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Fear, trauma and found footage: How found footage horror can help us feel better

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Abstract

Why would people experiencing a global pandemic seek out a pandemic disaster movie? Why would horror films help people feel better about an unrelated real world source of health anxiety? Why do people enjoy horror cinema at all? This project seeks to understand the mechanism by which horror scares and how this can be a therapeutic or preventative process, and then understand the found footage subgenre of horror by the function of this mechanical framework. This entails outlining a phenomenologically biocultural approach to horror, as informed by the work of scholars and researchers like Mathias Clasen et al, Coltan Scrivener, Julian Hanich and Adam Daniel as well as radical embodied cognition and affect theory. This approach argues that the effects of horror are fundamentally biological and cultural at the same time, and that horror provides an opportunity to vicariously experience and as such survive danger. I argue that found footage horror should defined not by the visual or formal traits the presentation seeks to emulate, but rather its relationship to the viewer; found footage horror will always feature a camera-using person or group who seeks to record. The distinction between found footage and mockumentary is in the embodiment or foregrounding of the people behind the camera, though these lines can often become blurred. This grounding of the camera-user furthers the impact of horror elements both specific to found footage and shared with more traditionally presented cinema. Finally, I will use the established methodology and the prior definitions of found footage and its thematic movements to break down *Host* (Savage, 2020) in order to understand both how it scares and how it can be seen as potentially therapeutic during a time of global pandemic.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

"It is important to note that horror is both a responsive and creative continuum, not a fixed point in psychological, sociological, or cinematic space." – D. E. Cowan.[1]

On January 21st 2020, the World Health Organisation released its first Situation Report[2] on what would become known as COVID-19. The Novel Coronavirus, or '2019-nCoV', had been confirmed to have killed six people in the Chinese city of Wuhan with a further two-hundred and eighty-two cases across China, Japan, Thailand and Korea. Nine days later, a second convening of the WHO's International Health Regulations Emergency Committee agreed the rapidly-spreading 2019-nCoV met the criteria deemed necessary to qualify as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)[3]. The following day, two people in the UK were diagnosed as having the disease[4]. Within twelve days, there would be nine UK cases[5]. Within a further thirty-two days, there would be well over a thousand[6].

At the beginning of March, film production studio Warner Bros. announced that their 2011 pandemic thriller *Contagion* (Soderburgh, 2011) had gone from the 270th to the 2nd most popular title in their catalogue[7]. A lot of people, it would seem, found themselves seeking out a fictional narrative concerning a deadly global outbreak, *during* a deadly global outbreak. But were these people accessing a nine-year-old film purely for informational purposes, given its grounded tone and supposed attention to detail, or was there something else going on?

In September 2020, Coltan Scrivner, John A Johnson, Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Mathias Clasen published a study wherein they found (even when controlling for age, sex and income) that experience with horror films, prepper genre films, pandemic films and a general trait of morbid curiosity was "…associated with greater positive resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic…In sum, the current study provides evidence that individual differences in both media preferences and personality are associated with resilience during the COVID-19

[1] D. E. Cowan, *Sacred terror: religion and horror on the silver screen* (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2008), 20

[2] World Health Organization, *Situation Report - 1*, 2020.

[3] World Health Organization, *Statement on the second meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the outbreak of novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV)*, 2020.

[4] BBC News, *Coronavirus: Two cases confirmed in UK*, 2020.

[5] BBC News, *Coronavirus: Ninth case found in UK*, 2020.

[6] BBC News, *Coronavirus: UK deaths double in 24 hours*, 2020.

[7] The New York Times, *'Contagion', Steven Soderbergh's 2011 thriller, is climbing up the charts*, 2020.

pandemic"[8] Specifically; "...horror fandom was significantly associated with lower psychological distress." As Valerio Sbravatti points out in his paper *Slashers and Mental Health,* cinema-borne metaphor (including horror) makes for a useful tool for discussing mental health conditions with patients[9], but is it possible there is a psychologically beneficial function to horror cinema that goes beyond its use as a conceptual talking point? Were people watching and rewatching *Contagion,* not for information on pandemics, but rather for some curative or restorative purpose?

During the early days of the UK's COVID-19 pandemic response, a UK-based filmmaker pranked his friends. On April 21st, Rob Savage tweeted a video recording of a *Zoom* call taking place between himself and his peers, wherein he describes strange noises coming from his attic. While on the call, he takes the camera to the attic, knife in hand, and looks around. Suddenly, something jumps out at him and screeches, sending Savage falling down the ladder to the floor, unresponsive, as his friends look on.[10] The prank quickly went viral and a feature film was greenlit shortly afterwards. From the project pitch to its release on horror streaming service *Shudder*, *Host* (Savage, 2020) took three months to produce with actors shooting their own sequences with direction over video calls. As a result of this incredibly compressed production process, we have perhaps the most consistent social backdrop to a film's production in cinematic history, with the ongoing anxieties over personal health and isolation remaining a dominant concern throughout. *Host* is not a film about COVID-19 or even the threat of global pandemic, but infection anxiety, isolation and social stress is baked into the text of the film.

Throughout this thesis, I will construct the elements necessary to evidence the following; *Host* could potentially make people feel better about the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of this construction will be dedicated to understanding how/why horror media and found footage horror in particular affects audiences. In chapter one I will layout my case for a phenomenologically biocultural approach to horror, built largely on the work of Mathias Clasen in his *Why Horror Seduces[11]* but enriched with radical embodied cognition, affect theory

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[8] C. Scrivner et al., 'Pandemic practice: Horror fans and morbidly curious individuals are more psychologically resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Personality & Individual Differences*, 168 (2021).

[9] V. Sbravatti, 'Slashers and Mental Health', *Panel 9: Slasher & Mental Health* [Lecture] (The Slasher Studies Summer Camp, 2021, unpublished).

[10] *I've been hearing strange noises from my attic...* Directed by Rob Savage. Written by Rob Savage (Vimeo 2020).

[11] M. Clasen, *Why horror seduces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017)

and production/consumption context. The mechanism by which horror films – charged with the intention to scare an audience aware of and anticipating scary material and yet somehow still succeeding in this effort – will be explained here, before moving on to how being scared in a consensual, safe environment can be a psychologically beneficial activity. In chapter two, the focus will then fall onto found footage horror cinema in order to understand the ingrained cultural/aesthetic expectations viewers will have watching *Host*. Found footage horror has been defined – and indeed named - very differently across the few works that have been written on the subject. In keeping how and why horror works in mind, I will be outlining an alternative definition of found footage horror, predicated not on its formal characteristics but its relation to the audience. As I will argue in this chapter, found footage should be understood not by its imitation of 'legitimate' media sources but rather through the identification it forges between audience and diegetic filmmaker. I will then move on to breakdown the specific methods used to scare audiences, or 'gags', as they pertain to the subgenre as defined as well as the approach to horror established in chapter one. Finally, chapter three will see these two concepts brought together to analyse *Host*, both in order to understand how the horror works and what effects are being triggered in the audience, but also how the *phenomenologically biocultural* approach to horror can help us understand precisely how *Host* can be seen as psychologically beneficial, be it restorative, curative or preventative. By the end of this thesis paper, I intend to have outlined just how horror cinema, specifically found footage horror, could theoretically be good for audiences under specific circumstances, but also to have outlined future questions for consideration. This is, after all, relatively new emerging theory placed at a junction between evolutionary science and psychology, and media studies.

Chapter 2 Defining the Phenomenologically Biocultural Approach to Horror

"Though often reviled or dismissed, horror remains one of the most enduringly popular genres in cinema history. Even in the era of big-budget, effects-driven blockbusters, small-budget horror films can draw large audiences…Beyond impressive box-office numbers, however, many intelligent, independent productions and filmmakers have also garnered critical acclaim…Put simply, the current state of horror films is strong." – K. R. Phillips[12]

In the following chapter, I will outline my argument in defence of a phenomenologically biocultural approach to horror, examining the individual components of evolutionary biology, embodied cognition, affect theory and the socio-political contexts that interact with audiences. Outlining this approach will necessitate a critique of both psychoanalysis and representational cognitivism in order to illustrate how these approaches fail to fully justify the existence of, and indeed success of, cinema that aims to upset its audience with threats that the audience knows are not real. Once my methodology has been outlined, I will then take into account the contemporary science that seeks to understand how horror viewership might be beneficial in a psychological sense; in particular in relation to mental health conditions such as anxiety.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis, as an approach to cinema, finds as its starting point the theories of Sigmund Freud and how his conception of the mind's operation can inform an understanding of cinema. The relevance to film theory is described as thus by Todd McGowan; "Psychoanalysis makes its more important discoveries through the analysis of dreams, and to this day, the cinema remains a dream factory, a form of public dreaming."[13] To McGowan – drawing on Freud and Lacan exclusively – "The cinema attracts spectators because it ignites their desire, and psychoanalysis is a philosophy of desire", desire being the 'unconscious' that causes neuroses in the neurotic and shapes dreams in the unneurotic.[14] The goal of psychoanalysis is to empower a subject to act by recognising themselves in seemingly alien unconscious. This

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[12] K. R. Phillips, *A place of darkness: The rhetoric of horror in early american cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 1

[13] T. McGowan, *Psychoanalytic film theory and the rules of the game* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 1

[14] *Ibid, 17*

unconscious – desire – carries a "…traumatic charge because the subject desires against its own good…[this discovery] places psychoanalysis in opposition to almost the entire history of philosophy and to common sense, which sees our good (or happiness) as the unquestioned aim of all our actions."[15] This counter-happiness desire isn't buried in a subject, but is revealed in their actions and words and requires an external voice to draw attention away from conscious thought to elucidate the unconscious. To McGowan, "Films translate unconscious desire into a series of images that we can analyze".[16] Desire is the result of lack, or castration, and to psychoanalysts there is no curing lack but rather embracing it as a part of themselves. This concept of castration would become foundational in certain readings of horror film, especially as linked to feminist studies as; "Freud designates the castration complex as a dilemma that both sexes must confront, but he consigns castration itself only to women."[17]

Although psychoanalysis has grown to encompass much more than just Freud's work, it is important to understand that Freud's work on his 'talking cure' and its implications for an unconscious self was fraught with scientifically and ethically questionable conduct. According to vocal psychoanalyst-turned-Freud-critic Frederick Crews, the origins of psychoanalysis are fraught with spurious behaviour on Freud's part. Where Freud says in *Studies in Hysteria*[18] that co-author "Breuer did in fact restore his hysterical patient [Anna O] – that is, free her from her symptoms…",[19] in his *Freud: The Making of an Illusion*, Crews tells of the real Anna O, Bertha Pappenheim; an articulate and intelligent woman who lost her father and subsequently suffered weight loss, weakness and a cough, and following 'treatment' would end up with a possible morphine and/or chloral hydrate addiction as well as a significant time spent in a sanitorium following Breuer's 'care'[20]. According to Crews, the questionable retelling of Pappenheim's case was only one in a series of spurious cases, the majority of which saw Freud as the primary caregiver. One thing immediately apparent in reading through the *Studies on Hysteria*, in particular the actual words of Freud himself, is the consistent rejection of the female patients' self-reporting of their symptoms and the insistence that something further must be afoot; something more in line with Freud's own theories. The purpose of discussing the above is not to weigh in on a hotly-contested discussion within psychology, but rather to establish that if we are to come to a fundamental understanding of how horror cinema

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[15] *Ibid, 19*
[16] *Ibid, 21*
[17] *Ibid, 42*
[18] S. Freud, *Delphi Collected Works of Sigmund Freud* (East Sussex: Delphi Classics, 2017)
[19] F. Crews, *Freud: The making of an illusion* (New York: Henry Holt and Company; Metropolitan Books, 2017), 353
[20] *Ibid, 353-374*

interacts with the horror viewer and their brain, it is necessary to find a form of analysis or framework that has a tangible grounding in cognitive science.

A number of theorists took Freud's theories and used them in their own discussions, but according to McGowan; "In fact, it is the failure of other psychoanalysts to sustain the radicality of the unconscious that prompts Jacques Lacan to argue for the necessity of a 'return to Freud' in the 1950s."[21] For Lacan, the human animal exists in three stages; prior to, during and proceeding subjection to language/social order. It is a 'being of need' that will sate its desires for food and sex until subjection, when desire emerges and those needs are mediated by the social order.[22] Desire, to Lacan, was the difference between the unspoken demand and satisfaction. This desire is entangled with the Other – the social authority. "We desire the Other to desire us…But even more importantly, we also pattern our own desire on what the Other desires."[23] Lacan also classified experience as the 'Symbolic' or the order of language and identity, to understand the unwritten rules and inherent incompleteness that creates division between those who belong and those who don't (according to those rules). With the Symbolic Order, also comes the 'imaginary' which seeks to patch the holes in the Order, and the 'real' which enables and undermines the Order. There is an antagonism that tells us society cannot work out successfully, and "Psychoanalysis emerges from the discontent of those whose material conditions suggest that they should be happy"[24] To Lacan, castration is symbolic; an incomplete speaking resulting from subjection.[25]

A key text in psychoanalytic readings of horror films is Carol J Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, in which Clover codified – amongst other things – the concept of the Final Girl; the final female victim of a slasher film who comes to understand the mortal threat she is under and either lives by escaping or slaying the monster herself.[26] In drawing on the work of Thomas Lacquer[27], Clover claims that the archetypal mythologies upon which horror narratives are

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[21] McGowan, *Psychoanalytic film theory and the rules of the game*, 19
[22] *Ibid, 26*
[23] *Ibid, 28*
[24] *Ibid, 35*
[25] *Ibid, 42*
[26] C. J. Clover, *Men, women and chainsaws: gender in the modern horror film* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1992), 35
[27] Lacquer's claim that gender difference was invented in the 1800s to socially supress women has been challenged by Michael Stolberg, who states in *ISIS: Journal of the history of science in society* that "[Lacquer and Londa Shiebinger] have rightly emphasised the potential cultural and political uses of sexual dimorphism as a means to legitimize female subordination and disempowerment as naturally given" but "the new anatomy of sexual difference emerged in the sixteenth century, at a time when the enlightened ideas of liberalism, universal rights, and 'republican motherhood' that would make

based to a 'greater or lesser degree', such as werewolves, vampires and possession by demons or Satan, all come from a time before the 'two-sex' concept of gender. In using this 'one-sex' concept, in part because horror films have "…a quality of 'slidingness' that is more immediately apprehensible in the terms of one-sex reasoning than in the oppositional categories of psychoanalysis", Clover makes the point that "the world of horror is in any case one that knows very well that men and women are profoundly different (and that the former are vastly superior to the latter) but one that at the same time repeatedly contemplates mutations or slidings whereby women begin to look a lot like men (slasher films), men are pressured to become like women (possession films), and some people are impossible to tell apart…"[28] According to Clover, sexual identity and gender confusion forms the driving impetus for horror monsters[29]. To Clover, the fact that male viewers can and will identify with the Final Girl of a slasher film (as female audiences can enjoy male-dominated films like *Deliverance* (Boorman, 1972) means that "…this fluidity of engaged perspective is in keeping with the universal claims of the psychoanalytic model: the threat function and the victim function coexist in the same unconscious, regardless of anatomical sex,"[30] which prompts her to ask why there are not more female killers and 'Final Boys'. To this, Clover says that the gender roles aren't as clear as they seem; though the killer's 'phallic purpose' is unmistakable, his masculinity is qualified in ways that reflect Linda William's formulation that classic monsters are representative of 'repressed, animal male sexual energy' and the 'power of non-phallic sexuality', before drawing a line to the Terrible Place lair of the killer and Freud's assertion that neurotic men find vaginas uncanny. Likewise, the Final Girl has masculine interests, an inevitable sexual reluctance, apartness from other girls and aggressively investigates the horror in a fashion normally reserved for males.[31] For Clover, the slasher is site of particular cruelty to women, and yet indicates a shifting empathy as male viewers[32] end up identifying with a character "…who is anatomically female and one whose point of view the spectator is unambiguously invited, by the usual set of literary-structural and cinematic conventions, to share."[33]

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dimorphism still – or again – so attractive to the eighteenth century were not yet on the agenda."

[28] Clover, *Men, women and chainsaws: gender in the modern horror film*, 15-16
[29] *Ibid, 27*
[30] *Ibid, 47*
[31] *Ibid, 47-48*
[32] At the exclusion of mentioning the female film audience at the time
[33] Clover, *Men, women and chainsaws: gender in the modern horror film*, 61

Lacan's classifications of experience, particularly the Symbolic Order, were largely taken up by Julia Kristeva with her theory of abjection, though where objects of desire for Lacan help coordinate desires, Kristeva's abject shares only a quality of "…being opposed to *I*."[34] For Kristeva, what is abject has been 'jettisoned' by the ego-superego and challenges from the outside. The 'I' in this case suffers the torment of affect under the understanding that this is the wish of the other.[35] Another prominent voice in the psychoanalytic theory of horror is Barbara Creed, who in her work exploring the Monstrous Feminine draws from Kristeva's theory of the abject – in particular the 'border' and the mother-child relationship – and brings it into a cinematic context. This includes noting the relevance of corpse-adjacent horror monsters (corpses being the ultimate abjection) and the abjection arising from those beings that highlight the 'fragility of the law'.[36] The border, and subsequent crossing thereof, foreshadows Carroll's theory of horror, though with Creed the crossing of the border between natural/supernatural, good/evil, man/beast etc marks the trespasser as abject as opposed to Carroll's later and more science-oriented approach. The final key way in which horror pertains to the abject is via Kristeva's belief that "…all individuals experience abjection at the time of their earliest attempts to break away from the mother." For Creed, this results in the cinematic construction of the mother becoming a site of abjection.[37] Here too we see castration anxiety taking a key role, as Creed claims that it "…is a central concern of the horror film," where men inflict on women (via stabbing) the 'one act he fears for himself'; castration, in making the woman's entire body a bleeding wound.[38] Creed explains the overarching threat in *Alien* (Scott, 1979) as the following; "…Alien is a complex representation of the monstrous-feminine in terms of the maternal figure as perceived within a patriarchal ideology. She is there in the text's scenarios of the primal scene, of birth and death, she is there in her many guises as the treacherous mother, the oral sadistic mother, the mother as primordial abyss; and she is there in the film's images of blood, of the all-devouring vagina, the toothed vagina, the vagina as Pandora's box; and finally she is there in the chameleon figure of the alien, the monster as fetish object of and for the mother. But it is the archaic mother, the reproductive/generative mother, who haunts the mise-en-scene of the film's first section, with its emphasis on different representations of the primal scene."[39] To zoom in on a sequence in specific, she outlines the

[34] J. Kristeva, *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1
[35] *Ibid, 2*
[36] B. Creed, 'Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An imaginary abjection', in B. K. Grant (ed.), *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2015), 41
[37] *Ibid, 43*
[38] *Ibid, 46*
[39] *Ibid, 49*

moment when Kane is infected as him 'investigating the egg/womb', thus making him a part of the 'primal scene, taking the place of the mother to be penetrated by the father/phallic mother'.

