimension from the experience of the digital image. Hansen elucidates this concept by drawing on Ruyer’s contrast between perception of the traditional cinematic image and the “autopoietic force of sensation.” As Ruyer writes: “[a] photographic apparatus, in order to capture the entirety of a surface, must be placed at some distance from it, along a perpendicular dimension [...] It is necessary to be in a second dimension to photograph or perceive a line. It is necessary to be in a third dimension to photograph or perceive a surface.”

Alternatively, the dimension of consciousness that Ruyer labels “form-giving form” involves a consideration of vision beyond a physico-physiological event or geometric function; instead, it is the entirety of the visual field in dimensionless “direct knowledge.” Ruyer writes:

’I’ have no need of being outside my sensation, in a perpendicular dimension, in order to consider, one after another, all the details of the sensation... The surface of the [perceived] is a surface captured in all its details, without a third dimension. It is an ‘absolute surface,’ which is relative to no point of view external to itself.

---

473 Ibid., 22.
474 Ruyer, La Cybernétique et L’origine de L’information, cited in Hansen, New Philosophy for New Media, 173.
475 Ibid., cited in Hansen, New Philosophy for New Media, 185.
As Mark Hansen defines it, the absolute surface “is a non-geometric, non-dimensional space directly and immediately correlated with the surveying ‘I-Unity.’”476 The ‘image’ is wholly subjective, in that it can only be experienced internally within the body of the sensing organism itself. This opens up the question of what reconfigurations are required to embodiment theory when, as Hansen says, “perception is simulation — a process of construction or data-rendering that takes place in the body-brain — and not an inscription or registering of an outside object or reality.”477 In terms of thinking about the possibilities of cinematic virtual reality, it requires an acknowledgment of the reductive process of trying to ‘frame’ the content of the diegetic world. In Hansen’s understanding, virtual reality forces a reassessment of the conception of the image and the viewer being separated at all, even by a “permeable membrane.”478

This recognition of VR’s capacities, and its potential for the creation of new experiences of the body, has radical implications outside of the genre of horror. Artist Diana Gromala eloquently argues for what she sees as the virtues of virtual reality. She challenges claims of post-human transcendence or disembodiment, when she writes: “[r]ecent media frenzies about virtual reality portray these technologies as promising a brave new world [...] What if, instead, we explore this notion turned in on itself— our travels not to an abstract virtual ‘outer’ space, but to the inner reaches of our body?”479

Interactive media systems like VR can bring about an evolution by presenting new perceptual experiences, new temporal flows and new sensory syntheses. Mark Hansen argues that they achieve this by:

[...] catalysing those bodily ‘senses’ – proprioception, interoception, affectivity – that allow us to orient ourselves in the absence of fixed points or external orienting schema, or in other words, through the internal, intensive space of our affective bodies [...] That is to say, by placing us into ‘direct coupling’ with information, this technical extension not only dissolves the mediating (framing)

476 Ibid., cited in Hansen, New Philosophy for New Media, 185.
477 Hansen, New Philosophy for New Media, 167.
478 Rutherford, “Precarious Boundaries,” Art and The Performance of Memory, 63-84.
function of the image, but it renders perception itself secondary in relation to the primary affective experience of self-enjoyment.  

This speaks potently to the immersive capacities that virtual reality may offer to cinema more widely, and horror specifically. While virtual reality is often presented as a type of optical illusion, there is always an awareness in the spectator that what they are experiencing is an illusion. However, Hansen’s expanded mode of virtual reality, where our perception may potentially be undifferentiated from illusion, given the bodily self-affection is at the root of our perception, raises the question of the limits of this awareness. This could have resonant consequences for horror’s affective power in this mode. The cognitive distancing which challenges the authenticity of the monster may be insufficient to overcome the intensity of this type of horror: which is to say, in this type of horror we are not perceiving an image of ‘the monster,’ we are literally experiencing the monster’s presence. The implication of this is that spectators are less likely to subject themselves to this experience, given that it no longer has the voyeuristic distanciation of watching on a screen.