Generally speaking, the dominant form of psychoanalytic discussion on horror is centered on gender politics and the representation of women. On the occasions where psychoanalysis meets horror on grounds not explicitly concerned with gender, it tends to follow class politics and the society-borne Other that can be explicated in horror cinema. For example, Christopher Sharrett claims that horror of the 1980s and 90s has been co-opted by neoconservative values and the demand of capital; "The cooptation is particularly disturbing for its suggestions about the reach of capitalist culture. Inasmuch as the horror film addresses the Other at the primal level of the unconscious, the overturning of the genre's radicalism and the restoration of the Other in fantastic art are evidence of capital's further colonization of consciousness."[40]

To return to McGowan, a key issue in his argument is the reductive way he dismisses the "…ever-popular – and ever-tedious – question of nature or culture."[41] No one person is purely of nature or purely of culture but a 'product of the violent collision of both', and once language is introduced the animal instincts are replaced with desire, according to McGowan. He argues that science wants to explain actions via evolution and DNA, and cultural critics via the exigencies of society,[42] and the example he uses for this is an affair taking place either as a result of polygamous male evolutionary result overriding the desire for monogamy or living in a patriarchal society, a comparative example that is very reductive. This is to say nothing of the idea that humans are not the only species to use language or a method of communication, and society and science are impacted by each other in a multitude of complex ways. Herein lies a key problem with psychoanalysis as an approach to understanding horror cinema; it attempts to be entirely prescriptive using models of human cognition that are simply non-existent, predicated on bad science that similarly contends a social structure that simply *is*, rather than constructed and developed. Where there virtually no scientific fact underlying the many facets of psychoanalytic film theory, any resulting discussion involves finding information purely within the text of the film and applying it to the framework of Freudian ideas. This is not to say that discussion of film must remain in the realms of what can be empirically certified, but if question being asked is 'how or why does horror scare us (and how can this be a good thing?)',

40 C. Sharrett, 'The horror film in neoconservative culture', in B. K. Grant (ed.), *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2015), 282
41 McGowan, *Psychoanalytic film theory and the rules of the game*, 24
42 *Ibid, 23-25*

then it stands to reason that using a conception of the mind that has been long since rejected by cognitive science will not be satisfactory.

Cognitivism

I shall turn, then, to what was a key academic response to psychoanalysis; cognitivism. In the introduction to their compiled essays on the subject (though they are clear that this does not constitute a primer on the cognitivist field), David Bordwell and Noël Carroll write that psychoanalysis – what they called the 'Grand Theory' – was an aggregate of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Structuralist semiotics, Post-structuralist literary theory and Althusserian Marxism and was "…put forth as the indispensable frame of reference for understanding all filmic phenomena: the activities of the film spectator, the construction of the film text, the social and political functions of cinema, and the development of film technology and the industry."[43]

Perhaps one of the most widely recognized definitions of horror cinema comes from Noël Carroll in his *Philosophy of Horror;* that of 'art-horror'[44]. For Carroll, there is a need to distinguish between 'natural horror', or the horror felt towards terrible things in real life, and emotions of 'art-horror' that "…is meant to refer to the product of a genre that crystallized, speaking very roughly, around the time of the publication of *Frankenstein* – give or take fifty years – and that has persisted, often cyclically, through the novels and plays of the nineteenth century and the literature, comic books, pulp magazines, and films of the twentieth."[45] Like suspense and mystery, horror as a genre derives its name from the very *affect* it intends to produce; "…this emotion constitutes the identifying mark of horror."[46] According to Carroll, the horror film is one that concerns a monster or monstrous entity that breaches the ontological norms of their setting to which the protagonists feel a fear or revulsion, and it is in emotions like these that the audience are expected to converge with the characters. [47] This convergence enables Carroll to root his philosophy of horror in his wider preference for cognitivism as a methodology for approaching film theory, as it provides a possible means to remove the subjective experience – to an extent – from discussions on art-horror in that we are able to discuss the emotional responses of the characters as presented in the text of the

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[43] D. Bordwell & N. Carroll, *Post-theory: reconstructing film studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), xiii

[44] N. Carroll, *The philosophy of horror: Or, paradoxes of the heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 12

[45] *Ibid, 13*

[46] *Ibid, 14*

[47] *Ibid, 18*

film. The reactions of the character that typify this divergence are usually a mix of fear, revulsion and disgust[48], and it is this that forms the centre point to Carroll's qualification on the mechanism of horror; art-horror requires the viewer to evaluate the monster onscreen as threatening (fear) and, drawing on Mary Douglas' work on transgressions of schemes of cultural categorization, impure (disgust)[49].

This can be easily recognised as a cognitivist approach to horror, but as Bordwell and Carroll write, they do not view cognitivism as theory but rather "…a stance. A cognitivist analysis or explanation seeks to understand human thought, emotion, and action by appeal to processes of mental representation, naturalistic processes, and (some sense of) rational agency."[50] By their own admission, within the loose framework of the cognitivist stance, the essays in their compiled collection offer different opinions and contradict each other, much as psychoanalysis did before them. As Carroll later defines it; "[the name cognitivism] derives from its tendency to look for alternative answers to many of the questions addressed by or raised by psychoanalytic film theories, especially with respect to film reception, in terms of cognitive and rational processes rather than irrational or unconscious ones"[51]

As previously discussed, the works of Freud via Lacan were particularly influential to feminist film studies, by a mechanism described by Cynthia A Freeman in her essay *Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films*; "Typically this sort of feminist film theory relies on a psychoanalytic framework in which women are described as castrated or as representing threats evoking male castration anxiety. These theories also standardly presume some connection between gazing, violent aggression, and masculinity, and they suggest that there are particularly 'male' motivations for making, watching, and enjoying horror films."[52] Freeland outlines her intention to "…propose an alternative framework constructing feminist interpretations of horror films by critically interrogating their gender ideologies"[53], alternative in particular to what she calls 'psychodynamic' feminist studies that "…may consider films as artifacts, recognising such aspects as plot, narrative, or point of view, their chief emphasis is on viewers' motives and interests in watching horror films, and on the psychological effects such

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[48] *Ibid, 23*

[49] *Ibid, 28*

[50] Bordwell & Carroll, *Post-theory: reconstructing film studies*, xvi

[51] N. Carroll, 'Prospects for film theory: a personal assessment', in N. B. Carroll, David (ed.), *Post-theory: reconstructing film studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 62

[52] C. A. Freeland, 'Feminist frameworks for horror films', in N. B. Carroll, David (ed.), *Post-theory: reconstructing film studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 195

[53] *Ibid,*

films have." In response to both the Mulvey-Lacanian and Creed-Kristevan frameworks, Freeland's objections include the problematic nature of psychoanalysis and the seemingly illogical bias towards specifically Lacanian or Kristevan ideas over other psychoanalysts, the 'reductive' and 'one-dimensional' readings that these frameworks produce, the problematic gender differentiations that the theories are predicated on (to the exclusion of other social factors like race or class), the fact that psychodynamic feminist studies are disproportionally prevalent in film theory compared with contemporary feminist theorizing in general and the fact that the genderized plot-spectacle tensions can be easily degendered (as per Carroll).[54] Freeman's proposal for a new form of feminist film theory concerns 'extra-filmic' roles that investigate the social and historical context around film production and reception, and 'intra-filmic' roles that focus on interrogating their contents and structures to scrutinize their representation of gender and sex.[55]

Alex Neill notes that there is a rough but identifiable distinction between the emotional responses concerning one's self, and those concerning another which can further be separated into empathetic and sympathetic.[56] This forms the starting point of his determination that in looking at the variety of emotional responses to film, we can better understand them as opposed to lumping them all together. He refers to Dolf Zillman's assertion that although the notion of 'vicariously experiencing' the experiences of characters they sympathise with is widely accepted as 'secure', our interaction with suspense films would serve to undermine this exercise as the audience feels tense while the protagonist is unaware of the danger.[57] This assumption is that the audience empathising with a character is a case of directly mirroring their current emotional state, rather than emotionally siding with them, empathy here defined as feeling *with* a character. He then returns to Carroll's assertion of much the same in his issue with 'character-identification'. And yet, according to Neill, a growing force of 'empathy acceptance' is moving through philosophy and psychology, and it is in light of empathy's apparent large role in 'understanding and explanation' that Neil seeks to assess where this relationship sits with fiction; "…If empathy does play a crucial role in our understanding of history, of society, and of others, wouldn't it be at least somewhat odd to find that it is marginal or of little importance in our understanding of fiction?"[58] On two characters being

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[54] *Ibid, 198*
[55] *Ibid, 204*
[56] A. Neill, 'Empathy and (film) fiction', in N. B. Carroll, David (ed.), *Post-theory: reconstructing film studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 175
[57] *Ibid, 176*
[58] *Ibid, 178*

scared in *The Haunting* (Wise, 1963); "It may be suggested that as we watch we are terrified for the two women in the film; that it, our terror is sympathetic…But of course this does not mean that our responses are merely a matter of mimicry. Rather….we respond as we do because in this scene we see the situation that the two women are in from their point of view. We find it terrifying because they find it terrifying."[59] Neill pulls from several sources to understand the constructive limitations of empathy as a vehicle, but what is of interest to this thesis is his concluding remarks about the value of empathy; "But given that we can empathize with fictional characters, why do we do so? The answer to this question, I believe, will be more or less the same as the answer to the question why do we empathise with actual persons…in short, we come to understand them better; so that we are better placed to understand why they have reacted and behaved as they have done, and to predict how the will react and behave in the future…Empathizing with others also makes available to us possibilities for our own emotional education and development…In short, through responding empathetically to others we may come to see our world and our possibilities anew." [60]

Although the merits of coming to understand our own emotions by empathising with others is not something to be dismissed out of hand, if the objective is seeking to understand the mechanism by which perception leads a viewer to interact with a fictional narrative concerning fictional characters in a way that bodily affects them, there must be a practical and tangible mechanism at play that drives this experience, rather than this connection being a second-hand benefit to a more philosophical notion. This is an issue across the cognitivist approach to cinema in general; though there is nothing in the loose definition that demands it, cognitivist discussion on film typically revolves around the audience building representations in their mind; receiving the input from the cinema screen and evaluating it cognitively, from which the emotions of horror and disgust arise. Where psychoanalysis was accused by Carroll of being 'monolithic' in its construction, cognitivism seeks to take a more scientific approach but the tools its prescribes – the function of viewership, the analysis of empathy via *convergence* – fails to provide a methodology that understands the primacy of the *human* viewer in the experience.

It is clear that both psychoanalysis and its baseless claims to the human/social structure and cognitivism with its assumed empricality and requirement of cognitive 'representations' fail to meet my requirements for an approach to horror that can explain a) how horror scares and b)

[59] *Ibid, 180*
[60] *Ibid, 192*

why we seek this out. There are a great many arguments critiquing both approaches, sometimes from within their own schools of thought, but it is beyond the focus of this thesis to dedicate the time and space to such arguments. For now, it is enough to confirm that psychoanalysis is of no use to this thesis as its prescriptive labelling of media elements as evidence for concepts almost entirely devoid of any scientific grounding means any psychoanalytic lens used to asses *Host* will ultimately mean nothing *outside of* the inner continuum of psychoanalytic theory. *Something* is happening; people were watching *Contagion* for a reason. In a similar vein, this representational cognitivism is also not fit for this purpose. Although in essence the aim of cognitivist intention is correct – an evidence-based system of analysis – a lot of the theories seen thus far have relied on an input-process-output form of cognition that have the illusion of evidence-based but seem to rely on what is essentially folk psychology or a conceptual understanding of how the human mind responds to things in their environment. Cognitivism is closer, but still not close enough. As such I will move on to demonstrating the phenomenologically biocultural approach as defined by its contributing elements.

The Phenomenologically Biocultural Approach

A phenomenologically biocultural approach to horror is constructed from the following aspects;

- Biocultural approach to horror
- Embodied cognition and phenomenology
- Affect theory
- Performative approach to pleasures of horror
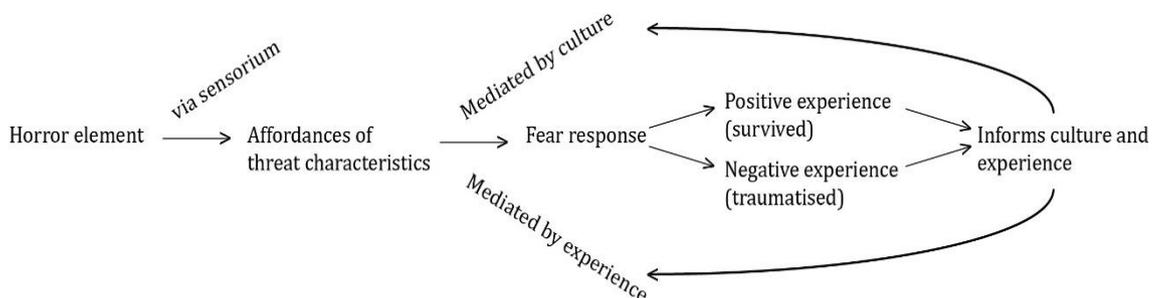
The loose construction of this mechanism is as follows;

Figure 1 - the phenomenologically biocultural approach to horror

A horror element, for example the giant shark from *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975), is perceived. The threat characteristics, understood via the deeply ingrained affordances of threat (sharp teeth, fear of predators, fear of unseen danger, fear of being eaten, etc), initiate a fear response (startling, screaming, raised heartrate, sweating, etc) that is mediated by culture and personal experience to the inciting horror element and the film in question (experience with sharks, dangerous predators, understanding of the film's genre, knowledge of creatives behind film, social context of film in question). The fear response, treated by the body as a genuine response to genuine threat, is then followed by processes in the body (parasympathetic nervous system) that lead to positive feelings, unless the individual had an overly negative experience and as a result feels no better. These responses are then fed back into the personal and wider social context of the relevant elements of the experience (opinions on film, creatives, sharks, etc that then interact with other viewers). I will now outline each of these elements in detail.

The first point of focus is how the viewer perceives the film. In *Affective Intensities and Evolving Horror Forms*, Adam Daniel argues for the transgressive and convention-breaking history of horror, and how previous academic approaches to horror such as psychoanalytic, representational and hermeneutic models, offer crucial insights but "…have limitations in that they are largely focused on unpacking the semantic elements of the film."[61] For Daniel, the problem with Carroll's theory of horror (and cognitivist approaches in general) is that it "…frames the viewer's primary experience with the horror film as one of comprehension of the semantic content of the image,"[62] decoding representations and appraising the implications of them. He takes issue in particular with how the cognitivist model as proposed by Carroll, Bordwell, Smith, Currie, and Plantinga, "…is inadequate to fully account for instances when, in the moment of cinematic experience, out affective response exceeds or contradicts that which our semantic understanding of the image presents."[63] He agrees with Clover and Carroll (as well as Julian Hanich) in that there is an inherent push/pull attraction/repulsion generated by horror, but he argues that this is not the result of scopophilia or appraised fear but a more nuanced and embodied movement of the spectator between the two poles.[64] At the core of Daniel's argument is the necessity of reframing the interaction between the film and its viewer from the previously-held 'top-down-processing' stimulus-appraisal approach to one of "…the

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[61] A. Daniel, *Affective intensities and evolving horror forms: From found footage to virtual reality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 4
[62] *Ibid, 14*
[63] *Ibid, 17*
[64] *Ibid, 31*

spectator's pre-cognitive, affective, corporeal engagement." This is key to help us understand how horror can 'produce experiences that contradict our evaluative processes'.[65] Daniel outlines that horror cinema's efficacy comes from its 'narrative contents' and the "…particular affective force generated by its sensory and sensual capacities [that] are being transformed by the genre's direct engagement with technologies of perception and expression such as screens and cameras…", and he maintains this is particularly the case with found footage horror.[66]

Angela Ndalianis' focus in her book *The Horror Sensorium* is the body's interaction or 'interface' with horror cinema, in particular 'New Horror Cinema' which she defines as being particularly affective, violent, gory and harshly critical of society. As she puts it; "…the horror spectator enters a space that operates as a ritualistic violation of taboos and, in the process, fears and desires are unleashed that often threaten 'normal' society and its onscreen ideologies: murder and displays of sadomasochistic violence, perverted sexual acts, incest and interbreeding, the return of the dead, cannibalism – these themes are at the core of New Horror."[67] To Ndalianis, the entry of the monster in horror fills a less biologically-driven and more sociologically-questioning role; a chance to 'test the rules, morals and ideological structures'.[68] Though the focus on New Horror Cinema and the rejection of the biological is of less relevance to this study due to the primary sub-genre under examination being found footage horror, Ndalianis' definition of the sensorium locates the 'sensorium' as being fundamentally important in the interaction with cinema; "[The sensorium] refers to both the sensory mechanics of the human body, but also to the intellectual and cognitive functions connected to it: it's integral to the process of perceiving, and to processing the gamut of sensory stimuli the individual may experience in order to make sense of their understanding and impression of the world around them."[69] This highlights another issue with both the previous approaches to discussing film and its affects/effects; what Ndalianis refers to as 'ocular-centric' film discourse. This exclusion of the other bodily senses, and the emotional reactions prompted from those senses not only diminishes the importance of sound cues in horror but also the sensation of sitting in the dark, surrounded by other people, or how the

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[65] *Ibid, 19*
[66] *Ibid, 31*
[67] A. Ndalianis, *The horror sensorium: media and the senses* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012), 16
[68] *Ibid, 15*
[69] *Ibid, 16*

resulting response to a film may differ if the same film is watched in an entirely different environment. This rejection of ocular-centrism is shared by Daniel.[70]

Adam Charles Hart argues that "…horror is defined by the way it engages with its audience- by styles and forms that are designed to elicit emotional responses…Horror has always been sensational, and it has always exceeded (or elided) the narrative in search of effects/affects."[71] He continues; "Horror should be understood through its 'sensational address'…It often privileges emergent effects, sometimes working within diegetic boundaries and other times exceeding them, or ignoring them entirely. Because the body in front of the screen is a common currency here among and across different mediums, the styles through which that body is addressed can move fluidly from platform to platform."[72] Appearing in Daniel's, Ndalianis' and Hart's work is the concept of interaction; perception of horror doesn't operate as a one-sided exchange of information or an analysis of external stimuli, but a corporeal and bodily interface between the perceiver and the perceived.

This concept of perception as being an intentional activity the entire body is engaged in is, in philosophical terms, phenomenological. For Julian Hanich, genuine phenomenology is "what we have at least a certain awareness of; awareness-of-experience is a defining trait of conscious experience."[73] In *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers*, Hanich takes issue with the cognitivist assumption that there must be a thought or evaluation that joins a feeling and an object, with emotions organising perception and affixing the viewer to the film, though his intention is not to refute the 'cognitivist research agenda' but rather elaborate on where cognitivists focus on explanation or *why* we feel, phenomenologists are focused on description, of *how* we feel.[74] For a practical and related example, the act of watching a film at the cinema shows the form of perception as something that is undertaken automatically – most people will not consciously consider their perception of a film, but rather the film itself – and yet after the fact the viewer is capable of reminiscing or examining the act of their perception, despite the lack of attention paid to it during the screening. As Hanich puts it, this disentangling ourselves from the continuous flow of experience to reflect on the structure of experience itself "…transforms the act I accomplish in a natural and transparent way into an

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[70] Daniel, *Affective intensities and evolving horror forms: From found footage to virtual reality*, 31

[71] A. C. Hart, *Monstrous Forms: Moving Image Horror Across Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 8

[72] *Ibid, 7*

[73] J. Hanich, *Cinematic emotion in horror films and thrillers: The aesthetic paradox of pleasurable fear*, 5 (Florence: Routledge, 2010), 38

[74] *Ibid, 14*

object for my attention"[75] In discussing cinema in particular, Hanich claims that there are different 'shades of phenomena'; the core or focal experiences, the peripheral or marginal experiences and those experiences on the fringe (or horizon) of awareness, and awareness is not distributed evenly between these gradations. "In most cases the film will claim focal awareness, while we are only marginally conscious of the lived body and the cinema. Put differently, the film experience dominates consciousness whereas body and cinema have receded – or, rather, were pushed – to the phenomenal background."[76] This notion of affective movement is a through-line in Hanich's book; according to him watching a movie is a double movement wherein the audience moves towards the screen by radiating attention (aesthetic attitude) and the film approaches the audience (aesthetic absorption). This occurs, and thus the film is elevated above our 'disinterested perceptual awareness', and the film becomes an aesthetic object; "A frightening movie as the intentional object of an aesthetic experience is completed, concretized, actualized only by the perceiving recipient who – through this constituting activity – turns the film into an aesthetic object," while the viewer is also affected; "Adopting an aesthetic attitude implies that I attach myself to the aesthetic object and deliberately put myself in a position to be affected by it."[77]

The signification of the film object as being distinct from objects in the phenomenal background of our disinterested perceptual awareness is echoed – or validated, depending on perspective – in the scientific field of neuroscience, where the philosophy of phenomenology – and the driving aim of this study – finds a scientific foundation in embodied cognition. Psychologist Robert Epstein draws reference to George Zarkadakis' elaboration on the different metaphors commonly used to understand the human brain; from hydraulics to clockwork to computers, these metaphors always use the most modern of technologies to explain the function of the mind. The most recent visitation of this practice, as Epstein points out, was with John von Nuemann's book *The Computer and the Brain* in which he referred to the human brain as 'prima facie digital'. The issue with this is that it "…encumbers our thinking with language and ideas that are so powerful we have trouble thinking around them."[78] Epstein uses the example of memories; the computer-like conception of the human brain understands memories as file, external data processed and stored. In asking a volunteer to draw a one dollar bill from memory, producing a recognisable but far from perfect imitation,

[75] *Ibid, 38*
[76] *Ibid,*
[77] *Ibid, 53*
[78] R. Epstein, *The empty brain*, 2016.

he says "The difference between the two diagrams reminds us that visualising something …is far less accurate than seeing something in its presence. This is why we're much better at recognising than recalling. When we re-member something…we have to try and relive an experience; but when we recognise something, we must merely be conscious of the fact that we have had this perceptual experience before." This differentiation between the computational recalling of copied files and the cognitive process of reproducing something based on memory forms a large part of the problem with this theory of cognition.