There are even more controversial implications to experiments with this form. For instance, virtual reality introduces the potential for contradictory visual-sensory-motor solicitations, where our embodied habits are pitted against a virtual world that doesn’t necessarily correspond to reality. What happens when the physical laws of normal perception, or normal geometric space, are broken or defied in horrific ways? What if ‘the monster’ is no longer derived from the tropes of horror narrative, but instead in the monstrous disruptions to the body-brain connection that brings about the image? Each of these questions has yet to be explored by VR filmmakers, but the creative capacities of cinematic virtual reality allow for these questions to be raised. These types of experiences could hold the same thrill that attracts horror aficionados to the more emotionally and sensory-heightened aspects of the genre in cinema.

One could argue that the vicarious identification in conventional horror would be irrelevant to this type of experimental virtual reality cinema, in that the spectator no longer requires a proxy to draw them in to the storyworld of the film; as we have seen, in virtual reality, the viewer is a participant, not a witness. A further way of

---

480 Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, 205.
developing this concept is to look at how the horror experience of virtual reality could capitalise on this inability for a viewer to demarcate themselves from the image. Experimenting with manipulating the image to respond to our heart rate or brain-waves, as some new media art installations have already done, could further tighten this inextricable bond between viewer and image. This reconfiguration of the stable, logically ordered world of sensation would certainly seem to tap into the Lovecraftian definition of horror as creating an:

[...] atmosphere of breathlessness and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces . . . of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the demons of unplumbed space.

Experimenting with these capacities would appear to shift emphasis even further away from cinema’s existing techniques of spectatorial integration, via narrative and identification with character. There are larger ethical issues raised by these possibilities, that, while important, are outside of the scope of this chapter; the focus of which is on the aesthetic potential and problems of the early experiments in the art form; however, there is productive space to further examine the ethical boundaries of the form, particularly in relation to horror.

One path in continuing this process of examining the problematic aspects of the current works is to assess the contention that spectatorial identification is less relevant to virtual reality cinema than conventional cinema. The alternative conception, which contends that spectatorial identification is no less relevant, may be evidenced in the way that there is arguably something missing in the current wave of VR horror films: the production of empathic engagement.

481 Pavel Smetana’s *Rooms of Desire* (1996) and Alan Dunning and Paul Woodrow’s *Einstein’s Brain* (2006), for example, both utilise bio-feedback in the production of the image.

What Cinema can return to VR

While it is certainly true that many of the existing cinematic virtual reality projects address the viewer as a diegetic participant and not a witness, there is an element to the cinematic experience that is lost under this configuration, and it is one that is particularly important to horror film. Christian Metz contends that much of cinematic pleasure is derived from the distance between the spectator and the image. This distance is defined in two senses: firstly, the physical distance from the events on the screen, and secondly, the temporal distance, in that the events occurred at an earlier point in time. This double distancing, for Metz, produces pleasure, in that the viewer has complete mastery over the image and does not fear any form of reprisal.483

This vicarious pleasure in being an observer at a distance is rarely offered in contemporary virtual reality cinema projects, perhaps because many of the filmmakers are mistaking perspectival situatedness for empathic engagement: empathic engagement may require more than just an acknowledgement that the viewer is a participant in the diegetic world. One VR filmmaker who has a more nuanced view of virtual reality’s production of empathy is Chris Milk, whose work, Clouds Over Sidra, was made in conjunction with the United Nations to highlight the Syrian refugee crisis. Clouds Over Sidra places the viewer inside the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan, not in the position of refugee, but as a witness, observing daily life. Milk describes how he was driven by a desire to put the viewer not just “inside the frame,” but “through the window.”484 This desire was driven by what he saw as VR’s capacity to accentuate human connection: VR as an “empathy machine.”485

For theorist Pia Tikka, positing VR technology as a machine that is especially productive of empathy requires that we consider its perceptual equivalence and immersive capacities as dependent on “experiencing embodiment as emotional situatedness, and not about the perfect image projection.”486 She elaborates that, “if the context of the perceived world – interpersonal relationships, causal events, nature’s forces, or facial movements – is meaningful, it will enable immersion.”487

483 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, 42-66.
484 Milk, “How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine.”
485 Ibid.
487 Ibid., 151.
redefines immersion from the purely theoretical interpretation put forward by Mark Hansen, and reminds us that, for spectators, it is these contextual elements that deepen an emotional engagement. The affective properties of the face, the interpersonal relationships amongst diegetic characters, even the cause and effect structure of narrative, all enrich the cinematic world; cinematic virtual reality projects that neglect to consider these elements will be the poorer for it. For while many VR cinema shorts are affectively rich in the embodiment they produce, they often neglect elements like the ones listed above, that conventional cinema has honed in order to produce emotional engagement.

Another issue to consider is the potential reduction of the cinematic to the largely subjective response of a viewer as “locus of experience,” which has ramifications for cinema’s social and cultural significance. Isaacs, for instance, argues that “cinema cannot merely be about personal, individual experience,” questioning the loss of cinema’s cultural and social significance if experienced in isolation.\textsuperscript{488} Isaacs is arguing for the image as a shared “pathway,” and making a link between how the images of the world are rendered in the image of cinema and how, through cinema’s position as a popular and pervasive art form, these images become “cultural and aesthetic object(s) of enormous significance.”\textsuperscript{489} If the experience of virtual reality is largely unique, in the sense that each iteration is dependent on the smallest fractional movement of the spectator’s body or vision, does this freedom unmoor cinematic virtual reality from its ability to become a shared “cultural and aesthetic object”?

Films seemingly provide a static and repeatable artefact which reflects a culture and which a culture can reflect on, whereas virtual reality may only reach its full potential through its creation of unique and responsive ‘events’ where the viewer is co-creator. This has particular relevance to horror as a cinematic genre, which, as Hanich astutely points out, is often embraced as a shared theatrical experience due to the “emphatic feeling of belongingness” that is brought about by what he labels a “collectivity.”\textsuperscript{490}

\textsuperscript{488} Isaacs, \textit{The Orientation of Future Cinema}, 11. This point has a heritage that traces back to Walter Benjamin’s film theory, and has been examined in detail in Miriam Hansen’s work on Benjamin.\textsuperscript{489} Ibid., 9-11.\textsuperscript{490} Hanich, \textit{Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers}, 249.
One way in which virtual reality cinema may address this is through its potential to uniquely energise and engage each viewer in a shared experience; in other words, how the bodily experience of spectators may become synchronous through their shared presence within the virtual world. The recently released *Life of Us*, which premiered at Sundance Film Festival 2017, is an animated VR project that allows four participants to experience it concurrently; although primitive in how it executes this concept, it demonstrates the potential of this new mode.\(^{491}\) The aspirational notion of how cinematic virtual reality may embrace these possibilities would perhaps see it fulfil the mythic potential of cinema to instantiate new perceptual and psychological experiences.

**The future of Cinematic VR**

Cinematic virtual reality, while only in its infancy, requires far more creative experimentation if it is to integrate cinema with the strengths of its particular form. While this form will no doubt evolve with the expansive current and future development of content, it must also be noted that the technology is constantly evolving. Existing research argues persuasively that the more ‘invisible’ the interface with the body, the greater its affective capabilities.\(^{492}\) While the binocular vision provided by headsets like the Oculus Rift may surpass traditional modes of cinematic perception, it still requires the wearing of a headset, one that is currently tethered to a computer (in the case of high-end virtual reality experiences). It also still needs further development in its optical resolution, range of optical periphery, and potential integration with other sensory stimuli. There is also much work remaining for both filmmakers and developers to develop their understanding of the physiological limitations and advantages of virtual reality; while the makers of the various headsets have amassed a large repository of information on the neurological and physiological responses to virtual reality, there is still only a small number of projects that have begun to comprehensively experiment with the wider range of aesthetic techniques discussed in this chapter, such as volumetric integration, hyper-narrative and

\(^{491}\) For a video demonstration of the kind of shared world experience created, go to bit.ly/lifeofus.