The conception of human cognition as being 'computer-like' forms only a small part of a much wider range of theories on the nature of thought throughout psychology. Anthony Chemero addresses the computational theory of the mind (CTM) in his wider timeline of cognitive theory, stating "For [computationalists] computation is the rule-governed manipulation of the formal symbols in what Fodor calls a language of thought. These formal symbols share many properties with idealized natural language words. They are discrete, context-independent tokens; they are combinable into larger molecular representations…whose meaning is a function of the parts that make them up."[79] These representations, what Epstein alluded to as organic facsmilies for digital files, are the individual pieces of data humans supposedly recall when receiving relevant sensory information and are immediately recognizable as being a fundamental piece of the cognitivist approach. Chemero's work builds on a number of cognitive theorists; one in particular is James Gibson whose ecological theory of vision in the 1970s was a foundational response to CTM. His theory revolved around three key tenets; perception is direct, or without representations, perception is primarily for the guidance of action and perception is of *affordances*.

The concept of affordances plays a key role in Chemero's theory, which he outlines as Radical Embodied Cognition in an attempt to differentiate from Embodied Cognition which in turn attempts to connect the eliminativist principles of embodied cognition with computationalism. Put simply; "Affordances are relations between animals and features of situations."[80] By necessity, affordances are context-dependent due to their relation to the perceiver. For example, two people looking at a cup of coffee are both perceiving of the same item in their environment. If they both like coffee and presently want some, it might be that the quality of their response to perceiving the coffee are functionally very similar. The affordances the coffee offers are still unique to both individuals; even if they overlap (they both want the coffee but

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[79] A. Chemero, *Radical embodied cognitive science* (London, UK: MIT Press, 2009), 21
[80] *Ibid, 141*

one wants it for taste and the other is tired and wants caffeine), it is the individual response to the coffee and the actions it enables that is their perception. But if a third person arrives who is deathly allergic to coffee, their perception of the same item is entirely different; the affordances the coffee offers are likely to involve wholly different actions to those of the other two people. Chemero uses the example of realising your car is dented, wherein "…you must a) perceive a particular entity; B) know its property, that it is your car; c) know what it is to be dented; and d) perceive that this particular entity (your car) has this particular property (being dented)."[81] To outline Chemero's theory in full, "Animals are active perceivers of and actors in an information-rich environment, and some of the information in the environment, the information to which animals are especially attuned, is about affordances. Unified animal environment systems are to be modelled using the tools of dynamical systems theory. There is no need to posit representations of the environment inside the animals (or computations thereupon) because animals and environments are taken, both in theory and models, to be coupled."[82] From this we can understand the importance of understanding the perceived in relation to the perceiver; in fact, these cannot be separated from each other. To relate this back to the experience of watching a film, the engagement a film spectator undertakes is relational to the affordances the film material imposes, or rather the actions it enables or possibly demands.

Another key aspect of Adam Daniel's pre-cognitive, affective, corporeally engaged approach to reframing cinematic perception is that of affect. He draws on Brian Massumi's definition of affective engagement as 'crossing a threshold' as a part of this approach, along with Massumi's contention that film viewership consists of multiple levels, such as the content of the image and the duration of the image both of which are separate but can influence each other.[83] For Sara Ahmed, affect does not pertain to an object in the world or something with autonomy; rather it is "…the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near."[84] According to Gregory J Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, affect is – at its more anthropomorphic – is the name we give to the 'forces other than conscious knowing that can drive us to action or thought, suspend us across force-relations and leave us underwhelmed'; a 'gradient of bodily capacity'. They

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[81] *Ibid, 139*
[82] *Ibid, 160*
[83] Daniel, *Affective intensities and evolving horror forms: From found footage to virtual reality*, 19-20
[84] S. Ahmed, 'Happy objects', in M. Gregg & G. J. Seigworth (eds.), *The affect theory reader* (Duke University Press, 2010), 30

tentatively lay out eight angles of approach for discussing affect (though these can 'undulate and overlap') which are (very reductively) summarised below:

1) human/nonhuman nature as intimately interlaced
2) robotics, cybernetics, neuroscience and artificial intelligence
3) certain nonhumanist and non-Cartesian philosophy that often tries to move beyond cultural limitations
4) psychological and psychoanalytic inquiry where biologism meets systems of social desiring
5) politically engaged work where experience can be used to understand practices of power and their influence
6) work influenced by quantum-, neuro- and cognitive sciences
7) studies of emotion that question the validity of historical individualised accounts in favour of historically-collective voices
8) science and scientific studies that do not exclude the 'wonder' or 'messiness' of the world[85]

Ultimately, Daniel's approach is that of an 'embodied spectatorship theory' which "…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 [his book]"[86] But what is it in the body that drives the reaction to horror? Ultimately, the same question remains; regardless of how we phrase the interaction, *why* do we get scared at something we know to be not real?

Xavier Aldana Reyes states that "…Affect Studies is not a totemic or even cogent school of thought adhering to a given number or precepts…" and "…Affect, as a term defining the physical process whereby the body is affected by an external prompting, has been described in incredibly abstract ways…"[87] In his *Horror Film and Affect*, Reyes returns to the Kristeva's concept of abjection in order to redefine it as a fearful disgust that emphasises corporeal boundaries. These boundaries are both cultural and 'socially inflected', thus not removing but

[85] M. Gregg & G. J. Seigworth, 'An inventory of shimmers', in M. Gregg & G. J. Seigworth (eds.), *The affect theory reader* (Duke University Press, 2010), 1-9
[86] Daniel, *Affective intensities and evolving horror forms: From found footage to virtual reality*, 26
[87] X. A. Reyes, *Horror film and affect: Towards a corporeal model of viewership* (London: Routledge, 2016), 5

reframing the discussion on the portrayal of women in film.[88] To Reyes; "Female bodies may well be presented as monstrous and horrific, but their appearance is a conscious decision made by the directors or screenwriters that does not sit, or indeed act upon deep-seated structures of the human psyche."[89] Reyes' theory of affective abjection is as follows; "What I am suggesting is that abjection works in two ways: firstly, it creates a specific form of affect – fear as connected to disgust – through reliance on discourses around the body, its social representation and that of its components (organs and expelled substances). These are ultimately cultural constructions, regardless of how closely they have been aligned with common sense…Secondly, abjection also works on a more primeval level. Images of abjection are connected to the frailty and vulnerability of the body, and are affective because they remind us instinctively or our mortality and the possibility of pain or extensive damage."[90] This latter part, the grounding of threat to the body, ties into the work of scholar and director of Aarhus University's Recreational Fear Lab Mathias Clasen.

Once the 'threat' has been perceived, this triggers a inbuilt response not tied to the psyche or the perceivable fear of others (in totality, at least), but a biological survival function. Clasen, one of the study authors from the paper mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, says in his book *Why Horror Seduces* that the humans of early societies that form the basis of our physiology lived in a world full of environmental, predatory and social dangers, and as such we have a highly developed fear system; "Most striking, perhaps, is that the human fear system evolved to be hypersensitive to cues of danger. That is why we humans scare so easily, why we tend to jump at shadows. The biological logic underlying this design characteristic is encapsulated in the aphorism 'Better safe than sorry'."[91] This fear system, according to Rush W Dozier Jr, will initiate the fear response only to be overridden or modulated by the younger prefrontal cortex that comprehends the non-danger of the stimulus. "We can rationally override an aversive impulse and decide to climb onto the diving board fifteen feet above the surface of the water and plunge to what the limbic system considers certain death, but which we know to be a thrilling few seconds of freefall to safety"[92] As to *what* we fear, Clasen points to the natural dangers humanity has traditionally faced and explains that in some cases the antagonists of horror are faithful representations of these fears like large predatory animals or homicidal humans, and others "…exhibit what ethologists call 'supernormal' traits (Barrett

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[88] *Ibid, 29*
[89] *Ibid, 38*
[90] *Ibid, 51*
[91] Clasen, *Why horror seduces*, 39
[92] *Ibid, 41*

2010) – they're bigger, more dangerous, or cleverer than the real-world organisms that they mirror; they may even have supernatural abilities" The key to making a memorable horror monster, according to Clasen, is to not shy away from hybridity but to ensure that the subject is minimally counter intuitive. Barrett via Clasen; "[Minimally counterintuitive agents] 'largely match intuitive assumptions about their own group of things but have a small number of tweaks that make them particularly interesting and memorable'."[93] Clasen's description of hybridity calls back to Carroll's philosophy of horror, albeit changing the reason the hybridity is effective, and qualifying the level to which it can be counter intuitive. This focus on the bodily response to horror leads Clasen to outline his 'vertically-integrated' and biocultural theory of horror attraction wherein "…specific works of horror reflect or engage with sociocultural issues, but it locates such analysis within a framework informed by evolutionary social science.[94]

C. M. Coelho et al propose that phobia of the supernatural is widespread and 'real' enough that it has the potential to lead to tangible health concerns for sufferers, despite the fact that supernatural agents have no 'referents' in the real world nor has there been "…historical selection pressure from zombies, ghosts or other supernatural monsters."[95] They too point to the body's willingness to act according to false alarms, from a point of 'cost efficiency'. As a result, 'non-existent' beings like werewolves are associated with existent threats like aggressive dogs/wolves and as such the same evolved defence mechanism is used. Specifically on the example of ghosts; "The idea of a ghost – an entity of ambiguous ontological status, able to bypass or subvert the laws of nature – can evoke a deep, epistemological fear of the unknown… Supernatural fears exploit not just fear of the unknown, but also the anxiety that accompanies situations that are unpredictable and/or uncontrollable."[96]

To take an example, Creed's reading of Alien is one rooted in abjection and the monstrous-feminine, where a cognitivist like Noël Carroll would say the audience member receives the visual information from the movie screen and builds a representation in their mind, and it is from this evaluative representation that the fear is felt when Dallas gets grabbed. But to Clasen's biocultural approach, understanding that cognition is done bodily and actively, then our intrepid movie viewer isn't just reacting to a cognitive representation of Dallas descending

[93] *Ibid, 63*
[94] *Ibid, 15*
[95] C. M. Coelho et al., 'Super-natural fears', *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 128 (2021), 406-414, 407.
[96] *Ibid, 409-410*

into the darkness, relating his experience their own lived one, but rather they are at once immersed in darkness that bleeds from the cinema screen out into the audience, the frantic chirping of the movement sensor as Dallas' own fear contagiously infects them without sharing the tangible sensations of the cold vent or his heavy weapon. The fear felt from the viewer comes from the very situation itself, long-fixed fears of the dark, of predation and isolation. Perceiving the film as an aesthetic object, the viewer is sensitive to the environment and situation the character on screen is in and by tapping into deeply-rooted survival instincts, the movie scares them.

The threat response, as mediated by culture and experience, then triggers a fear reaction. To define what 'fear' actually is, one can look to negative valence systems as defined by the National Institute of Mental Health's Research Domain Criteria Initiative framework. The five constructs under the umbrella of the negative valence system domain are; acute threat (fear), potential threat (anxiety), sustained threat, loss and frustrative nonreward. Fear here is defined as an "activation of the brain's defensive motivational system to promote behaviours that protect the organism from perceived dangers"[97]. In her ongoing mission to explore the nature of fear, sociologist Margee Kerr – in light of the difficulty of establishing objective definitions for as subjective an experience as fear – points out that "Every organism, from the fruit fly to the human, has a defence or threat response; it's one of our survival circuits. Kerr explains the threat response as an organism perceiving a threat stimulus, which leads to "…two warning signals – what neuroscientist and fear expert Joseph LeDoux calls the 'low road' and the 'high road'." The 'low road' signal goes straight to the amygdala and triggers the sympathetic nervous system; fight, flight or freeze. The 'high road' signal takes longer, collating visual information and 'stored information' to critically evaluate the threat and either 'reinforce or debunk' the first signal. [98] When the body goes into fight or flight, the sympathetic nervous system releases 'go' hormones which decrease pain and break down fatty acids for fuel, which then get delivered to the muscles for immediate use while blood pressure increases to facilitate oxygen and glucose delivery around the body. "Other effects are a temporary loss of hearing and tunnel vision. All of this happens in an effort to focus attention on survival, turning our bodies into a ready-to-go strong and powerful machine."[99] Blood rushes to the muscles ready to run, which means away from the skin and as a result the skin

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[97] Research Domain Criteria Initiative, *Domain: negative valence systems*
[98] M. Kerr, *Scream: Chilling adventures in the science of fear* PublicAffairs, 2015), 20-21
[99] *Ibid, 48-49*

temperature drops.[100] This process is, according to Kerr, highly contextually influenced. When a thrill ride creature scares a customer, the culture will have influenced the 'character of the monster', the customer's makeup will influence the scale of their threat response, and culture will influence the expression of the fear response; Kerr here points at the social differences between the extroverted Colombian and American responses to a simple test compared to the more reserved responses of Japanese subjects, as well as a generally individualist American attitude compared to a Japanese collectivist one.[101]

In spite of fear being "…the most widely studied emotion in science because it can be easily conditioned, studied and observed in non-human organisms"[102] and there being a 'substantial literature' on the subject, assessing the efficacy and patterns of horror consumption proves a little harder to qualify. As G Neil Martin eludes to in his 2019 review of horror-psychology research, there are three main limitations on existing research; sample sizes, methodologies and the horror material used. Says Martin; "Studies have used a variety – although a very restricted variety – of horror films over thirty years of research, and the films share little in common apart from being classed as horror film…each has distinctive mechanisms of evoking fear and disgust based on story, filmmaking, plot, characters, sound, performance, visual effects, credibility and use of music. No one study can fully take into account our response to horror because not all horror films are the same…"[103] Martin's review is able to outline some conclusions concerning patterns in response, for example a positive correlation in thrill-seeking behaviour with enjoyment in consuming horror media, low empathy and fearfulness are associated with enjoyment in horror media, etc. Similar trends were identified by Cynthia A Hoffner and Kenneth J Levine in their 2005 meta-analysis (in which they identified much the same limitations in data set as Martin). Specifically on the subject of empathy, Hoffner and Levine found some evidence that increased empathy could lead to stronger enjoyment of horror films, but only in cases where the protagonists successfully escaped the source of the horror. A key factor identified by both parties was that "…negative affect during viewing was associated with a greater enjoyment of fright and violence"[104] and they both draw a line from this notion to Zillman's 'Excitation Transfer Theory'. As Martin puts it; "…excitation transfer theory argues that we derive our enjoyment of horror film from this feeling of

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[100] *Ibid, 118*
[101] *Ibid, 129,133*
[102] G. N. Martin, '(Why) Do you like scary movies? A review of the empirical research on psychological responses to horror films', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2298 (2019).
[103] *Ibid, 17*
[104] C. Hoffner & K. Levine, 'Enjoyment of mediated fright and violence: A meta-analysis', *Media Psychology*, 7 (2005), 207-237, 226.

suspense…When a threat is resolved, our negative affect converts to euphoria and suspense ends. The vital aspect of the theory is that enjoyment is derived from the degree of negative affect built up during exposure to the horror film and from the positive affect/reaction that results from the resolution of the threat.[105]

But there is a problem with this theory when discussing 'bad endings'. According to Martin/Zillman; "If the resolution does not occur, then residual negative affect will lead to increased dysphoria. If there is no suspense but a complete certainty about what will happen, suspense is replaced by dread."[106] This assumption that a lack of 'resolution' or satisfactory 'win' for the empathised-with characters will result in a frustration of enjoyment via increased dysphoria and dread fails to take into account certain highly-praised films. A cursory look over the top ranked horror movies according to *Rotten Tomatoes*[107] shows titles such as *Hereditary* (Aster, 2018), *Drag Me To Hell* (Raimi, 2009), *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), *The Wicker Man* (Hardy, 1973) and *Paranormal Activity* (Peli, 2007) trending very positively, in spite of their overwhelmingly negative endings, to say nothing of titles like *The Witch* (Eggers, 2015) or *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019) wherein the 'resolution' of the conflict is tenuous in its positivity at best. This is mentioned in Hoffner and Levine's meta-analysis; "In fact, Hoffner and Cantor (1991a) manipulated the resolution and found that the contribution of negative affect to program enjoyment was similar for the resolved and unresolved versions."[108]

Kerr, initially talking on co-attendance to thrill rides but subsequently including characters on screen, points out that "…when we watch someone experience something, we experience it ourselves – it's how we empathize and connect to each other."[109] Calling on the work of Kyung Hwa Lee and Greg Siegle, Kerr says that the affective part of pain, for example, is something experienced by spectators of the person on screen actually cutting their foot off, but not the physical pain of the sensation. Lee and Siegle's metanalysis of existing studies shows that 'similar or overlapping patterns of brain activity' are seen when people experience an emotion directly or in evaluating the emotions of other people. This means that witnessing something scary in a horror film is likely to provoke the same reaction as though the spectator were really there, triggering a fear response. Echoing Kerr, while referring to Joseph Carroll, and in what could be seen as a response to Alex Neill, Mathias Clasen says; "Emotional contagion allows for

[105] Martin, '(Why) Do you like scary movies? A review of the empirical research on psychological responses to horror films', 6.
[106] *Ibid,*
[107] Rotten Tomatoes, *Top 100 horror movies*
[108] Hoffner & Levine, 'Enjoyment of mediated fright and violence: A meta-analysis', 226.
[109] Kerr, *Scream: Chilling adventures in the science of fear*, 25

swift response to a threat that one has not personally observed, and it accounts for the way that we mirror the emotional responses of even fictional characters. We use the same psychological mechanisms to understand and make sense of fictional characters as we use to understand and make sense of actual people in the real world"[110]

Why are horror fans better equipped to deal with real world tragedy? It is here that this thesis would argue that Zillman was almost correct in his excitation transfer theory before; the positive and successful resolution at the end of a horror film can be associated with a form of euphoria, but the positive resolution is not dependent on the characters surviving or resolving their problems; it is that *the viewer survived the threat*. The consensual and intentional activity of 'watching' (ocular-centric terminology aside) a horror film constitutes what Margee Kerr calls a Voluntary High Arousal Negative Experience (VHANE).