\(^{492}\) Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, 200.
expanded forms of interactivity. It is vital for filmmakers to consider the manner in which the bodily experience of virtual reality requires that they rethink some aspects of cinema’s formal conventions.

Peter Weibel offers a potential riposte to the charge that virtual reality may contribute to the loss of cinema as cultural object. He sees virtual reality as expanding and revolutionising the existing cinematographic code, and points to the experimental placement of multiple simultaneous participants in new media installations, and in video games, as the future direction: this is the creation of virtual spaces, like *Life of Us*, that can be inhabited by more than one person at a time. The evolution of this, he sees, is an image technology shaped by “massive parallel virtual worlds” (also known as MUVEs, or multi-user virtual environments) which are tele-correlated or “entangled.”493 This would facilitate a shared virtual reality experience between participants, reinstating its social and cultural significance. As mentioned previously, this “entanglement” is only currently hindered by technical limitations and Weibel’s hypothetical mode is no doubt on the horizon. What is up for debate is how much these virtual environments would draw from established cinematic paradigms, such as linear narrative progression or the use of diegetic characters to promote emotional engagement.

Another vital question raised by the emergence of this new form is the lack of political or ethical engagement with virtual reality as a technology. Erkki Huhtamo labels the field as dominated by a “demo-aesthetic,” wherein most projects “have concentrated on exploring the expressive potential of the medium, instead of using it for ideologically charged critical purposes.”494 For three-dimensional image-making to progress, technologically and culturally, Huhtamo requires that it become “integral, constructive, and ‘deep.’”495 Certainly this is a valid criticism for much of the early cinematic virtual reality, and given the radical potential spelled out by Hansen, there is much room for development and expansion of the political and ethical capabilities of this new mode.

495 Ibid., 473.
Ross Gibson sheds an idealistic light on his hopes for the transformative potential of virtual reality, and sees the cinematic in this new art form, in that cinema already segments and attenuates time, and that “the art of time” will be vital to the development of these new experiences.\(^{496}\) He posits this art as a “phenomenological routine [that] will offer each participant a compelling, fully conscious experience of perceptive intensification followed by alteration.”\(^{497}\) The alteration he refers to is that of the participant’s understanding of experiential time.

Each of these futurists addresses the preliminary aspects of the cinematic virtual reality form, and how it demands evolution in various ways in order to reach maturity. To these suggested philosophical approaches, this chapter suggests the addition of key obstacles that need to be addressed by creatives: the melding of spectator and interactor, the ‘rejection’ of the frame, and the embrace of virtual reality’s more radical capacities.

The production of a spectator-interactor balances the existing immersive elements of cinema spectatorship with the facility for the spectator to engage with the space in a manner that fully utilises virtual reality’s unique spatial and temporal capacities. While this requires the integration of database logic and a reconsideration of linear narrative, two changes that may be outside of the scope of what we currently consider ‘cinema,’ introducing these elements would only strengthen what is cinematic about the experience: the further heightening of a synthesised bodily and emotional engagement.

A nascent understanding of virtual reality would suggest the ‘rejection’ of the frame as a necessity, given the perceptual freedom afforded to the spectator. However, it is evident, based on the current crop of cinematic virtual reality horror films, that the convention of ‘framing’ content in order to direct spectatorial engagement is a technique that filmmakers find hard to let go. It is also evident that those projects that do engage with Oculus Story Studio’s principle of allowing the

---

\(^{496}\) Gibson provocatively also proposes: “Artists won’t be fabricating objects so much as *experiences* – they will offer us intensely ‘moving’ immersion in (or perhaps *beyond*) the objective world. The immersion will be so *moving* that the ‘objective world’ will cease to be sensible in the ways we thought normal. Which means we will develop new options for agency or subjectivity in a world no longer composed of stable settings and props, a world no longer sensibly ‘objective.’” (Gibson, “The Time Will Come When...,” *Future Cinema*, 570).

\(^{497}\) Gibson, “The Time Will Come When...,” *Future Cinema*, 570.
viewer to inhabit an experience and ‘direct’ their own engagement are those that are
the most stimulating and enjoyable, because they don’t draw attention to the artifice
of the form and instead capitulate to a sense of the naturalistic real world process of
being-in-an-environment. This involves, in part, a surrender to virtual reality’s
fundamental differences to cinema, and perhaps an acquiescence to what Massumi
presents as the defining asset of interactive media, when he writes that its strength is:

to take the situation as its ‘object.’ Not a function, not a use, not a need, not a
behavior, exploratory or otherwise, not an action-reaction. But a situation, with
its own little ocean of complexity. It can take a situation and ‘open’ the
interactions it affords. The question for interactive art is, [h]ow do you cleave
an interaction asunder? Setting up an interaction is easy. We have any number
of templates for that. But how do you set it up so you sunder it, dynamically
smudge it, so that the relation potential it tends-toward appears? So that the
situation’s objectivity creatively self-abstracts, making a self-tending life-
movement, a life-subject and not just a setup. How, in short, do you make a
semblance of a situation? [...] where you are polling styles of being and
becoming, not just eliciting behaviors.498

This creation of “semblance” is the employment of interaction away from its
instrumental function. For Massumi, the move instead towards “relation” instead of
“interactivity” allows the semblance to express the dynamic qualitative differences of
lived reality. He sees the emerging lived relation to an artwork as capable of producing
an awareness of how “every moment is intensely suffused with virtuality.” To further
articulate the differences, Massumi argues that “[w]hen what is concentrated on are
instrumentalized action-reaction circuits, what gets foregrounded is the element of
nextness in the flow of action. The voluminousness of the experience, its all-
aroundedness [...] shrinks from feeling.”499 Thus, cinematic virtual reality that allows
for the emergence of these “situations,” as opposed to the attempted creation of
environment-action/spectator-reaction, may utilise its interactive potential to the
fullest.

498 Massumi, Semblance and Event, 52.
499 Ibid., 46.
Finally, it is perhaps in the more radical capacities of virtual reality that cinematic virtual reality, and horror in particular, will find the defining aspects of its new form. Virtual reality could examine that which terrifies us from a totally new perspective, where we are no longer tethered to allegorical monsters, but instead are subject to the possibilities for the brain-body image to itself become monstrous in the destabilisation of our everyday sensory-motor linkages. Each of these aspects requires further experimentation, but each also holds great significance for the advancement of virtual reality cinema, as not merely a hybrid combination of the two forms, but an art form in its own right.
Another evening and I’m alone at home. Tonight, I’m watching a movie on my computer screen. It’s a Vimeo video of a yet to be released found footage horror film with a brilliant concept: a documentary crew attempts to discover the identity of the creators behind a sinister batch of viral horror videos, similar to those examined in Chapter Four.

The man on my computer screen, one of the documentary participants, sits in front of a computer, his colleague standing behind him. “Go ahead, press play,” the colleague says [Figure 46].

A title card appears on my screen, exactly as it does on the screen inside the film. It tells me: This is a snuff video. You actually see this girl commit suicide on camera. It is one of the most gruesome acts of violence ever captured on video.

On screen the film cuts to a graveyard in the daytime. Blue-tinged and wintry. The camera pans across the headstones, coming to rest on a young woman off in the distance. The camera reframes, then zooms in as she walks towards the camera,
oblivious to the fact she is being filmed. She wears what looks like a wedding dress, and appears forlorn and distressed. She stops suddenly, clutching her wrists with each of her hands [Figure 47].

Another title card appears: You can see her veins ripped out of her wrists.

The title card fades away. The shot returns to the graveyard, and the woman.

Sitting at my computer, I realise I am mirroring the man in the narrative: we are both watching this video simultaneously. Although I can no longer see him, I am an echo of him. There is something potent in this interplay. We both know nothing about this woman. We know nothing of this cemetery. We know nothing of why she may be committing suicide, if that’s even what she is doing. We know nothing, and yet...