In Kerr and Siegle's Basement haunted house/scare lab, participants were scared with a number of scenarios, fully consenting and often in pairs, and the data showed that not only did participants find the experience improved their mood, but accompanying EEG scans showed that "…those who were the most open and ready to engage with the thrilling experience got the most out of it; that is, they left happier. And not only were participants saying that they felt better, but EEG data showed that they were more relaxed; they didn't overthink or stress out about the cognitive tasks, and they didn't ruminate or worry as much."[111] This is in addition to smaller contributing factors such as the benefit of doing 'evolutionarily salient activities' in crowds (like movie theatres) are more rewarding than doing them alone,[112] and the fact that the antisocial act of screaming can feel rebellious and even if the folk psychological notion of 'bottling up' emotions is false, thinking that it is can prove 'letting it all out' a satisfying experience.[113]

The importance of consent cannot be overstated, however. Kerr calls on the work of Catherine Hartley and colleagues wherein they found that subjects exposed to a shock by consent were more likely to overcome their fear of being shocked than subjects who believed the shocks inescapable. "Knowing you can leave and choosing to stay is empowering; being forced to endure is the opposite."[114] Although there is potential argument to be made on the exact level of consent in the content of a horror film on the outset of the viewing experience (and a

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[110] Clasen, *Why horror seduces*, 70
[111] Kerr, *Scream: Chilling adventures in the science of fear*, 228
[112] *Ibid, 36*
[113] *Ibid, 34*
[114] *Ibid, 221*

supplementary discussion on safety devices like trigger warnings), the perceptual activity of watching a horror film (or series, online media, etc) constitutes an act of consensual participation in an experience that is, amongst other desired outcomes, designed to frighten the viewer and prompt a fear response. In fact, Coltan Scrivner and Kara Christensen propose that knowing consent is key in triggering a sense of anxiety in the viewer, one which goes hand in hand with the acute fear episodes that punctuate a horror film.[115] In their article *Scaring Away Anxiety*, Scrivner and Christensen posit a number of potential reasons why those suffering with anxiety may intentionally seek out horror films likely to cause feelings of anxiousness. These potential explanations include; the immersive quality of a narrative centring on a threat, horror media providing a site for expressing anxiety where individuals might normally engage in suppressing those feelings, horror providing a predictable and identifiable source of anxiety, the opportunity to transfer anxiety to a fictional source, the opportunity to regulate or control the anxious experience and, like findings from the *Scarehouse*, produce a calming effect after the experience. They find potential resolutions in horror as an experiential learning tool as well, drawing a comparison to 'rough-and-tumble' play and childhood games that simulate scary situations and its potential use as a tool in cognitive-behavioural treatments via a possible capacity for increasing emotional clarity, use as a behavioural experiment, challenging emotional reasoning, learning to cope with the physical experience of anxiousness and practicing cognitive reappraisal.[116] Scrivner attributes this behaviour as morbid curiosity, which "…manifests as a balance between the costs of exposure to morbid content and the perceived benefits of learning about that content."[117] In developing a scale by which this behaviour could be assessed, Scrivner outlines the four factors that morbid curiosity is divided into; the minds of dangerous people, paranormal danger, interpersonal violence and body violation[118]. Of a more generalised audience, Clasen et al also hypothesise horror as a learning opportunity in their *Horror, Personality, and Threat Simulation: A Survey on the Psychology of Scary Media*; "According to [the evolutionary threat-simulation hypothesis], people tend to find pleasure in imaginative experience with threat scenarios because such experience serves the adaptive function of preparation for real-world threat situations…Horror media provide a context for gradually acquiring vicarious experience with fear-, anxiety-, and dread-evoking stimuli, thus, in Steven Pinker's words, opening up

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[115] C. Scrivner & K. A. Christensen, 'Scaring away anxiety: Therapeutic avenues for horror fiction to enhance treatment for anxiety symptoms', (2021), 4.
[116] *Ibid, 8-18*
[117] C. Scrivner, 'The psychology of morbid curiosity: Development and initial validation of the morbid curiosity scale', *Personality and Individual Differences*, 183 (2021), 2.
[118] *Ibid, 4*

'beneficial regions in the space of local experiences.'"[119] This is a behaviour that, according to Schjoldager and Petersen, is present even since childhood. In their paper *Infants, Toddlers and Recreational Fears* they outline the scary activities that are commonplace in Danish nurseries and kindergartens like reading books to the class with scary voices and growling, hide-and-seek and games involving chasing/being chased. Great care is taken by the teachers in question to ensure that where children are pushed towards engaging with unsure or tense situations, they are kept from being too scared by carefully maintaining the activity environment. These recreational fear activities were identified in a number of interviews with nursery/kindergarten teachers as being perceived as part of their job.[120] According to Coelho et al, this learning could have very real benefits; "The adaptive mastery that might come from virtual dangers like horror films could be achieved through keeping a clear head and avoiding a panic reaction like freezing before an oncoming car."[121]

Once the viewer has 'survived' the corporeally experienced danger of the horror experience, they then participate in a series of interwoven interactions that see them influencing the culture around the fil, thus contributing to the same cultural and experiential bodies that mediated their own fear response in the first place. This comes in the form of reviews and discussion about the film, intentional or inadvertent priming of others who have yet to see it, adding to the conversation about the film's cast and crew, the support given in paying to see the film or the traffic given by streaming, etc. Though he may well take issue with this potentially 'brute, positivist' approach, Matt Hill's proposed 'pleasures of horror' form a valuable contribution to the 'cultural' part of my 'biocultural approach'. In response to the theories that "…appear to proceed from the basic notion that horror's pleasures stand in need of explanation…"[122], Hills proposes that the so-called pleasures of horror should be understood as being 'performed and constructed'.[123] Hills goes on to outline the active engagement with horror media as a fan and the shaping of that engagement via interactions from outside sources (like censorship efforts); "For many horror fans the pleasures of horror are discursively constructed through micro-narratives of biography as well as through notions of belonging to a fan culture and through notions of horror-as-art."[124] This inclusion of the sociocultural

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[119] M. Clasen et al., 'Horror, personality, and threat simulation: A survey on the psychology of scary media', *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*, 14 (2018), 29.
[120] E. Schjoldager & L. H. Petersen, 'Infants, toddlers and recreational fear: A study of recreational fear in Danish nurseries and kindergartens', *When fear is fun* [Lecture] (Aarhus University, 2021, unpublished).
[121] Coelho et al., 'Super-natural fears', 410.
[122] M. Hills, *The pleasures of horror* (London: Continuum, 2005), 2
[123] *Ibid, ix*
[124] *Ibid, 73*

movements of horror's consumers is vital to take into account as modern horror, especially found footage horror, is highly referential and self-evaluative. To take an example to be explored later, a famous jump-scare from *[Rec]* (Balagueró and Plaza, 2007) will go on to be used as the chief gag in a prank video, which will then inspire a film that includes an identical sequence that doesn't end with the expected jump scare, in a manner similar to the sequel to the original film, *[Rec]2* (Balagueró and Plaza, 2009). Hills, in considering critiques of cognitivism from outside opposing schools of thought such as psychoanalysis and post-structuralist, instead proposes an affective theory of horror in response that does not fully reject cognitivist theory. Where in cognitivist theory emotions are assumed to be 'object directed' and 'occurrent' – thus neglecting any "Any sense of a horror text as globally constituting a mood or ambience through music, *mise-en-scène*, iconography, etc…"[125] – an affective approach acknowledges that 'art-horror' is capable of objectless affects and doesn't trivialise bodily responses like being startled.[126] Hills also goes on to explore (and in concert with the responses of others, outline the issues with) Todorov's account of 'the fantastic' and psychoanalysis.

To summarise; psychoanalysis is unable to elucidate the mechanism by which the viewer interacts with horror, and neither is cognitivism. This previous chapter has outlined how horror scares and why we might seek that fear out, but it is important to reiterate that although both psychoanalysis and representational cognitivism fail to satisfy our requirements, this is not to consider them valueless. In particular with psychoanalysis, the dominant concepts like the uncanny, unconscious and id/superego have found their way into pop/folk psychology and have become well known to people outside of the cognitive science arena. As such, they are part of the language that filmmakers use to create and audiences use to understand media. As Carroll himself says on the subject of psychoanalysis in the closing remarks of *The Dread of Difference*, many horror films themselves contain explicit or implicit psychoanalytic concepts as they have become "…a common idiom of thought throughout Western culture: its concepts, scenarios, and metaphors have seeped into everyday language."[127] The biocultural framework Clasen puts forward starts with the human as perceiver, and builds a model from there. Specifically, the key triggers of horror are biological, those teeth and claws and large falls and anti-social people who posed such a large threat to humanity in the past. We understand our

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[125] *Ibid, 25*
[126] *Ibid, 31*
[127] N. Carroll, 'Afterword: Psychoanalysis and the horror film', in B. K. Grant (ed.), *The dread of difference: gender and the horror film* (Second edition., Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2015), 257-258

responses to these triggers as being corporeally-perceived, and our interest in seeking them out could we be an expression of morbid curiosity as we navigate the world, looking for the opportunity to safely learn from dangerous experiences in much the same way puppies playfight with each other. In exposing ourselves to the danger, we become better able to deal with the threat itself and our own reactions to it.

This phenomenologically biocultural approach to horror answers the questions that were unanswered by other academic approaches. How does horror scare an audience that knows it is fictional and not a threat? Because the body treats the evolutionarily ingrained threats as actual threats. Why would people seek out such a negative experience? Because 'surviving threats' feels good in a bodily sense and experiencing VHANEs with others increases enjoyment. It even offers potential answers as to how horror could be therapeutically good for people, whether by vicarious threat engagement, practicing threat responses or offering controlled experiences in which to feel usually uncontrolled anxiety. As Scrivner and Christensen put it; "Many questions remain about the possible therapeutic use of horror."[128]

A phenomenologically biocultural approach is a freeing one; in understanding the nature of fear response triggers, it enables us to more closely assess the 'packaging' these triggers are contained within, in a way that is comprehensive of the practical and theoretical ways that films are produced and consumed. In place of a monolithic theory of gendered difference, we are instead free to ask why the concept of a man dressing up as/identifying as a woman via mental illness would be included in a film, and why would this be effective. Removing the psychoanalytical theory and instead recognising that the fear from those later sequences in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) come in part from the fear of dangerous humans, sharp objects and being chased/hunted allows us to assess the important social and political attitudes that were likely influential to and influenced by the film. It can be understood that the titular creature in *The Thing* (Carpenter, 1982) scares by its pervasive infection threat, its teeth and claws, its uncanny mimicry of the human animal; but why is The Thing, The Thing? Why Antarctica? Why Vietnam veterans? The extent to which these choices are made by production limitations or preference by those individuals involved in making the film (as will be explored in greater detail later) can be discussed, but the cultures and societies of those individuals lead in part to

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[128] Scrivner & Christensen, 'Scaring away anxiety: Therapeutic avenues for horror fiction to enhance treatment for anxiety symptoms', 22.

those people make those choices, and either psychoanalysis or cognitivism (or neither) can be used to analyse the importance of that impact.

The science behind horror media and its potential benefits for its viewers remains in its early stages, but the discussion as presented provides satisfactory grounding. It is now possible to analyse *Host* as a horror film via the *phenomenologically biocultural* approach, but the film is not just a horror film; it is a found footage horror film. On the face of it, found footage horror seems like a subgenre of horror that neatly groups together films that pretend to be real via recognisable forms of documentary and television, but actually defining found footage has proven to be a controversial issue. Not only this, but the way scares are constructed within found footage horror are by formal necessity often very different to 'traditional' horror and prompt a level of identification that will intensify the threat response and survival aspects of horror viewership. In order to accurately discuss *Host* we must first understand in sufficient detail the subgenre of horror in which it falls.

Chapter 3 The Form, Function and Fears of Found Footage Horror

"Across 80-or-so minutes, the film relies on none of the usual tricks…less a story than a traumatic shared experience." – M. Glasby and B. Bodoano on The Blair Witch Project.[129]

In this chapter, I will be outlining my own definition of found footage horror as a subgenre of horror characterised not by its visual aesthetic or the media forms it imitates, but rather via its relationship to the act of recording as understood by a perceiving viewer. Following this definition – and consideration of the existing approaches to found footage horror – I will define a number of new terms that enable discussion of production and thematic patterns within the subgenre. Finally, I will utilise the phenomenologically bicultural approach from the previous chapter to break down and understand *how* found footage horror scares.

'Found Footage' as a genre or subgenre label is easy to identify, but somewhat harder to define. Where the shaky first-person perspective or collated CCTV images betray a very specific aesthetic, the outer boundaries of the found footage form can be difficult to qualify. For example, where does *The Pyramid* (Levasseur, 2014) sit; as a film it follows the narrative and formal attributes of found footage horror almost to the letter, but includes some shots from a non-diegetic camera including establishing shots of a satellite in space and long-shots of the entire group of characters. Is it still 'found footage' despite breaking one of the conventions of the subgenre? And what of *Antrum* (Amito and Laicini, 2018); a horror film consisting of a fake horror film 'made' in the 1970s played in its entirety, framed within a pseudo-documentary that explores the 'real world' history of the (fictional) film? That the film from the 70s, named *Antrum*, was *found* is a key piece of the narrative of the framing device. Is this found footage?

Found footage horror has been relatively ignored in academic discussion' especially in comparison to the horror genre writ large. Certain entries in the subgenre are often discussed for specific factors in their production (like *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sánchez, 1999) and *Paranormal Activity* with their minuscule budgets and marketing tactics), but there is some excellent critical commentary available.

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[129] M. Glasby & B. Bodoano, *The Book of Horror: The Anatomy of Fear in Film* (Minneapolis: Quarto Publishing Group UK, 2020), 83

Describing found footage horror as the 'subgenre *du jour*'[130] in the early 2010s, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas points to the loose definition as used in popular discourse; "In some cases, it pertains only to horror films that feature material that is literally discovered…It can also accommodate horror movies filmed with diegetic hand-held cameras, surveillance cameras, or both…This definition begins to get hazy when considering the inclusion of this material in films loosely described as 'horror mockumentaries' alongside interviews, voice-overs and visual documentation…".[131] In her book *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality,* Heller-Nicholas uses Scott Meslow's definition – that the film was filmed diegetically and discovered sometime after – albeit with a more 'elastic approach to the notion of discovery', pointing to films like *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998) as satisfying this criteria but not being presented to the audience as a non-fiction film and thus not being found footage. Heller-Nicholas points out that 'particular brand of aesthetics' in found footage horror has made it much more approachable in terms of practical and budgetary matters for filmmakers[132], but states that "The commercial value of many of these films is built on verisimilitude and their signature deployment of [these aesthetics]."[133] Douglas E Cowan points to much the same in *Sacred Terror*; "The jerky camerawork…poor video and audio quality, and lack of coherent narrative all contribute to the impression that the audience is watching something that actually happened…"[134] as does Chuck Tryon who writes that the footage "…creates a disorienting effect and a much more intensely 'personal' experience…"[135]

For Peter Turner, found footage horror often bears more in common with reality television and home videos than documentaries[136] and as such he divides them into three categories; films resembling documentary and reality television, films resembling home videos, and those that feature 'charismatic killers' where the camera operators are less the victim and more complicit in the source of horror[137]. Turner refers to this group of categories not as found footage horror but rather as 'diegetic camera films', in part because the fact the films are produced diegetically is more important than the fact the footage has been found, and in part because this avoids conflating these films with the previously established art-film movement with the

[130] A. Heller-Nicholas, *Found footage horror films: fear and the appearance of reality* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014), 3

[131] *Ibid, 13,14*

[132] *Ibid, 3*

[133] *Ibid, 192*

[134] Cowan, *Sacred terror: religion and horror on the silver screen*, 116

[135] C. Tryon, 'Video from the Void: Video Spectatorship, Domestic Film Cultures, and Contemporary Horror Film', *Journal of Film and Video*, 61, 3 (2009), 40-51, 44.

[136] P. Turner, *Found Footage Horror Films: A Cognitive Approach* (Milton: Routledge, 2019), 4

[137] *Ibid, 5*

same name[138], a concern also noted by Heller-Nicholas[139] as well as David Bordwell who prefers the terms 'discovered footage' or 'pseudo-documentary' films.[140]. Turner proposes that "…the diegetic camera is thus a narrational tool employed to creature a specific kind of realism; a mediated realism that attempts to mimic the recognisable codes of other media forms such as documented home videos."[141] A key aspect of found footage horror for Turner is priming; "Priming occurs when stimuli such as dialogue, actions, or stylistic elements including cinematography, music, or editing coax the viewer into hypothesising about the remainder of the text."[142] "Diegetic camera films have very particular aims and ways of setting up priming patterns. Their opening scenes are structured and presented specifically to get viewers to imagine that the films are documentaries or home videos, or to allow the viewer to make cognitive assumptions about how the footage has been filmed, who was filming it, and for what purpose."[143] Noteworthy is Turner's intentional exclusion of films that require a 'double-priming' as they mix media forms. This removes from discussion a film like *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980) – a traditionally-presented film that features segments of diegetically-produced found footage – and *Diary of the Dead* (Romero, 2007), which is an entirely diegetically-produced documentary that features both found footage as well as narration and – to borrow Heller-Nicholas' term – 'visual documentation'.[144] Turner also excludes films that were not produced intentionally – diegetically speaking – and were instead captured via surveillance footage or webcams.[145] This would potentially exclude *Host* from discussion.

In *Monstrous Forms*, Adam Charles Hart finds a key point in the placement of viewer adjacent to the camera-wielding character onscreen; "I would suggest that in place of 'identification', we might thing about an affective alignment. Our position – our vulnerability – is coincident with that of the camera and its operator on which we the viewers are dependent to decipher the threatening landscape. This is situational and sensational, coming less from close acquaintance with a character that it does from the spectator being placed in a similarly exposed situation: by looking at the movie, the spectator is subjecting themselves to the kinds of attacks that result in jumps and screams."[146] For Hart, there were two major cultural causes

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138 *Ibid, 3,4*
139 Heller-Nicholas, *Found footage horror films: fear and the appearance of reality*, 14,15
140 D. Bordwell, *Return to paranormalcy*, 2012.
141 Turner, *Found Footage Horror Films: A Cognitive Approach*, 61
142 *Ibid, 80*
143 *Ibid, 81*
144 Heller-Nicholas, *Found footage horror films: fear and the appearance of reality*, 14
145 Turner, *Found Footage Horror Films: A Cognitive Approach*, 6
146 Hart, *Monstrous Forms: Moving Image Horror Across Media*, 109

that lead to the proliferation in found footage horror in recent years; one was the rise in first-person shooter (FPS) videogames and the other was where "Filming had, by 2007, become more of a commonplace part of everyday life, even if its onscreen avatars might sometimes have used higher end equipment than would be found in the hands of most civilians. By the time *Paranormal Activity* received its theatrical release in 2009, the iPhone has more or less normalised the idea of anyone and everyone becoming a cameraperson."[147]

Director of *Be My Cat: A Film for Anne* (Tofei, 2013) Adrian Țofei, in his *Found Footage Manifesto*, defines the found footage film as "…technically a pseudo-documentary film…a fictional film in which all or a substantial part of the picture is presented as being composed of recordings of real life events, seen through cameras that are part of the events."[148] For Țofei, pseudo-documentary stands apart from both mockumentary (which is based on 'parody, satire and farce') and found footage, which is in itself a part of pseudo-documentary but with the requirement that the recordings were lost or given away, only to be rediscovered and edited together.[149] Țofei's approach is influenced by Romanian theatre director Ion Cojar's methodology that sees actors as needing to go through the emotional journeys of their characters to ensure that performances are authentic, and the additional element that audiences should believe what they are witnessing is real and not a performances provides a clear motivation for the use of the found footage, or pseudo-documentary, form.[150]

Sarolta Mezei points to Carroll's blurring of categories as a fundamental of horror in order to justify the found footage genre as a ghost itself; "The ghost is always the signifier of something that works differently; it is the alarm that draws attention to malfunction and deficiencies within a system. Through the dissolution of traditional cinematographic techniques, found footage horror adopts this ghostly feature: by breaking the seamless flow of film viewing and by violating many of the standards of filmmaking, it opens the spectator's eyes to its contractedness, and, as a result, renders found footage horror the genre that stands outside the order as does a ghost."[151]

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[147] *Ibid, 116*
[148] A. Țofei, *Found footage manifesto: The huge hidden potential of the found footage filmmaking concept*, 2013.
[149] *Ibid,*
[150] *Ibid,*
[151] S. Mezei, 'Spectral Media Technology and the Vicious Brothers' Grave Encounters', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, 22, 1 (2016), 167-180, 168.

Like Turner[152], Xavier Aldana Reyes takes issue with the idea of found footage being considered as a genre or subgenre in the first place; instead that as the label denotes little in the way of theme, it needs to be understood as a stylistic signifier (as evidenced by those found footage films that exist beyond the generic purview of horror).[153] Reyes draws a line between some of dominant themes emergent in found footage horror and counterparts in traditional cinema, such as the demonic possession of *Paranormal Activity* and *The Last Exorcism* (Stamm, 2010) and previously released *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (Derrickson, 2005), arguing that instead found footage as a label refers to a 'set of formal characteristics' already popular enough to warrant referential commentary (*Grave Encounters 2* (Poliquin, 2012)) or recognisable parody (*A Haunted House* (Tiddes, 2013)).

In his *Post 9/11 Horror*, Kevin J. Wetmore Jr locates found footage horror's growing popularity as a response to the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers; "These two streams, the amateur video document of 9/11 and the terrorist-made, internet-dispersed video of real torture and death, combine into a major trope of post-9/11 horror: the pseudo-documentary/'found footage' horror film. This subgenre is not a new one; it was not invented in the wake of 9/11, but it has risen to prominence since."[154] He points to the combination of the documentary-style presentation and the casting of unknown actors as a major reason why found footage and pseudo-documentary horror generates more fear; they have a "…greater connection to the real world."[155]

As can be seen above, attempts to define found footage as a descriptor tend to focus on two key areas; the formal construction of the cinematic image and whether or not the footage has been 'found'. Aside from the method by which the 'footage' has found its way to an audience, the key driving concern is fixing a definition of found footage using the non-fiction or traditionally-cinematic media forms that the films in question most closely resemble. Although the arguments made by Turner, Bordwell and others make technical sense, word usage is dictated by use over logic and the overwhelming public acceptance and cultural persistence of the name 'found footage' as eluded to by Heller-Nicholas[156] make it sensible to continue to use the phrase.

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[152] Turner, *Found Footage Horror Films: A Cognitive Approach*, 83
[153] X. A. Reyes, 'Reel evil: A critical reassessment of found footage horror', *Gothic Studies*, 17, 2 (2018), 122-136, 124.
[154] K. J. Wetmore, Jr., *Post-9/11 horror in American cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 59
[155] *Ibid, 60,61*
[156] Heller-Nicholas, *Found footage horror films: fear and the appearance of reality*, 15

I argue that any attempt to define the found footage subgenre by its shared formal characteristics will always be frustrated by the continued emergence of new technologies through which horror storytelling can be communicated; early definitions that might apply to *The Blair Witch Project* or *The Last Broadcast* (Avalos and Weiler, 1998) would likely need revising when looking at the screen-bound *Host* or the multi-platform livestream-slasher *Spree* (Kotlyarenko, 2020). As established in the first chapter of this thesis, horror films are not effective in their intentions because of deep-rooted psychic guilts, repressed sexuality or a computerised representation of personal experience projected against received information; whether or not viewer believes what they are watching is real, the affectual charge experienced by the viewer *is* real. If our understanding of horror cannot be complete without foregrounding the experience of the viewer, then why try to define the generic boundaries of a subgenre (especially a subgenre of horror, a genre in and of itself defined by its effect on a viewer) using only technical/production factors? Where filming (already a technically-questionable term for video-capture) and viewing forms continue to evolve, the supposed reality of the media object as it relates to the actual reality of the viewer remains the dominant feature of found footage cinema.

For Adam Daniel, the implication that the viewer is a diegetic character "…leads to a lack in spectatorial identification as it is traditionally understood", something shared across other emergent forms of media including streaming video and VR. [157] He argues that the form of found footage horror facilitates an 'imaginative integration' between the viewer and the fictional world, as well as being "…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."[158] In the first of two common forms within the subgenre, the viewer experiences the film's world with the protagonist through a 'shared perceptual verisimilitude', and in the second, events are captured through 'impartial' objective camera like a surveillance camera.[159]

Defining the found footage horror film

I argue that a definition of found footage horror as a subgenre must centre the subjective perspective of the one(s) doing the filming, linked as they are to the perspective of the viewer. I define a found footage film as a film that is produced diegetically, or within the world of the

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[157] Daniel, *Affective intensities and evolving horror forms: From found footage to virtual reality*, 7
[158] *Ibid, 75*
[159] *Ibid, 76*

film, in that both the capturing of the footage and the subsequent editing result in a piece of media that is both of the narrative world and of our world. Often the footage has been 'found' but this is not a necessity, as the film object itself has been 'found' and is available to view both inside the world of the film and outside. Excluding titles and credits, almost all elements of the film are diegetic (the score to *Blair Witch* (Wingard, 2016) is the soundscape of the forest) and those elements that cannot be reasonably argued as diegetic indicate the film is not a found footage film, but rather uses elements of the subgenre. This is not to say that only those elements captured 'in the moment' can be considered diegetic; for example, in *Diary of the Dead*, documentary filmmaker and narrator Debra makes a point to explain she has added music to the film in order to scare the viewer, but this inclusion by Debra makes it diegetic. The footage has been edited/altered/manipulated by a character as a part of its diegetic production. In *The Last Exorcism* a score has been added over Cotton's exorcism preparation montage, but this can be assumed to be the work of the editor of the footage, like Debra. In many cases the story of how the footage was recovered or who edited it is not mentioned; as Reyes puts it; "Generally speaking, in found footage horror we watch a recording that has been discovered by someone else, who remains almost always unmentioned, and has been edited for ease of consumption."[160] In cases like this (*The Last Exorcism*, for example), although it is perfectly satisfactory to simply write this off as a part of the 'magic of cinema', if we are to take the rest of the film's diegetic production on face-value, there are perhaps interesting narratives to imagine following the closure of the film's events for members of the audience. The actual existence of the footage in an edited state eludes to the further narrative, long after the cameras have stopped rolling. In this way, only films where it is made clear the footage could not be recovered risk breaking the generic protocol. As an additional example, in *The Borderlands* (Goldner, 2013) the skeletons of the child sacrifices made to the creature under the church are found shortly before Grey and Deacon are eaten alive; it seems plausible that the camera gear could survive this process and be 'evacuated' the same way their bones will be. By this same logic, *The Pyramid* is not a found footage film, as there is no meaningful way that the additional non-diegetic shots could have been produced within the scope of the wider narrative. Certainly, an editor could well have sourced a CG establishing shot of a satellite, but when the shots of the entire party are taken into consideration, the possibility of these shots being staged or produced after the fact render the 'footage' that has been 'found' as ultimately meaningless. Found footage horror is a subgenre heavily concerned with what Thomas M. Sipos calls 'pragmatic aesthetics'; artistic effect (narrative content, structure,

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[160] Reyes, 'Reel evil: A critical reassessment of found footage horror', 129.

presentation, distribution) as resultant from working to the technical and budgetary compromises common in – especially independent – horror cinema.[161]

The most important part of this definition can be most clearly identified in its distinction from mockumentary or pseudo-documentary; films that are similarly diegetically-produced. What has largely gone undiscussed in the journey to defining found footage is the key aspect that I argue separates these two cinematic subgenres; the embodied presence of the filmmaker. Where mockumentary or pseudo-documentary is a fictional story presented as factual, using the trappings of documentary film or reality television with no meaningful reference to or appearance of the filmmaking apparatus (people or equipment), found footage horror not only makes evident the process and intention of production (if not simply being a piece of footage presented as found) but places the filmmaker as central to the ongoing narrative. For example, *Trollhunter* (Øvredal, 2010) and *Apollo 18* (López-Gallego, 2011) fit the found footage label comfortably as both contain footage that was recovered and edited together with a specific purpose. *Diary of the Dead*, although presented as an actual documentary, places the filmmaking process of Jason and Debra at the front of the story thus making it a found footage horror film. So to with *The Bay* (Levinson, 2012), diegetically a documentary, but presented to us with narration and commentary from one of the individuals who experienced the events of the plot and provides us one of the camera perspectives being discussed. This is not to say that pseudo-documentary is ignorant of its medium; *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (Charles, 2006) is a comedy mockumentary that follows a character who is trying to diegetically make a film and this forms a large part of his journey, however Borat is not a part of the filmmaking apparatus but more a character whose interaction with the world of the narrative is more closely bridged with the audience, akin to the documentary work of filmmakers like Louis Theroux. The camera crew who follow Borat around are very rarely interacted with.

Already there is an immediately clear lexical issue when discussing found footage film; the language of a film's production and dissemination need to be separated between the film's production (*The Blair Witch Project*) and the *diegetic* film's production (the recovered and edited footage of Heather, Josh and Mike's disappearance). *Apollo 18*, as a piece of media we can watch, went through two different editing suites; one by the diegetic information-leaking

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[161] T. M. Sipos, *Horror Film Aesthetics: Creating the Visual Language of Fear*. Translated from English (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2010), 29

organisation from within the story, and the actual real world editing of Patrick Lussier. As such, I propose the following terms to better delineate between the diegetic and the non-diegetic.

Camera-entity – the individual(s) responsible for the capturing of the film's footage, from whose perspective the viewer is experiencing the narrative. This includes characters who are involved in the production of the footage but are not directly operating the sound or video gear, including Cotton from *The Last Exorcism* and Holly from *Devil's Pass* (Harlin, 2013). This also does not include the editor of the final film as this is frequently a different and often unknown person.

Film-artefact – the film's diegetic reflection, the film-artefact is the film as consumed by the real-world viewer, but from the perspective of its place in the narrative. For example, in discussing the film *As Above So Below* (Dowdle, 2014), we are talking about the 2014 horror film written and directed by John Erick and Drew Dowdle, but when discussing the film-artefact – the exact same piece of media – we are talking about the documentary as edited together by an editor, likely on Scarlett's instruction after she, George and Zed manage to escape the catacombs.

Qualifying found footage horror film

Where Xavier Aldana Reyes argues that there is no thematic through-line that validates it as a subgenre, I would argue that there are in fact four key categories into which any found footage horror film can be placed and within these categories shared themes and concepts begin to emerge (hence my persistence in referring to it as a subgenre). These categories are based on the motivation of the film-artefact's production; why is the camera-entity engaging in recording the footage? The four categories correspond to that motivation; *explorative*, *defensive*, *narrative* and *imputative*.

The first and by far most popular category is *explorative*. Explorative found footage horror centres the camera-entity's decision to travel into a strange or unknown place for the purpose of recording. The location doesn't necessarily have to be a cause of fear or concern to the characters before undertaking the journey, nor is the reason they are travelling into this space necessarily linked to the emergent threat. A common location is the woods, whether it is camping in the wild like *Blair Witch*, *The Blair Witch Project* and *Followed* (Justice, 2017), staying in an isolated cabin or house like *Exists* (Sánchez, 2014) or *The Lost Coast Tapes* (Grant, 2012) or a community far removed from wider 'safe' society such as *The Last Exorcism* and *The Sacrament* (West, 2013). Other popular locations include dilapidated or abandoned buildings (*Grave Encounters 1* (The Vicious Brothers, Ortiz and Minihan, 2011) and *2*, *Sx_Tape* (Rose,

2013), the *Hell House* franchise (Cognetti, 2015; 2018; 2019)), caves or tunnels (*The Tunnel* (Ledesma, 2011), *As Above So Below*, parts of *Devil's Pass* and *Jeruzalem* (Paz and Paz, 2015)). The popularity of this category of found footage is likely in part due to its structural legacy within horror/gothic storytelling in general and the fact that as long as a location can be secured, it is a relatively inexpensive setting for producing a low budget movie.

The second (and second-most prevalent) category is *defensive*, wherein the camera-entity is using the recording equipment to either capture, understand or simply mediate their environment or something in their environment that is a cause for concern. The most famous example of a defensive found footage film is by far *Paranormal Activity*. Micah buys his 'prosumer' camera to capture paranormal events that have taken place before the camera started rolling; his exact words are "Hopefully once we get it on camera, we can figure out what's going on…Once we know what's going on, we can react appropriately, and take care of it"[162]. Defensive found footage may be set in a single location or involve travel. In much the same way as the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, films like *The Amityville Haunting* (Meed, 2011) and *The Bell Witch Haunting* (Miller, 2013) respond to a threat emergent in the home, and *Apartment 143* (Torrens, 2011) does the same albeit with a much more empirical/scientific approach to the nature of the recording. In *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008), Hud begins the film recording testimonials at a party but ends up capturing the creature's attack and the group's attempt to escape the city in a way reminiscent of the plethora of footage captured during 9/11. In both *Alien Abduction* (Beckerman, 2014) and *Exhibit A* (Rotheroe, 2007), the threat being 'defended' against doesn't have a clear separation from the primary threat of the film. In *Alien Abduction*, Riley uses the video camera as a coping mechanism for his autism and although the camera has some tactical use against the aliens, it remains primarily for his comfort that the recording continues. In *Exhibit A*, Judith is a shy young woman living with her boisterous family at a time where she is slowly coming to terms with her own sexuality. For Judith, the camera itself becomes a close confidante and occasionally a manifestation of the neighbour she has a crush on, and although it is via the camera she is able to uncover her father's actions, it ultimately remains a private and personal thing that provides a filter for the world around her.

The third category, *narrative*, concerns films wherein the camera-entity is setting out to record a journey or development centred on a person, as opposed to a place or story. In *Creep* (Brice, 2014), Aaron is making a video diary for Josef as a freelancer, and as is revealed at the end of

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[162] *Paranormal activity*. Directed by Oren Peli. Written by Oren Peli (2007).

the film, the film-artefact has been edited together by Josef and thus the story as we see it plays out according to his intentions. In the sequel (Brice, 2017), Josef's murderous habits are made clear to Sara early on, but her documentary series on 'strange people' provides a unique opportunity to test the boundaries of his behaviour. *Afflicted* (Lee and Prowse, 2013) and *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (Robitel, 2014) both focus on a sick character, the former being a video diary of a pair of friends, one of whom is terminally ill, as they travel across Europe and the latter being a PhD project documenting the effects and impact of Alzheimer's on the titular Deborah Logan and her daughter. Both *Phoenix Forgotten* (Barber, 2017) and *The Frankenstein Theory* (Weiner, 2013) follow people driven by their own investigations, whether it is the determined hunt for the truth about the disappearance of a sibling or the desperate search for evidence of a theory that is tearing a character's life apart. Like *Spree*, which follows gig-economy worker Kurt's spree killing as he tries to make it big on the internet, a lot of those found footage films that capture the killer's perspective or where the primary threat is the camera-entity fit within this category (the *August Underground* series (Vogel, 2001; Vogel, Killjoy, Whiles, Cruise and Schneider, 2003; Vogel, 2007), *Man Bites Dog* (Belvaux, Bonzel and Poelvoorde, 1992), *Zero Day* (Coccio, 2012)).

The fourth category is *imputative*. Imputative found footage films often closely resemble documentaries because the purpose of the film-artefact is to levy charges or accusations against an individual or organisation, and are often closer to a state of 'completion'. As such, it is here in particular where the embodiment of the camera-entity is important in delineating imputative found footage horror from mockumentary. In *Trollhunter* and *Apollo 18*, the film-artefact has been produced as a way of making clear the complicity of the Norwegian and American governments in the disappearance of the protagonists. In both cases the characters have gone missing; either fairly recently to the film-artefact's completion or several decades ago. In *The Bay*, the protagonist and narrating voice is Donna, one of the several primary sources for the film's many perspectives and someone who survived the events. In all three of these examples, the footage was intended to be confiscated but was either recovered by chance or leaked intentionally. *The Tunnel* directly implicates the Australian government in a coverup while charting the journalist protagonists' journey into and subsequent escape from the water-logged tunnels beneath the city. Both *The Bay* and *The Tunnel* serve to draw parallels to issues in the real world; Levinson based *The Bay* on his research prepared for a

documentary on the environmental threats to the Chesapeake Bay[163] and Heller-Nicholas points to *The Tunnel* being a 'powerful allegorical reaction' to the Australian history wars[164].

There are found footage films where these categories blend into each other; in *Followed*, Brook and Caleb's part of the story sees them heading into a Florida wilderness for a camping trip where they encounter a threat, marking it as an explorative found footage film, but if Jake and Nick's story was isolated it would more closely fit the narrative category as their intentions (and relationships with their target) form the basis of the plot's ongoing momentum.

Fear in found footage horror film

With the term 'found footage' fully defined and hopefully convincingly outlined as a cinematic subgenre, it is necessary to analyse the structural mechanics of found footage both as they are changed from 'traditional' horror to found footage and how they exist uniquely within the found footage space. As will be seen in the following, each have a key relationship to the human survival mechanism, specifically prompting behaviours that emulate a body in physical danger. Herein lies the key reason why found footage horror can be, from a phenomenological biocultural perspective, incredibly impactful. I have identified five key types of fear that found footage generates either uniquely or in a form altered within the generic bounds of the subgenre.

Pareidolic Framing

In their video essay titled *The Power of VHS*, Shannon Strucci and Harris Bomberguy point to the poor resolution and video quality of VHS tapes as being a key part of why horror films sold well to home consumers[165]. Specifically using the example of *Alien*, they talk about the atmosphere generated when the lack of visual clarity made it harder to tell if the dark shapes littered throughout the film's cinematography were the hostile creature or a normal part of the environment; a technique included within the plot of the film's sequel (Cameron, 1986). The visual noise provides shapes and lines where in reality there are none, but the viewer is left perceiving these shapes and consciously or unconsciously seeks to find patterns that, in turn, become potential threats. This concept is one of the key methods of generating fear in found footage horror audiences, most clearly defined and exercised within the *Paranormal Activity* franchise. Here, the camera is frequently set up to capture wide frames full of detail,

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163 J. Crow, *Barry Levinson on his environmental horror movie 'The Bay' – 80 percent of this is true*, 2012.
164 Heller-Nicholas, *Found footage horror films: fear and the appearance of reality*, 182
165 hbomberguy, *The power of VHS*, Scanline. 30/09/17 [Video].

often in low lighting with less than ideal camera visual quality, wherein slow long-takes play out in uncomfortable quiet. One of the series' most iconic set-ups – and perhaps one of the most visually-iconic sequences in modern horror – takes place in Katie and Micah's bedroom in *Paranormal Activity*. The camera sits in the corner of the bedroom on a tripod, with the sleeping couple in bed on the right hand side of the frame and the open bedroom door on the left. Through that doorway, the left corridor leads to a few other rooms including the attic space and on the right is the staircase down to the lower floor. Off to the far left of frame, the mirror provides an obscured glimpse into the bathroom behind the camera. Much of what is outside the room is dark and foreboding; the top of the staircase and the other doorways all lead to total darkness with a single bar of light coming from the attic room doorway providing another series of lines to check for motion, and this combined with the horizontal warping of the wide angle lens and teal hue degrade the image to a point where detail becomes hard to find accurately. The viewer, left with this single static shot for a long time, is lead to search the frame – most specifically the space outside the doorway – for any emerging threat or danger. Sounds from downstairs (more on that later) and the presence of the later-named Toby in the attic tell the viewer that the threat very much is outside, and so the eyes are drawn that way, searching for details that is not there. As Kim Newman puts it; "Long, static, time-coded shots of the bedroom encourage the eye to look at the corners of the frame…"[166], a perceptive engagement that David Bordwell describes as 'scouring indiscernible images for clues'.[167] Because of the response this triggers in the viewer, I refer to this tactic as 'pareidolic framing'.

In fact, in the writing of this thesis, as I sit here with my document open on one side of the screen and a still frame from Paranormal Activity on the other, I just made myself jump as I glanced back at the image, mistakenly thinking I was seeing a dark silhouette in the doorway. Although I can now see it is a 'head' made from the rightmost of the backrooms and a 'torso' constructed from the negative space beyond the staircase, this is the key visual trick that was so firmly established within Paranormal Activity *and would go on to become a key part of effective found footage horror scares.*

This is echoed in non-found footage horror cinema as well; the church scene in *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002) is effective because it is difficult to make out what the bodies/infected inside are doing; praying? Eating? Sleeping? Waiting? The jerky movement is threatening as they turn to

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[166] K. Newman, *Nightmare movies: horror on screen since the 1960s* rev. edition, (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 510
[167] Bordwell, *Return to paranormalcy.*

face us (Jim), but the quality of that threat is hard to read with facial details broken down into vague shapes. To locate a parallel to the tree-filled frames of the *Blair Witch* films, there are a number of similar sequences in *The Ritual* (Bruckner, 2017) where the unknown shape of the creature combined with the dense forest surrounding the characters make for frantic detail-searching. Pareidolic framing is frequently 'trained' into the audience by including a scene that primes them with the understanding that they *should* be looking for details. To remain with the same, albeit non-found footage example, the viewer is made to be constantly searching for the monster in *The Ritual* following a scene where the creature is camouflaged against a tree and cannot be seen until it chooses to move; a motion that is the motivating purpose for the shot that shows it happening.