My body is like a twisted rope, ever tightening. I feel as though I am being inexorably drawn into the image. The woman on-screen continues to clutch her hands together, and lowers her head. The moment swells, distends, as I wait for what comes next.

Figure 47: The Woman in the Graveyard in #Screamers

This description of personal experience, like each of those described in the preceding chapters, provides a first-hand account of one of the ways that the modern experience of watching cinema has evolved and transformed. Whereas the traditional theatrical
experience still has great value, advances in technology, and mutations in how horror stories are told cinematically, have led to reconfigurations of the viewer’s bodily experience. Each of these new forms facilitates its own juncture with the spectatorial body. Importantly, in spite of claims from some cultural critics that increasing technological development devalues the body, these cinematic experiences revalorise this integration between spectator and film at a corporeal level. They defy any disembodying tendencies, in the way they produce an experience that many horror viewers seek from the genre – a proximity to the image that goes beyond our engagement with its narrative.

Through an analysis of the evolving forms of horror media presented in each chapter, this thesis has asked how cinema’s affective capacities are transformed by these modifications in form. The answers are distinct to the modality examined; however, what each has in common is an intensification of bodily presence. Found footage heightens the viewer’s engagement, not through richly-drawn narrative or compelling characterisation, but by its distinct application of capacities of the out-of-frame, and its expanded temporal economy. Because found footage consciously experiments with subjective perspectives, it opens up a space for a consideration of flux in the distinction between subjective and objective images, such as that proposed by the perception-image. That these images are indistinct in perspective produces a complex interaction between viewer and film, and accentuates a ‘being-with’ the image, in a Deleuzian sense. These films also may markedly replicate the instinctual human drives of foraging, investigation, curiosity and expectancy of the SEEKING system that Panksepp proposes, in the way that their diegetic cameras often scan or search their environment.

The post-cinematic videos examined in Chapter Four accentuate their synaesthetic and haptic qualities through the employment of an ‘aesthetics of distortion,’ both visually and aurally. These aberrations of form heighten the sensory aspects of the sound and image, promoting the potential for cross-modal sensory experience. Their concerted amplification of the non-representational content emerges often as a creative response to limitations in the practicalities of their production, be those limitations budgetary, or technical, or simply relating to the scope and duration of the video. Like found footage horror cinema, these videos build
on the inherent myth-building compulsion of some viewers, where they make an imaginative leap from incredulity to ambiguity. This myth-building is insufficient, however, to fully explain how a viewer interfaces with these videos; there has to be something more than just the viewer’s imagination breathing life into a previously inert object. This ‘something more’ is at the heart of this thesis. It is the affective charge that image and sound can carry, in excess of the representational content, that allow these videos to become, in the words of Martin, “living, breathing, pulsating organism[s].”

Importantly, the interface between the film as an ‘organism’ and the human body is just as dynamic as our interaction with any other organism; both are best thought of as Deleuze does: “a body is not defined by either simple materiality, by its occupying space (‘extension’), or by organic structure. It is defined by the relations of its parts (relations of relative motion and rest, speed and slowness), and by its actions and reactions with respect both to its environment or milieu and to its internal milieu.”

The meeting point of virtual reality and horror cinema has tremendous implications for how we consider the body of the spectator. Virtual reality promotes an embodied response in its construction of presence. Importantly, it highlights the fallacy of visual engagement as the primary sensory interface in the human interaction with media. Although a nascent art form, virtual reality demands that filmmakers consider an embodied response at the foundations of their interface with this ‘frameless’ media. In some vital sense the body is now the frame in virtual reality.

While psychoanalytic, representational and hermeneutic models are important to an analysis of how horror works, they often place the spectatorial body as second to cognitive response, contending that our physiological response emerges from our appraisal of the sound and image. By focusing on how the body is the primary interface between viewer and image, and by demonstrating how the somatic response to horror arises from horror’s recurrent destabilisation of the image’s semantic content, this thesis has shown the value of approaches to horror scholarship that reframe these questions through the presence of an embodied spectator. So too has it demonstrated

---

the limitations of representational and hermeneutic models. By drawing on the work of theorists of embodied spectatorship, and more broadly, theorists of embodied cognition, I highlight how inseparable cognitive appraisal is from corporeal response, and offers a counter to the hierarchical approach that places cognition over corporeality.