The *Paranormal Activity* franchise may well have codified the pareidolic frame within the found footage subgenre, with the nature of these frames evolving as an increasing number of cameras placed in spots that include more visual noise, darker spaces and more possible points of entry into the filmed spot (meaning more doorways to frantically scan for intruding threats), but it has played an important role in found footage since the early days of the subgenre. In *The Blair Witch Project*, particularly before it is understood that the threat is never seen on screen, the viewer is left searching the vast forest as seen through the dense chiaroscuro of the CP-16 and the washed-out grain from the Hi8 video camera for details of the group's stalker. This becomes especially frantic at night when the only details to be picked out of the black void are those trees being illuminated by their lights. As Matt Glasby writes in *The Book of Horror*; "Within that endless dead space, it is easy to imagine seeing things that are not there, and the film becomes a kind of Rorschach test for the audience."[168] In a visual reminiscent of Katie and Micah's bedroom, the sequel *Blair Witch* features a camera angle that is a grainy, high-contrast hunting camera that points at the group's tents and includes a lot of forest in the back of frame, prompting the viewer to scan the areas around the tents and between the branches of the space behind them.

Echoing *Aliens*, *[Rec]²* sees Rosso operating a camera rig that includes the ability to 'cut in' to the helmet feeds of the rest of his GEO team as they enter the quarantined apartment building from the first film. As they investigate the space and fight back against the infected denizens, Rosso is able to view his colleague's helmet-mounted camera footage. In viewing events from their perspectives, the video quality is degraded and noisy, prompting the same issue identifying detail at mid-long range. Both when Martos investigates an apartment on his own

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[168] Glasby & Bodoano, *The Book of Horror: The Anatomy of Fear in Film*, 86

and when Larra crawls into a vent in order to recover a hidden blood sample, the threats they face are not presented as fast jump scares close to camera, but rather left far away and small in frame, leaving the viewer to construct the sequence in pieces as more visual information is made available, first a figure is visible, before details eluding to who they might be are made clear, and then finally facial details betray exactly what level of threat they present.

The most extreme example of visual noise in a found footage film is undeniably *Apollo 18*; some of the 16mm film cartridges were purposely damaged to give them authentic and unique imperfections. This taken in combination with the grainy 16 aesthetic makes searching frames – especially exterior shots of the moon's surface – for the well-camouflaged alien creatures an intensive process.

A film that shows how filmmakers are already taking pareidolic framing and exploiting it for greater effect is *Followed*. In a sequence where fitness-vlogger Brooke is doing yoga, several things have already taken place to prime the viewer. First, we know that we are watching a horror movie, and something bad will likely happen at some point. Two, we know that Brooke and her boyfriend Caleb are already being followed by someone/something. Three, Caleb has confessed to camera that he has a surprise planned for Brooke, and we can't rule out that he's going to be the source of a horror scare (whether he poses actual danger or not). Already, the audience is primed for something to happen, so when the yoga sequence plays out with Brooke doing yoga with her mat perpendicular to the camera, facing toward camera-right, the eyes immediately go to the background. The frame is bisected horizontally between safe and not safe. The lower half is terra firma, with a potential approach point for something off to the right but she is facing this direction and it seems unlikely to be there. The top half of frame however is a visual noise goldmine. A body of water takes up the next quarter of the frame, reflecting the dense forest above and beyond that. Dark browns and greens are interrupted by occasional dark shapes and bright patches where the light is being harshly reflected back at the camera. Three large trees in the foreground provide natural frames, drawing the eyes to three sections of background; the far left with a well-illuminated shore, the central shore with a mix of shapes that could be people, and the far right which is close enough that the viewer could make out facial detail, if a face were to appear between the foliage there. Brooke then turns to face the camera, and the alarm bells go off; with her vision now centred on the camera, the threat has the perfect chance to make itself apparent behind her. The frame searching goes on, switching between the three frames and the reflective water surface below them. This is where the subversion comes in; Brooke then turns to face away from the camera, out across the shore that we've been staring at. The viewer knows, as a general rule, that she won't see the threat before they do, and so the realisation sinks in that the source of horror will not be

coming from somewhere hidden in the frame, but from behind the camera – behind us. That's exactly what happens, leaving to a lingering moment where it's not clear who the man who walks onto screen holding a weapon is or what his intentions are.

Darkness/Restriction of vision

Another major element utilised in constructing scares and building tension in found footage horror is the use of darkness and restricting the vision of the viewer. This is something Monnet points to as a contribution from the use of hand-held video cameras, which "…[heightens] the tension in the play between concealment and revelation."[169] This frequently manifests as an exploitation of the human fear of the dark, with sequences like the dorm rooms and hospital in *Diary of the Dead*, the apartment buildings in *[Rec]*, *[Rec]²* and *Quarantine* (Dowdle, 2008), the streets in *Jeruzalem*, the catacombs in *As Above So Below*, the church and countryside in *The Borderlands*, the tunnels of *The Tunnel* and *Grave Encounters* and *Grave Encounters* 2, the forest in *The Taking of Deborah Logan*, *The Lost Coast Tapes*, *Trollhunter*, *Followed*, *Alien Abduction*, etc.

In some cases, such as *The Blair Witch Project*, *Blair Witch* and *Followed*, the darkness is a space that contrasts with a previously-understood to be safe space that is lit; in these cases a tent. The darkness in this situation is not just the absence of light but a material presence of its own, a boundary that characters must either shy away from or enter into. It is in this darkness that the threat lurks, either real or imaginary. In the *Blair Witch* films, noises can be heard from outside (to be discussed later) and in *Jeruzalem* Sarah's malfunctioning 'Smartglass' starts picking faces out of the darkness using its facial recognition Facebook-search feature. Reyes contends that the perceiving through a camera – something Heller-Nicholas refers to as a faulty surrogate eye for the spectator[170] – results in a more 'organic synergy' between the 'vision/bodies' of the film and viewer[171].

It is not just darkness that can restrict the camera/camera-entity's vision however. In *Cloverfield*, vast amounts of dust and debris are the result of 'Clover' smashing its way through the city in what Newman describes as returning "…us to Lovecraft's vision of man's cosmic

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[169] A. S. Monnet, 'Body genres, night vision and the female monster; REC and the contemporary horror film', in F. a. S. Botting, Catherine (ed.), *Monstrous media/spectral subjects* (Imaging gothic fictions from the nineteenth century to the present; Manchester University Press, 2015), 143-156, 146
[170] Heller-Nicholas, *Found footage horror films: fear and the appearance of reality*, 23
[171] Reyes, 'Reel evil: A critical reassessment of found footage horror', 130.

insignificance"[172], resulting in visuals that are heavily reminiscent of the walls of dust that followed the destruction of the Twin Towers. This provokes not only a biological fear of being without an important sense needed to help keep the human body safe, but also a culturally-ingrained one. The perspective of being 'on the ground' during the event with little to no information on the cause or motivation for the destruction, according to Wetmore, places the Cloverfield protagonists in direct contrast to pre-9/11 horror and sci-fi cinema that often featured characters at the top of the 'social and political pyramid' who were thus more in-the-know.[173] In *Grave Encounters*, as Lance and Sasha are at their wit's end in the patient transportation tunnels under the hospital, alone in the dark, a dense fog builds and sweeps over the two; when it recedes, Sasha is gone. This implies not only the threat of something hidden in the fog capable of taking a person, a situation they are encountering in the pitch darkness, but also the direct-ness of the act implies an escalation of danger towards an end.

Out of Frame Sound

As eluded to before, the darkness or restriction of vision often goes hand-in-hand with sound, the source of which cannot be seen. In *[Rec]*'s finale, the surviving characters are trapped in a pitch-black attic with a hostile creature that cannot see them. The night-vision sequence pairs the glimpses of the threat seen on camera with the noises of both it and the characters trying to navigate the space; as Monnet says "In fact, sounds without clear visual correlatives take central stage in the climactic final scene because visibility as been reduced to nothing or next to nothing…As a result, the viewers, like the characters, are transformed into listeners, anxiously pricking up their ears, dreading to hear the sound they are wholly focussed on detecting."[174] In *The Blair Witch Project*, the only sign the protagonists experience that they are being followed at first are the sounds they hear at night. Initially, it is only Josh, who tells of noises he heard in the night as "coming from two layers of space…one of them could have possibly been an owl, but the other one was like a cackling."[175] The following night, the whole group hears a series of unexplained sounds coming from all around the tent – something communicated by the sound mixing – of trees being broken and twigs snapping as well as rocks tumbling or being thrown. The tent, as mentioned before, is established by its inherent not-darkness-ness as being presumably safe. The sounds occur out in the woods, close but not

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172 Newman, *Nightmare movies: horror on screen since the 1960s*, 641
173 Wetmore, *Post-9/11 horror in American cinema*, 43
174 Monnet, 'Body genres, night vision and the female monster; REC and the contemporary horror film', 148
175 *The blair witch project*. Directed by Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez. Written by Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez, Heather Donahue (1999).

here. When on the following night the crashing persists, Heather instructs Mike to get the sound on the DAT, which prompts the remark that they sound like footsteps. By this point, the sounds are evidence of some form of presence but do not necessarily imply outright hostility. After a series of small cairns are found by the tent, that night the sounds take on a human and very intentional form; the sound of a woman mumbling and talking quietly, children laughing and playing and then what sounds like a person with a naturally-high voice performing a low-pitch growling sound. The human-seeming sources, as naturally placed as they should be out in the wilderness, are immediately more threatening as they carry with them a motivated intelligence that the sounds of movement do not inherently imply. This leads the audience to construct a scene of what is happening outside based only on audio cues. Rebecca Coyle points out that "Without screen images, we strain to create images in our heads via other means. We experience the film through sound, sequences of 'impenetrable darkness' are too long for our eye to make the leap between one image and the next, and it is left to the ear to make that connection."[176]

Another film to prioritise the spatial quality of sound is *The Borderlands*. The central site of horror is a run-down church in the countryside where a miracle has supposedly taken place. The investigation to verify this miracle leads the Church-sent investigators into experiencing and investigating an array of strange sounds that happen in and around the building. To begin with, the sounds appear at night as Father Crellick is praying alone; deep, rumbling bass that sounds like a large creature shifting and the creaking of wood. There is also, on prompting by the priest for God to make himself known again, the sound of a baby crying, echoing off from the left side of frame (in the direction of a as-yet-hidden door). When the team hear the sound of scraping coming from the walls, Gray installs a series of microphones throughout the church, enabling them to track the strange sounds they hear in the walls in real-time as they move across the space around them. The level of noise escalates, the baby crying becomes doubled and distorted, and when Deacon finally finds the hidden door and opens it, the sound of the terrible child sacrifices that took place there play out in echoes amidst loud rumbling. This builds until the pressure release is prompted with the church bell ringing, and Deacon runs from the building. The sounds give the impression of a massive presence, something much larger and older than the church building itself, and this combined with the crying of babies imposes a feeling of dread on the audience.

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[176] R. Coyle, 'Spooked by sound: The Blair Witch Project', in P. Hayward (ed.), *Terror tracks: music, sound and horror cinema* (London: Equinox, 2009), 218

In *The Tunnel*, sound recordist Tangles leaves the rest of the group to find a further vantage point from which to record a loud warning bell. A mild scuffle is heard, and the mic cable is pulled from the mixer suddenly, implying something has grabbed Tangles and pulled him away. In the framing device interview, Natasha is given the chance to listen to the audio he recorded for the first time, and the audience hears with her the sound of the overwhelming bell sound, followed by a wet crunching and the sound of someone screaming with their mouth closed or covered, followed by the mic cable being disconnected. Throughout this, although we have seen the video track to accompany it, the camera stays with Natasha's face as she reacts to what she hears. The creature in *The Tunnel* is seen to have intelligence, and even speaks in an unclear language, and its other sounds are heavily reminiscent of alligator/crocodile roars.

In *Blair Witch* and *Cloverfield*, creature sound cues are used to imply predation and indicate a shift in the level of danger. Both the creature in the Burkitsville woods and the parasites that work their way into the tunnels and stairwells of New York have different sounds depending on state; passive hiding or searching, and outright attacking. In both cases the 'attack' sounds are more heavily reminiscent of human-made sounds like screams, compared to more animalistic passive sounds. In *[Rec]²*, the GEO team are trapped in a building that has been very clearly shown to be revolving around a single staircase, and so when sounds can be heard from downstairs, we understand this to mean that the characters are trapped. When Martos heads into an apartment on his own, it is to investigate the sound of music coming from within. As he gets closer, the sound gets louder to the point that it is uncomfortable as well as obscuring the ability to hear threats approaching from behind. The other major use of sound in the film comes from the infected victims; they howl and shriek in sounds based on the screaming of pigs.

In *The Last Exorcism*, Nell begins making the sounds of a baby crying as she 'drowns' her doll in the bathtub, as well as making a second voice audible through a closed door. In *Trollhunter*, before the camera-entity has had a chance to see a troll, they are only heard by their roars and the crashing of trees in the distance. In both cases, the sounds point to a series of circumstances that do not match the viewer's contemporary (as of that point) understanding of events and so prompt a confused dread as what we imagine the sounds to be try to interface with the world as we understand it.

Another manifestation of this format of scare is something happening to the characters off-screen; in *Paranormal Activity* and *Paranormal Activity 2*, Katie and Kristi are both either made to walk or are dragged off screen so that only their screaming can be heard. In the case of the

former, Micah also runs downstairs only for a struggle to break out that the audience can only imagine. Once again, leaving details to the viewer's mind is an effective tactic.

Unseen Danger

The fourth frequently utilised set-up for found footage scares is the use of the camera to present a threat onscreen that the camera's operator doesn't see, usually because they are not holding the camera at the time or the camera is part of an 'impartial' surveillance setup.

In *The Taking of Deborah Logan*, *Paranormal Activity* (as well as the second (Williams, 2010), third (Joost and Schulman, 2011) and fourth (Joost and Schulman, 2012) films), *Sx_Tape* and *As Above So Below*, a hostile entity enters the frame unbeknownst to the characters being approached. In the case of *Alien Abduction*, the camera is being operated but the user doesn't notice the presence of one of the aliens appearing in a car mirror reflection behind him. Here, there is actually a larger implication on the narrative revealed in this gag; the characters all come to believe that proximity to the aliens is marked by the presence of heavy static in the camera's viewfinder/screen. This tactic is shown to be false in this moment.

Night vision is often used in this manner; the notion that the camera is capable of seeing something where the human eye is physically unable plays off of the innate fear of the dark many people possess. In *The Tunnel*, Natasha puts down her night-vision enabled camera to help move an obstacle and while the three remaining characters are stranding in a room looking at Tangle's blood on the walls, unbeknownst to them something or someone has picked up the camera and begun filming them from the doorway. None of them are aware of the threat, but like the sounds outside Heather Donahue and crew's tent, the ability to pick up and use a camera implies a level of intelligence which is terrifying.

Similarly, in *Exhibit A*, Andy watches his family as they navigate their house in darkness while the fire alarm he set off blares. They are unaware of his presence as he moves through the space quietly, before calling out to them and prompting them to take a seat and listen to him after he has locked the doors. In this, he creates a situation that is both a perverse reflection of Judith's nervous mediation of the world through her camera and a scenario in which he has complete power over the family that has lost respect for him.

In *Cloverfield*, the night vision function on Rob's camera is used by Hud when noises are heard persistently from behind. Following a cascade of rats running in the same direction that they are moving, further noises prompts the group to stop. As Hud faces back the way they came, Rob appears in frame lit by the camera's onboard light. Behind, the tunnel is almost entirely

dark with only a small section of track and wall being visible. As Rob turns on the night vision for Hud, the screens turns the familiar dark green hue and over Rob's shoulder a number of the parasites can be seen, seeming to react to being spotted. Amidst the group's confusion, Hud – who is the only person who can see the threat behind them – shouts for them to run and in a panicked rush they try to run from the creatures.

In *[Rec]²*, the night vision plays a more prominent role in the narrative. Where in *[Rec]*, when the camera's light gets broken the only way to see is using the night vision, in *[Rec]²* it becomes a part of the key part of the narrative. In the final sequence of *[Rec]*, Ángela is completely blind and she has to rely on Pablo to navigate her environment. He holds her hand and begins to lead her out, when he sees the silhouette of a tall long-limed figure leaning unnaturally backwards. It rises as he tells Ángela to go back, and they attempt to hide amidst the [air's frantic breathing. In this situation, the threat is also blind and unable to see them, so a lot of importance is placed on the sound in the scene; Ángela's frenzied panting intercut by the sound of the creature banging around in the background. It looms into frame, detail slowly developing in the same vein as pareidolic framing technique, the shot slowly pans down by virtue of the creature getting closer, until Pablo spots the hammer in its hand. They try to sneak past, but alert the creature., As they try to run, Pablo attempts to keep her in frame so as not to lose sight of her, and in doing so becomes separated from Ángela and is killed. Ángela stumbles in the dark, looking for the camera, until she finds it, and then the creature, and ends up being dragged away from frame into the dark. In *[Rec]²*, we learn that both the creature and the space in which is imprisoned is only accessible in total darkness, with using night vision to see being a workaround. As such, the remaining GEO members, Owen and Ángela must elect to turn the lights off by choice and rely on Rosso to navigate the space for them.

Spatial Threat

The last of these focal found footage scare constructions is inherently linked to the embodiment of the viewer within the space of the film. Here found footage horror contradicts fundamental rules in formal cinematic construction concerning composition and editing, such as the 180-degree rule. Sequences in found footage horror are less presented against their settings but submersed in them. The camera/character/spectator moves through the space and around objects and people; Mezei points out that the 180-degree rule that 'separates horror and reality' must instead be a 360-degree rule in found footage[177]. In moving through a

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[177] Mezei, 'Spectral Media Technology and the Vicious Brothers' Grave Encounters', 174.

space in a fashion mimicking an actual personal presence (most notably in *Jeruzalem*, *The Borderlands* and sections of *Blair Witch* that use eye-level camera devices), the viewer becomes aware of the spatial dynamics surrounding 'them' in a way that is rarely seen in non-found footage cinema. This has two key manifestations; dread and panic.

Films like *The Last Exorcism*, *Sx_Tape* and the 'roaming' scenes in the *Paranormal Activity* series, the camera is slowly moving through a space that contains either a hostile or unknown entity. The pace is slow, often the soundscape dies off to quiet ambient sounds, and the viewer is left moving through a dangerous space with a very limited perspective that they possess no control over. The pockets of darkness, spaces behind doors and furniture become sites of dread as the viewer is left to anticipate a threat that will approach them in a fashion that is presented to them nearly identically to how it would actually take place were they in that situation. In *The Last Exorcism*, Nell's persistent eye contact and threatening behaviour make her a possible threat, and so when the crew are moving through the house trying to find her after she ran from the bedroom, the knowledge that she could jump out at any moment builds tension. This is then made worse when she is seen outside the kitchen window, miming a crucifixion; this implies the motive to scare/send a message, and the intelligent foreknowledge to find a vantage point that could be seen by the group.

In *The Borderlands*, the wider camera angles that show the 'danger spots' of the church – the plastic sheet-covered wall, the altar, the dark pews – give us information the characters do not possess. When the protagonists are navigating this space, the audience is primed with areas that signify a potential threat, which combined with the impenetrable shadows in parts of the building increases the tension substantially. Another spatially-oriented site of pre-scare anxiety can be found in *The Bay*; it is established early on that water – possibly any water – is the likely source of the strange infection and parasites that begin killing the entire town. This makes scenes when characters unknowingly interact with drinking, feature or seawater particularly tense.

In *Creep*, Josef repeatedly comes very close to the viewer/camera, which taken with his increasingly strange behaviour and consistent lying ingrains the fear generated when he is close by. When Aaron manages to call Josef's sister and discovers that something is very wrong and he needs to leave, he leaves the bathroom to find Josef missing. The house, once a somewhat mournful monument to the life Josef is being made to leave behind, becomes a trap with multiple hiding spaces and potential approaches from which Josef can reach Aaron. It is only on getting downstairs that Aaron sees Josef and the fear that he might be hiding somewhere is allayed, only to be replaced by the reminder that Josef is a well-built and

unpredictable man with possibly-fabricated stories of sexual violence in his past. This comes crashing into focus as Aaron sees Josef is barring exit through the front door, wearing the horrific 'Peachfuzz' mask. Daniel points to this sequence as being "…presented as Aaron's recording of an attempted scape 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."[178]

One of the most well-recognised (and one that will come up in later discussion) spatial dread scares comes in *[Rec]*, as outlined by Reyes; "For example, the opening of the attic trapdoor leads to a slow, surveying circular pan meant to assess the potential danger of the room. As the camera is about to come full circle, a small, rabid child (Victor Massagué) suddenly manifests where, previously, the camera had only recorded empty space. The close proximity of the image, plus the swift direction of the scene and anticipation of the moment – it is obvious from the build-up, that something horrible is likely to happen – means that it is difficult not to react physically to the scare."[179]

Dread features commonly in the narrative found footage horror that features the killer(s) as the protagonist; being acutely aware of what the killer/subject/we are capable of, scenes and interactions become tense manifestations of dreaded anticipation. In *Spree*, Kurt's earliest victim – that we see – is a white supremacist and as such his death is not nearly as upsetting as it could have been, but as we are introduced to the considerably-more sympathetic Jessie Adams and we see Kurt's unhinged attitude to her popularity, we dread what Kurt is going to do to her. Another pertinent example is *Zero Day* which follows two high-school shooters as they extensively plan their attack in advance. Sometimes, the violence that is dreaded doesn't come to fruition, further destabilizing the audience's comfort with expectations; this subversion appears in *Man Bites Dog* as Ben becomes frustrated with the filmmakers turning down his invitation to hang out. We expect him to turn violent on them, but he does not. As James Aston points out of *August Underground*; "The level of violence in the film trains the viewer to expect that scope of transgression, meaning when a young family appears on screen the viewer expects them to be targeted"[180], something that ultimately doesn't come to pass.

[178] Daniel, *Affective intensities and evolving horror forms: From found footage to virtual reality*, 76
[179] Reyes, *Horror film and affect: Towards a corporeal model of viewership*, 108
[180] J. Aston, *Hardcore horror cinema in the 21st century: Production, marketing and consumption* 2018), 89

The other way this spatial horror appears is as panic; in films like *Apollo 18*, *Trollhunter*, *The Lost Coast Tapes*, *Alien Abduction*, *Cloverfield* and *Blair Witch* the threat is coming after the audience/camera and through a first-person perspective the viewer is navigating the space, at speed, trying to get away. Some sequences last only a short time, as with the subway tunnel scene with the parasites in *Cloverfield*, but others like the chase through the house at the end of *Blair Witch* can be an persistent test of endurance as the sensation of being chased invites panic. In *The Visit* (Shyamalan, 2015), this happens but plays out slowly; Becca is trapped in a dark room with the woman she thought was her grandmother. Becca understands that she is being hunted by a person whose motivations and methods are incomprehensible, prompting a terrifying close-quarters stalking.

There is a rarely-used hybrid between this fear-generating foundation and extra-visual sound, and it appears in *The Blair Witch Project* twice. As mentioned previously, the fourth night in the woods sees Heather, Josh and Mike being surrounded in their tent by strange sounds; children laughing, a woman talking and a growling-like sound. This placement of something or someone capable of rational(ish) decisions in a place they shouldn't rationally be is something to be considered, but the group are denied the time to assess this or take a steady look outside the tent when the canvas walls around them are shaken violently. The group run from the tent in a panic; through the CP-16's perspective we see Heather, but as the 16mm camera is not capturing sound the audio we hear at this point is coming from the Hi8 in Heather's hands; confirmed by the spatial source of her voice in the sound mix. As a result, when we see Heather look off to the left and scream 'what the fuck is that?' in a panicked and hysterical voice, the fact that we cannot see what Heather is seeing but we can see Heather leads to a sense of dread that something unidentifiable and yet dangerous is very close by. As Coyle points out, the fear-inducing effect of the sound is only intensified by the characters "…remarking on its unknown/unseen source."[181] This, combined with the inherent panic that sets in with the sensation of being chased, prompts a fear response that is left to wind down in the dark as the characters hide and everything goes quiet.

The second time this tactic is used is at the end; Mike is holding the Hi8 and as such is the source of the audio we are hearing, runs ahead into the abandoned house and leaves Heather behind. He climbs into the attic, following the sounds of Josh's pained screaming, and then as he is joined by Heather he takes off at a sprint into the basement, leaving her behind with the CP-16. Mike makes it to the basement but is then attacked, dropping his camera. As Heather,

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[181] Coyle, 'Spooked by sound: The Blair Witch Project', 220

hysterical with exhaustion and fear, calls for Mike, we hear her voice as distant and far away despite that fact we are seeing the video from her perspective. This is disorienting at first, but then provides a terrifying new system of orientation; as Heather gets closer to where Mike dropped the Hi8 camera and thus closer to the danger that has attacked him, her voice gets louder. As a result, the already uncomfortable sound of someone crying and shouting is also getting louder and louder, providing a spatial countdown to Heather's now seemingly inevitable death.

As a continuation to the above, it is also important to take a look at the threats in found footage horror. A creature or force that signifies a threat (either intentional or passive) is a consistent part of horror cinema and usually drives the plot forward as the characters try to resist it. Within found footage horror, many of the staple elements from the wider horror landscape emerge such as vermiform, arachnid-esque or parasitic creatures (*[Rec]*, *Cloverfield* and *The Bay*), zombies (*Diary of the Dead*), demons (*Hell House 2* and *3*), demons-as-zombies (*Jeruzalem*), ghosts (*Grave Encounters 1 and 2*, *Noroi: The Curse* (Shiraishi, 2005), *Apartment 143*) vampires (*Afflicted*); even Frankenstein's monster (*The Frankenstein Theory*), but the most common form of threat comes from other humans. Some of them are possessed (*Paranormal Activity* franchise) or might be possessed (*The Last Exorcism*), but often the threat is relatively realistic in its presentation. For example, in *Creep*, Josef is a serial killer; a charismatic white male capable of sudden and incomprehensible violence; not exactly a new concept to the modern world. Sometimes these threats have paranormal abilities or motivations but simply present as something 'normal'; in *Hell House* one of the major sources of dread comes from a human-sized clown doll that moves on its own, something that could quite easily be a person in a mask.

One thing that stands out as a relatively unique ability in found footage horror is eye contact. Many horror films do make use of eye contact, usually for pre-credit jump scares wherein the story's monster takes one final look at the camera before the film closes. In found footage however, because the camera is a diegetic part of the narrative it doesn't interfere with the suspension of disbelief when eye contact is made. As eluded to previously, films like *Blair Witch* and *Jeruzalem* make use of cameras that are either mounted over or just next to the eye, meaning even normal dialogue between characters is delivered with eye contact.

This also results in hostile individuals looking directly into the audience's eyes. Josef is a keen proponent of eye-contact in *Creep*, frequently talking to camera as initially the project is supposed to be a video diary for his son. In *The Last Exorcism*, Nell frequently stares directly at camera once she begins to show 'demonic' symptoms, often when no one else is watching her.

Perhaps the most powerful use of eye contact to generate unease and fear comes in *The Taking of Deborah Logan*. As the camera operator approaches Deborah's bedroom door, she can be heard inside talking to someone, pleading for them to 'stop' and arguing that she 'didn't know'. Her voice is doubled and pitched deeper than is natural, looking into a large mirror at herself. The camera can only see half of her face, but there is a sudden weight added to the atmosphere as a bass-sound picks up and Deborah stops talking. She shifts to the side, and her eyes move to the reflection of the camera as she looks directly at us. Throughout the film, Deborah repeatedly stares either at the camera or at other characters in a manner familiar to those with experience in dealing with Alzheimer's or other dementia-related illness.

As discussed in this chapter, found footage horror should be considered a subgenre of the wider horror genre, and should be understood via its effect on a viewer and qualified via the motivational justification for the diegetic film-artefact. More importantly, at least as far as this thesis is concerned, it should now be clear that where before we could have approached *Host* and understood a great deal of its efficacy and the potential mechanism by which it might be beneficial to viewers suffering pandemic-related anxiety using the phenomenologically biocultural approach, the added layers of analysis made available from breaking down the found footage subgenre inform our understanding of not only how *Host* scares but also what the subgenre qualities the audience are likely to be anticipating.

Chapter 4 A Phenomenologically Biocultural Understanding of *Host*

"Basically, by inventing a person that doesn't exist, we've basically summoned a false spirit…imagine you created a mask so now anything can come through and wear that mask. We don't know what it might be." – Seylan

In 2020, the presence of the COVID-19 virus lead the UK government to close schools, put in place a furlough scheme and close many businesses. While the pandemic grew in severity and a 'stay at home' order was issued, on April 21st UK filmmaker Rob Savage tweeted a video recording of a *Zoom* call taking place between Savage and his friends. The two minute long clip begins with Savage telling the group that he has been hearing noises from his attic recently. They watch as the director climbs the loft ladder to investigate the source of the sounds, but when something jumps out and tries to grab Savage he falls and lands at the bottom of the ladder, unresponsive[1]. The video, a prank played on his friends by Savage, was achieved by bringing his camera close to the attic doorframe to act as a cut, before moving to film a screen showing an attic-based jump-scare from *[Rec]*. It quickly went viral on Twitter and the resulting public attention resulted in a bidding war over a potential feature film. From the project pitch to release on horror streaming service *Shudder* (the winner of the bidding war), *Host* took three months to shoot and edit, and as mentioned previously, presents a consistent sociocultural background to the film's production.

At their core, possession and haunting movies are fundamentally about the intrusion of something 'other' into a familiar space; as Sylvia Ann Grider points out, "[we] have an incredibly powerful psychological attachment to our houses – our sanctuaries – and the intrusion of a threatening, otherworldly force in that otherwise safe setting is terrifying to consider"[182]. *Host* in particular reflects elements reminiscent of the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and response in the UK (the production location of the film). To draw in the phenomenologically biocultural approach, not only does *Host* operate on a level using the same devices as outlined in the previous chapter for engineering scares, but it could be argued

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[182] D. Goldstein et al., *Haunting experiences: Ghosts in contemporary folklore* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2007), 143

that some of the more subtextual references to infection/invasion function to provide similar vicarious learning opportunities; thus helping viewers feel better about the pandemic.

Plot overview

The narrative follows five friends (Haley, Jemma, Emma, Caroline and Radina) taking part in a séance, run by medium Seylan over an internet-based video call; a measure necessary due to the ongoing lockdown. During the seance, Jemma accidentally invites a demonic entity ('Jack') into their space(s), and the entity then kills its way through the group, including Teddy and his girlfriend Ginny, with the final sequence seeing Jemma and Haley being attacked before the video call ends.

Host satisfies the found footage definition as set out in the previous chapter; the film-artefact is a screen recording from Haley's laptop, initiated from just before the *Zoom* call is started and ending after the call time limit is reached. There appears to have been no editor; the individual video feeds in the program enlarge in a non-diegetic way that can either be written off in the same way as title cards and credits, or as the actions of a mystery editor. The film falls into the explorative category; although on the surface it seems as though the film-artefact finds a similar purpose to the surveillance recordings of, for example, *Paranormal Activity*, there is evidence within the film that rules out a possible 'defensive' motivation. Haley not only begins the recording before the séance takes place, implying an intention to capture something – therein in, she expects there to be something to capture – but when a loud bang from somewhere in her apartment gets her attention, she brings the laptop with her to film the potential activity. This shows that not only is Haley anticipating some kind of paranormal event or contact linked to the séance that she has convinced her friends to undertake with her, but her intention is to capture it on video. Where this differentiates with defensive found footage lies in the agency of Haley and the séance; Ouija boards and seances are often used in haunting horror (like the aforementioned *Paranormal Activity*) but usually as one in a series of attempts to mediate the activity happening to the characters. In *Host*, the séance is something Haley has done before and seemingly had some response to, but not recent enough for her to have engaged Seylan's services since the beginning of the lockdown; thus not urgent. Her instigating and taking part in the séance is an act of metaphysical, if not geographical, transgression into a dark place for the purpose of finding (and recording) something.

The Scares of *Host*

The construction of the atmosphere and delivery of the horror 'gags' in *Host* tap into the same tactics as outlined and explored in the prior chapter. The 'frames' each character occupies

incorporates, with the exception of Jemma, dense background detail and/or large areas of darkness with a possible point of entry. For example, Haley's shot sees her framed by the kitchen worktop on one side and the unlit doorway to the hall on the other. Where these shots remain largely static, the viewer is once again driven to search for background detail or hidden threats. Another sequence that makes use of both intense darkness with a small and harsh flashlight beam is when Teddy runs to the garage/barn. The space is littered with objects that must be scanned quickly as the light passes over them to discern if 'Jack' is hiding somewhere there. This is particularly effective as this follows the first two times the demon has made itself directly visible to Teddy/us and all parties are primed for a sudden reappearance.

A large part of the film takes place in darkness; the séance requires the use of a candle and it is often this, combined with the incidental laptop/phone light and some background detail lighting, that illuminates the characters in varying levels of clarity. Further to the film getting generally darker as the threat grows, 'Jack' is seen to disrupt or damage lights when close by, further grounding it as a danger that lurks where it cannot be seen.

Another found footage staple – extra-visual sound – plays a role here harkening back to the film's genesis; Caroline hears sounds coming from her attic and decides to investigate. Because of the multiple perspectives on screen at once, it is hard to determine which camera feed is experiencing the banging at first, following on as it does from someone else being interfered with. As such, the viewer's experience of the banging aligns them not with Caroline but with the others; knowing the noise is coming from the computer speakers and as such one of their friends but without the means to comprehend the threat immediately.

There are two main instances where the threat going unseen is engaged here. The first is when Caroline checks her attic; in attaching her phone to a selfie stick and sending it up without exposing herself to whatever might be up there, the viewer is in the same position as the other call participants of seeing the hanging legs of 'Jack' while Caroline can't. What makes this especially effective here is that the other characters *are* able to see it, and their confusion and barely-masked fear sends Caroline into a panic. In placing the other call participants adjacent to the viewing experience of the audience, the audience are in effect made participants in the call. The other instance of the unseen threat tactic being expressed comes in a sequence where the threat can only be seen through non-direct or delayed means. Haley sees something that the others/us cannot; indicating to a dark space at the end of the corridor in the living room. It is not clear that there is nothing there, leading to a panicked threat assessment as the viewer searches the frame. Haley then grabs her Polaroid camera and takes a photo; the flash failing to provide any more clarity. After a tense wait for the photograph to expose, the image

reveals the hanging form of 'Jack' visible from the shoulders down at the back wall. Once again, we must wait *with* the characters for the information we need.

The characters navigate the space while holding their devices, playing into the spatial dread/panic response that particularly comes to the fore when Emma is confronted by the presence of 'Jack' with a mask filter being triggered in her living room. After the mask disappears, she throws flour onto the floor and this allows us to see when 'Jack' begins chasing her directly, bare footprints stamping into the flour towards her/us. The final sequence sees Haley and Jemma slowly moving through Haley's apartment, using the Polaroid for light. Every few moments the flash illuminates the space, as the countdown to the end of the call runs down in the corner of the interface. The slow movement through the darkness combined with the rapid flashes of light mean the audience is constantly trying to build a picture of the environment as the couple navigate the space. This sequence ends with 'Jack' leaping out at them, just as the timer stops and the call drops.

'Jack' itself, as the direct textual antagonist of the narrative, presents as a number of fear response-triggering images. The first is the hanging body seen several times, an image that invokes death and mortality. The second is the invisible agent seen only through its interactions with is environment. The third, and the most effective, can be understood as the mask of 'Jack' slipping away from its true demonic presence. Its first full appearance is as a man with wide white eyes and reddish livor mortis-esque skin and bared teeth in a surprising and hostile appearance. The second comes a few moments later in the same sequence; now blue/black skin with one white-silver eye visible. This time, although the teeth are visible again and the demon is once again screaming, this time the hands are placed almost entirely over its face in a display of fear, pain, anguish or all three. The effect of this, with the dangerous threat displaying body language reminiscent of vulnerable human emotions, leads to a confused sudden attempt to re-evaluate the threat, but the conflicting information isn't enough to guide judgement and the sequence moves on as Teddy runs screaming for his life. It is also possible that this configuration of 'Jack' is a mocking recreation of Emma; the triangular frame of its fingers reveal its left eye the same way Emma almost entirely buried herself in her sheets to block out what she was seeing. The final direct appearance in the final seconds of the film retains the blue skin tone but the face now is missing its nose, with an open mouth of predatory teeth covered in blood. The brows arc up too far, whether by VFX or prosthetics, and the mouth is too large; uncanny features that present issues for threat appraisal in the short time the image is on screen.

Recognising these found footage staples in the light of the phenomenologically biocultural approach that validates them, the previously discussed hallmark triggers are all there. The evolutionarily-learned fear of the dark, of being surrounded by a threat, of other humans with unknown or hostile intentions. These elements are direct and explicit; the group journeys into the darkness in order to explore somewhere they likely shouldn't be and the viewer vicariously survives 'Jack's' onslaught and – on some level cognitively and another biochemically – learns from the experience. These direct bioculturally-understood triggers are clear to see, as they are when deployed in most films, but there is also the subtextual level where we might argue these triggers are deployed in a more subtle way that speak to the dominant cause of social anxiety present during the film's production.

Priming

Calling back to Turner, *Host* does a lot of priming on multiple levels to prompt anticipation in the viewer. First, a lot of weight is placed on Haley's insistence that the séance should be taken seriously and Seylan should be shown respect. Here, the concern is less one of potential danger and more of social stress; it is important to Haley that her friends treat this properly, and so we are both driven to expect that this will not be the case and will be a point of contention between the characters. The second priming comes from Seylan herself as she reiterates the importance of showing the spirits respect; without outlining the possible dangers at this point, Seylan makes it clear that there is a way the séance should be done, something that we also understand to be at threat. The final diegetic priming, constructed of smaller elements woven through the film's first act, primes the audience to be scared. Repeatedly, Emma and especially Caroline are shown to be scared of what may happen, and Caroline's repeated attempts to persuade the group to do something else instil a dread in the viewer. This is coupled with Haley's behaviour at the beginning of the film which implies she is already experiencing something paranormal that she is looking for some elucidation on, as well as lower-threat unsettling images like the clown marionette, the music box and Emma's filters to ensure the viewer is prepared for *something* to happen.

The other piece of priming is one that will not affect every viewer; the original prank video from Savage went viral as previously established. For those that saw it, the sequence of events; introduction of the noises, opening the attic, climbing in and the slow pan around as the *[Rec]* footage is triggered, was a simple sequence that involved its own building of dread and then jump scare. For those viewers, the point in the film at which Caroline hears the noises coming from her attic and begins to investigate, the extra-diegetic reference instils a renewed dread as that viewer understands precisely what is coming. As such, when Caroline

takes much longer to open her attic than Savage did, that tension only continues building. When the camera enters the attic and begins the slow pan (Caroline may not have climbed up the ladder as Savage once did, but *we* certainly went in), the prank-aware viewer is waiting for that jump scare, now lacking the familiarity of the *[Rec]* sequence with this new environment and being unsure when it is coming. As such, when the legs of 'Jack' are visible but prompt no jump scare, when the camera whips back to them to reveal nothing there, when Caroline retreats from the attic without incident, the viewer is left in a highly affectively charged state. This leaves us having not had the shock to release that tension, leaving us vulnerable to the following events.