The perpetually changing forms of horror examined, and the technological modalities through which they are delivered, alter the dynamics of spectatorship, and in doing so, often intensify embodied experience. On the level of the various senses, these new forms create new relations of sensory response, highlighting the cross-modal potential of cinema more broadly. The viewer doesn’t simply watch or listen to these films, but as Ndalianis writes, they feel their “sensorial enactments” across their entire bodies. This is a consideration of horror cinema as a point of contact, but one that does not necessarily require the presence of on-screen bodies in order to generate this affective exchange.

A common factor between the works examined in this thesis is the reduced presence of on-screen bodies. Found footage, through the exigencies of its generic boundaries, commonly does not use the on-screen body in the same way that horror films outside of the sub-genre do, as a location for implied threat or, in some cases, actual mutilation or torture. While these applications of the on-screen body in horror do intensify the affective response of the viewer, they are not the only way to consider horror’s affect. Extending the consideration of horror’s affect to the way the non-representational aspects of the image work, and how affect does not, in Massumi’s terms, correspond to the semantic content, allows us a way to think through the intensities generated by forms that place less importance on elements such as narrative and spectatorial identification (for example, the Youtube videos discussed in Chapter Four). By employing Massumi’s concept of affect, as the “passing of a threshold, seen from the point of view of [the body’s] change in capacity,” we can also see how horror media often tries to direct this change in capacity, to enhance it or diminish it.\footnote{Massumi, Politics of Affect, 3-4.} The conclusions of this thesis do not establish a concrete articulation of what cinematic affect is; they are instead a thinking through of horror media’s
affective possibilities from the understanding of affect that Massumi advances. It may, in fact, be easier to articulate what affect is not, in the scope of this thesis; affect is not coterminous with emotion; it does not only emerge from the non-representational aspects; however, they do have the possibility of amplifying it; similarly, it is not pure sensation, although the intensification of cinema’s sensory aspects plays a major role in the generation of affect; crucially, its emergence does not require the presence of on-screen bodies. It may be beyond the scope of this thesis to fully codify cinematic affect, given that the way that we truly understand it is in the experience of viewing itself.

This understanding has obvious resonances with the understanding of affect proposed through Deleuze’s movement-image, where affection resides in between perception and action. For Deleuze, affect emerges from the change or alteration that occurs when ‘bodies’ come into contact with each other. Powell makes a strong and valuable contribution to horror scholarship by establishing the value of Deleuzian concepts in understanding a genre that so often works to complicate its semantic content. Powell’s application of Deleuze gives us ways of understanding how horror films employ the material force of their images, in her words, their “shades of colour, intensities of light and timbres of sound,” to affectively imbricate the viewer. I have expanded these understandings outside of conventional horror cinema, into these new modalities.

This thesis amalgamates and synthesises existing scholarship. It pays tribute to Deleuze’s concept of “machinic assemblage,” by taking heterogeneous fields of thought and placing them into interaction and imbrication with one another, without reducing one domain of thought to another. This is why it links Deleuzian thought with reconceptions of the perception-image, with neuroscientific concepts such as Embodied Simulation Theory and Panksepp’s SEEKING system, with existing theories of embodied spectatorship and phenomenological approaches to understanding the film-viewer dynamic. My approach is made with a consideration of the “lived-body” as the grounds of experience: it is predicated on the notion that, in order to understand the world (and cinema), the body must be conceived not as a ‘screen’ between us and the world, but that which forms our way of “being-in-the-world.” The embodied self is the ground of perception.
I have synthesised these various fields of existing scholarship with an aim to understanding horror cinema through the type of experience it produces for a viewer. This analysis shifts emphasis from horror’s representational content to how the affective properties of horror media can exceed the symbolic powers of language or the image. In the field of horror scholarship, this is crucial, as the more common approach to these texts is to either unpack their representational aspects, or to employ psychoanalytic theory to decode their production and reception. While both of these approaches are effective in part, the approach proposed by this thesis expands our understandings of how horror works. It provides a framework which could be applied to further evolutions in the form, be they technological or generic; it demonstrates how, in order to productively analyse these future developments, cinematic artefacts should be examined for their modifications to the viewer’s phenomenological experience of the image.

This thesis has several limitations. It has not focused on the political implications of the understandings it presents, although it does have potential value as a method of further extending Deleuze’s critique of representational thinking, and in the ways it has considered the mutability of cinematic subjectivity. It has also largely bypassed the ethical quandaries raised by this bodily intensification, particularly in relation to developing technologies such as virtual reality, where the ‘reality’ of the horror has the potential to be misappropriated, or employed without the full understanding of its consequences. There is value to further scholarship in the emerging field of cinematic virtual reality, particularly in relation to these ethical questions. There is also significant value in the further study of the development of a new cinematic grammar in this incipient mode. It would be productive to experiment further with the concept of ‘story-enabling’ in virtual reality cinema in a diverse set of genres, to establish whether the domain of horror can perhaps more fully integrate these qualities.

At the heart of this project has been an investigation of what horror cinema is capable of as it moves beyond the theatrical screen. Moments of viewing like the one described in the opening of this section will always hold appeal for the horror

---

502 Playtest, an episode of the TV Series Black Mirror, narratively wrestled with some of these implications in a profound and compelling way.
cinephile, in the intensification of experience they generate, in the way they promote entwinement with that which is often at the borders of our understanding. This thesis has been written for those who share this compulsion to ‘go ahead, press play’ and wait, on the edge of this border, for the image to grasp us, startle us, unnerve us.


IMAGES REFERENCED

Online Video. Parker Wright.


*Suicidemouse by Nec1.* Accessed June 20 2017. Screenshot taken from *Suicidemouse.* Online Video. Nec1


*The Slender Man (or The Operator).* Accessed June 20 2017. [https://goo.gl/images/Az3yRz](https://goo.gl/images/Az3yRz)


https://goo.gl/images/Ch7GuB.

https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/tH-VJRZ_ftpAvWjqCoR3G4vVGoF0UUGmzWj-BADg51GzeNAYSPAkSpQUzScHh6926jTw=s152.


VIDEOS REFERENCED


The Drop VR. VR Short Film. Inside 360. 2 July 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPmPU09GtHA.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzdZyZgCY58.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2Jo6yrUVwM.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQlVmauiXI.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6a-pO2Pm37A.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tb33j_DWu8Y&t=1s.

Escape The Living Dead. VR Short Film. Jaunt. 2 July 2017.
https://www.jauntvr.com/title/0ed2a6b244.


https://with.in/watch/evolution-of-verse/

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNUweuEnBI0.

The Game. VR Short Film. Jaunt. 2 July 2017.
https://www.jauntvr.com/title/e6a64293ee.

Life of Us. VR Short Film. Chris Milk and Aaron Koblin. 2 July 2017.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=142LNOPnxDU.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_h1dY66Rm4&.

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCA2j2wFhXsQej79c9V4v_Lg.


VR Noir. VR Short Film. AFTRS, FSM and StartVR. 2 July 2017.
https://startvr.co/project/vr-noir/.

https://with.in/watch/nyt-mag-vr-walking-new-york/.

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsLiV4WJfkTEHH0b9PmRklw.

Yellowstone VR. VR Short Film. Jaunt and Flex. 2 July 2017.


The Cabinet of Dr Caligari. 1920. Directed by Robert Wiene. Decla-Bioscop AG.


Pandora’s Box. 1929. Directed by G.W. Pabst. Nero-Film AG.


**TELEVISION REFERENCED**


*The Twilight Zone.* 1959-1964. Created by Rod Serling. Cayuga Productions and CBS.