Isolation and Space

Isolation plays a key role in the narrative of *Host*. Three of the five principle characters are alone in their homes and for those with company during lockdown, their presence brings with it a source of tension. Caroline's dad is not adhering to the stay at home order and although this gets laughed off as 'cheeky' by the group, we see throughout that Caroline is a very nervous person and we can infer the stress her father's actions put on her. This is reflective of the real world research undertaken by the University of Sheffield and Ulster University that showed an increase in anxiety and depression, more so in women, in surveys taken during the week of March 23rd 2020[183]. The other character with a companion is Radina, who moved in with her partner at the start of lockdown and it would seem that this leads to arguments concerning their shared space. The characters' individual isolation plays a part in the driving conflict of the film as well, as Seylan indicates that she usually does her seances in person, and the act of being in a physical circle provides protection. The only time we see two 'isolated' characters sharing a physical space together, it is Haley (who is hidden and seems to be safe at the time) and Jemma (who has remained completely free of Jack's malevolence) and as soon as they are together Jack attacks them.

As a found footage film, there are two levels of frame in operation throughout. The first is the tangible film artefact as we as audience are watching it; a screen recording from Haley's laptop that captures the video call program window. It is worth noting that the initial model of distribution for *Host* is through the streaming service *Shudder*, an online platform that will likely be utilised on the same platform as the viewer uses for their own online video calls. As Adam Daniel points out while discussing Caetlin Benson-Allott's writing on horror

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[183] C.-P. R. Consortium, *Initial Research Findings on COVID-19 and Mental Health in the UK* (2020).

spectatorship; "…each viewing medium produces its own specific qualities of experience, which, especially when coordinated with the diegetic content of the film, allows for the spectator to be more pervasively 'infected' by the film's content"[184]. This notion of 'infection', in this case potentially literal, is pertinent when discussing *Host*, given both the transmissive nature of Jack and the prevalent health concern at the time of its production and initial consumption. To draw from Daniel again, this time discussing *The Ring* (Verbinski, 2002); "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…perhaps 'infecting' us as well"[185]. This sense of infection is key in affecting fear in the viewer; the film opening and closing with allusions to the *Zoom* setting emphasises the viewer's placement outside of the characters on screen; in much the same way as the sequence in *[Rec]* wherein; "…the camera falls to the ground, and we 'fall' with it. Our point of view now is with the camera on the floor…it is a comforting realisation…because not having a body in this film-world means not being vulnerable to attack"[186]. Where in *[Rec]* this affords a moment of respite, *Host*'s internet-transmissible viral demon poses a potential threat to the viewer, regardless of their 'existence' within the film-world. The 'naturalised' setting of the film being distributed on largely *Zoom*-enabled devices reflects Jowett and Abbott's comments on *Ghostwatch* (Manning, 1992), wherein they point to the broadcasting into the domestic space of the viewer makes the television itself a form of conduit.[187] Hart, in introducing his *Monstrous Forms*, says of *Unfriended* (Gabriadze, 2014); "What makes [*Unfriended*] so effective is that by locking its depiction of a digital ghost into a laptop screen, it's ghostliness is grounded in familiar, everyday technological experience…But these movies also bring to the forefront the uncanny mixture of presence and distance that we've somehow grown accustomed to in the 21st century."[188] "*Unfriended* is symptomatic of [a promiscuous fluidity in digital horror form] because its cross-medial aesthetic and technological reference points become its very substance. To tell its story of digital horror it doesn't just refer to *Facebook* or instant messaging or *Google*; it adopts an aesthetic that is more closely aligned with browsing than it is with the 'cinematic'. The fears it presents to the audience are mediated not just

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[184] Daniel, *Affective intensities and evolving horror forms: From found footage to virtual reality*, 34
[185] *Ibid, 38*
[186] Monnet, 'Body genres, night vision and the female monster; REC and the contemporary horror film', 150
[187] L. Jowett & S. Abbott, *TV horror: investigating the dark side of the small screen* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 180-189
[188] Hart, *Monstrous Forms: Moving Image Horror Across Media*, 1

through the technology but through the ways in which we experience and engage with that broader range of technology on a daily basis: glitches, pop-ups, viruses, trolls."[189]

The second frame, or set of frames, are the individual boxes in which the separate video feeds sit in the 'program' window. The format of their video call is important; between businesses getting their staff working remotely and social visits having to move to the 'sterile' online space, virtual communications platforms like *Skype*, *Microsoft's Teams* and *Zoom* have taken a key position in how we communicate. The latter platform on that list saw a 248% increase in stock value in the first half of 2020[190], and that same platform is the 'location' for *Host*. There is an important aspect of *Zoom* as a platform; unlike other services that have users join a 'call', a call in *Zoom* is initiated by the host setting up a 'room'. This approximation of a physical space, coupled with a supplementary 'waiting room' where users pending acceptance into the conversation wait, plays an important part in establishing the invasion-as-infection theme of the film. The users all exist in a digital reflection of a tangible location, and in the act of inviting people to attend the call as well as new users being vetted by the host, the implicit understanding is that the room of a *Zoom* call – in this case 'Haley's Personal Meeting Room' – is safe. Only those invited can enter, and even then they must be let in. For something hostile to enter the space, it must enter under the guise of a friend or enter *with* them.

For the majority of the film, the characters are singularly located in their own space, be it bedroom or living room, and this reduction of people to individual windows is reminiscent of Jeff's detached voyeurism in *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954). Just as the residents of Greenwich Village exist in the same space with minimal interpersonal engagement, the reverse is coded in the visual language of the *Zoom* call; the participants are directly communicating with each other and yet do not exist within the same tangible space. The visual language of them being quite literally framed not only accentuates the isolated loneliness between them, but it places the viewer in a position as voyeur; we are also invaders in gaining access to this safe space.

In discussing how the séance will work and the rules the participants must follow, Seylan tells the group how to break the activity off and make themselves safe. This process involves imagining a rope that connects the person to their front door and the cutting of that rope. This representation of the seance as a process that connects or binds the characters to the outside

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[189] *Ibid, 3*
[190] R. Mashayekhi, *Zoom's stock is now up nearly 250% this year. It has Goldman Sachs in its sights next*, 2020.

through their front door reinforces the idea that the seance represents an interaction with the outside world. The cutting of the rope is isolation at its purest distillation. The activity is both a meaningful connection to the world through the opportunity to socialise, but it also establishes a link to the non-sterile world beyond the front door. To be safe, the participants must completely cut themselves off from the outside world, but to isolate is to lock yourself in with whatever else is already there. Cutting the rope once Jack has already made its way into the group is fruitless.

But just as the individually isolated characters exist in a space fraught with the fear of something getting in, the reflective virtual space – the *Zoom* call – carries with it the same fear. To enter Haley's Personal Meeting Room, one needs to be let in, and in recounting the fictional story of Jack, Jemma allows the danger into the 'room'. The room that is shared by the group is contaminated by the actions of a single person, thus making the controls in place to limit access meaningless. This is not to hermeneutically imply that the many people who have been infected with COVID-19 brought it about with their own actions, but rather *Host* puts particular stress on the character of Jemma as someone who was told what to do/what not to do, contradicted that instruction, and in doing so jeopardized the health of the group. Whether or not she meant to do it, or understood the potential ramifications is irrelevant, just as we can't possibly know the full consequences of any one of our actions. It is simply about mitigating threats where possible. We will return to this aspect of the theme in discussing anti-intellectualism.

A motif that occurs frequently within the film that has implicit connotations of respiratory illness and breathing difficulties is suffocation. Not only are Emma, Radina and Alan all lifted from the ground and choked/hanged – in Emma's case her survival of this experience is followed by panicked, sob-strewn breathing – but Jack itself is the very image of suffocation. In accordance with Jemma's fictitious story, Jack is often seen hanging as though by a rope and in one of the few close ups we see in the film of the entity's face, it is blue in colour. Beyond direct references to being suffocated however, there is also the frequent image of characters being compressed or surrounded by matter. Jemma pulls her hood tight over her head, Caroline uses her hands to hide her eyes and mouth and in a direct contrast to Heather's apology sequence in *Blair Witch Project* where the open space and darkness threaten through their vastness, *Host* sees Emma pulling her duvet so completely over herself as to expose a single, hysterically-searching eye.

Tied to this visual motif of suffocation is a frequent allusion to masks. Characters often cover their mouths during the ensuing events, and Emma's use of filters acts as another visual

reference to the hiding of one's own face. This is actually perverted by Jack as it triggers the face-finding filter app in Emma's living room wearing the mask of the killer from *Alice, Sweet Alice* (Sole, 1976); a film also about the invasion of a perceived secure place, albeit in that case religion as opposed to the isolated home. The film even opens with Haley removing protective film from her webcam; the first unmasking that precedes the threat to come. This frequent allusion to compression or being smothered, aesthetically binds the tangible setting of the film – people at home under lockdown – to the emotional condition that the threat presents.

Interpersonal Stress

The narrative structure of the film as a *Zoom* call between friends provides another opportunity to examine the social stresses of the UK in 2020, only this time without the need of arguing supernatural-to-epidemiological semantics. As mentioned previously, the online conference call has become a core method of communicating between groups that were previously able to engage face-to-face, and although there are many positives to socialising in this way (distance and cost being negated, the inclusion of other media like films or games, to name a few), there are some key ways in which this method of communicating is fundamentally flawed. In a normal social interaction between five friends, there is a lot of control each person has over their engagement with that discussion. Eye contact, speaking volume, facial expressions, body language, the conversational fallout shelter of distracting oneself with a phone; there is a lot of nuance and subtlety to the act of conversation that affords the participants a great deal of control over what they say and how they say it.

On a '*Zoom* call' – though this is an issue across multiple video-based communication platforms – each participant's face is placed side-by-side to give total panopticonical access to the entire discussion. Reflexive eye-rolls or involuntary pangs of sadness or pain can't be hidden when everyone engaging in the conversation is visible at once. Only one person at a time can talk, which often means that the most vocal person/people on a call tend to dominate the conversation, ostracising those who are much quieter. Not only does this frustrate the ability of the participants to hold a 'normal' conversation, but when this is the only way groups of friends can catch up with one another, there is a risk that the previously stable social dynamic of the group will be irreversibly damaged by trying to conform to this new system.

In *Host*, we see this manifest in a number of ways. When Jemma enters the 'room' from her computer while still logged in on her phone, resulting in a feedback loop from both active devices, Haley's irritation is clearly visible. She doesn't directly confront Jemma, but underplays her obvious frustration; "You got to turn off the phone audio, I think." From this

interaction alone, the viewer gets the impression that these two are not close, and yet when Haley is dragged away into the darker regions of her apartment later in the film, Jemma immediately runs from her house to try and save her. The legacy of their relationship in the 'real' world doesn't match up with the virtual space it must exist in. Similarly, when Teddy prompts Seylan to say 'astral plane' and thus act as an unwitting signal for their drinking game, Haley's frustration is again clearly visible. It's not that Haley only has this reaction because of the space of their communication, but rather she lacks the myriad of options to disguise or even subtly indicate her frustration to the relevant parties while she is compressed into this two-dimensional reality.

All participants in the call are equally involved in the call, removing the capacity for selectively engaging one or two people in a comment, so when the characters discuss Radina's mistake in moving in with Alan before lockdown, there is a tension formed in not knowing if the 'muted' Radina and Alan can hear their comments. So too with Jemma's critical comments about Jinny as Teddy joins the call; close enough that Jemma has to cut herself off mid-sentence. Did Teddy hear the remarks? Did Ginny? This lack of nuance in interaction forms a hierarchy of volume and agency that fundamentally alters the dynamic of any group who are used to communicating in-person. Jeremy N. Bailenson, the founding director of Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab, argues that there are four nonverbal factors that lead to '*Zoom* fatigue' that arise from videoconferencing; excessive amounts of close-up eye contact, constant self-evaluation due to constant visibility, restriction on physical mobility and increased cognitive load being caused by an increase in communicative cues both sent and received.[191] There are many accounts of individuals discussing their worsening social or familial relationships as a result online[192]. Another aspect of the Zoom call as socially-distorting communication is the constant awareness of one's own self; it is highly abnormal to constantly see yourself during a social interaction but as Lauren Geall puts it; "Being able to see (and pick apart) every little thing about the way I speak, smile, look and react during a conversation puts a downer on things."[193]

There is a concern of reality vs virtuality in online communication, especially for people for whom online is the only way they can communicate. One of the most striking images of the film comes towards the end; everyone but Haley and Jemma are dead, and one by one their

[191] J. N. Bailenson, 'Nonverbal overload: A theoretical argument for the causes of Zoom fatigue', *Technology, Mind, and Behavior*, 2, 1 (2021).
[192] S. Hamedy & A. Ebrahimji, *The pandemic has destroyed friendships and divided families*, 2020.
[193] L. Geall, *When did the idea of talking to my friends on Zoom start feeling like a chore?*, 2020.

video feeds blink out. Caroline's video screen shows a pre-recorded background of her entering her own room, perusing the drawers and leaving again. Earlier, Caroline jokes that she felt lonely so she made herself a friend; the digital Caroline walking around in the background as Zoom cuts out Caroline's outline in real-time and 'keys in' the pre-recorded video. But after she has been killed by Jack, she is gone in both being dead but being removed from the screen. In this form of communication, where there is no seeing someone outside of their little digital box, all that remains of Caroline is a saved loop of video. This virtual echo, at once an intentional aspect of her personhood but now the unintentional remainder of what is left, hints at a discussion of the nature of the purely virtual person and the ontological nature of being solely online. In this context, this invites for the viewer a ontological terror at both the possibility of death and the questionable 'fullness' of the digital imprint left behind.

Anti-intellectualism

As the number of COVID-19 cases rose higher and higher, along with deaths, the UK Government proved itself incapable of responsibly handling the outbreak to protect people both medically and economically. At the beginning of March the Medical Director of Public Health England stated widespread transmission in the UK was "highly likely" and that the country needed to be prepared[194], and yet lockdown measures were not put in place until the end of that month, with the actual 'stay at home' order announced on the 23rd March.

Medical professionals warned that they were running out of Personal Protective Equipment[195] or that the PPE they were receiving were four years out of date with 'updated' dates stickered over the top[196], and amidst a scramble to get more units delivered to the NHS, a scandal arose over issues concerning transparency and conflicts of interest in companies being awarded large contracts for that PPE[197]. The "world-beating" Test-and-Trace system missed targets[198]. It is still not, at time of writing in January 2021, compulsory to wear masks in all public settings, despite updated recommendations from the WHO in June 2020[199]. Government figures like chief advisor Dominic Cummings have made a mockery of UK authorities by claiming to have 'tested his vision' by driving to a public tourist spot during lockdown rules, after being

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[194] B. News, *Coronavirus: Widespread transmission in UK 'highly likely'*, 2020.

[195] B. News, *Coronavirus: NHS staff 'at risk' over lack of protective gear*, 2020.

[196] M. Launder, *Practices being sent expired face masks with 'concealed' best before dates*, 2020.

[197] T. Kinder et al., *Watchdog criticises government over awarding of £17bn Covid contracts*, 2020.

[198] A. Vaughan, *Internet outage slows covid-19 contact tracing of thousands in England*, 2020.

[199] B. News, *Coronavirus: WHO advises to wear masks in public areas*, 2020.

symptomatic[200]. And in spite of Matt Hancock's claim of a 'protective ring' thrown around care homes[201] – an act later qualified as a recommendation of "essential visits only" which was an attempt to revise history and pretend that care homes had been considered in the early stages of the pandemic[202] – The Health Foundation reported over thirty-thousand excess deaths in care homes and more still in domiciliary social care[203]; a staggering and preventable loss of life consigned to be yet another critical failure of Boris Johnson and his Conservative government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis.

I outline the above not to criticise the UK Government for the sake of it but rather to set the contextual stage for the production of *Host*. When discussing any film in an academic sense, there is always a level of push and pull between readings and perceived meanings of the textual elements and a practical understanding of its production process and context. One can analyse a line stated by a character as meaning any number of things, but the actual intentionality of that line is ultimately lost to context; maybe the actor improvised the line? Maybe it was hasty post-shoot ADR looping? Maybe the point we make of the director's intent in that line is incorrect, as it was actually inserted forcefully by a producer? My point is that a film can take a few years to produce, with the involvement of a huge number of creative agents and department heads, and the film itself is written *at least* three times (script, shooting and edit) in different production contexts each time. However, *Host* was conceived, written, shot and edited during the UK lockdown in 2020 in a space of twelve weeks, in the midst of a global pandemic wherein the UK government's COVID-19 response has been deemed a "national humiliation" by 51% of survey respondents[204]. Those same concerns about intentionality still exist, but the context within which this film was produced is relevant in its *consistency*.

In the effort of affording a rudimentary definition to the notion of anti-intellectualism, Richard Hofstadter writes in his work *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*: "The common strain that binds together the attitudes and ideas which I call anti-intellectual is a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a

[200] D. Cummings, *Dominic Cummings: Full transcript of Boris Johnson aide's statement from Downing Street*, 2020.
[201] V. Romei et al., *Hancock claim of 'protective ring' round care homes questioned*, 2020.
[202] A. MacAskill & S. Grey, *Exclusive: Review contradicts Boris Johnson on claims he ordered early lockdown at UK care homes*, 2020.
[203] T. H. Foundation, *New analysis lays bare government's failure to protect social care from COVID-19*, 2020.
[204] K. s. C. L. N. Centre, *Majority of Britons distrust government Covid response for first time*, 2020.

disposition constantly to minimise the value of that life."[205] The presence of anti-intellectualism in *Host* can be seen as reflective of the continued persistence of a generic anti-intellectual discourse, but I would argue its inclusion here can be closely associated with the COVID-19 informational ecosystem.

In the basic act of ignoring or dismissing the warnings of an authority, the actions of the characters can be said to be typical of anti-intellectualism, but given the newness and immediacy of the tangible threat I think it is more relevant to consider the text emblematic of a new or revised fear of the anti-intellectual. Despite the importance of elections, it can be said that to most, the impact of their five-yearly choice in the polling booth doesn't appear to directly impact their day-to-day life in any demonstrable way. Where political differences of opinion take on a more ideological shape in discussion, the anti-intellectual is a threat assessable on a scale depending on the shape of the society at the time. The 'new fear' of the anti-intellectual comes as a result of the immediate and personal potential mortal danger presented by an individual who chooses to reject scientific advise on health and the COVID-19 response. A person who votes 'ignorantly' contributes to a political movement and societal structure; a person who lives 'ignorantly' during the time of a global pandemic could be the one to infect you.

Although Seylan doesn't warn of the specific risks of derailing the seance, she does impart the importance of respecting the spirits, and this is echoed by Haley as she requests her friends show the seance leader respect and take it seriously. Seylan is even visually presented as separate from the group; her video feed is dark and brooding, dark wood and stone with an immense shadow in the doorway beyond. Seylan is visually coded as different. Immediately following Haley's plea for respect, Teddy makes a drinking game of the proceeding events, which most of the other participants take part in. He even acknowledges that he is contradicting her very words as he does. Though Teddy leaves the call with Ginny, the seance progresses and the drinking game continues until Haley begins to have an experience. It is clear from her seriousness in approaching this seance, as well as her concern at something being in her apartment (her isolated space) at the start of the film, that she has a particular reason for wanting to make contact. But just as Haley is having what seems to be an interaction with the spirits, Jemma pulls the attention away and begins tearfully recounting

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[205] R. Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1964), 12

the – fictional – story of Jack, following which Seylan's call drops off as something is thrown across her house in the background of her video feed.

The actions of the seance participants in *Host* represent this newly dangerous state of the anti-intellectual mindset. Anti-intellectualism is used to affirm already-held beliefs, and this is clear in the film; neither Jemma nor Teddy – the principle antagonisers to Haley's call for respect – believe anything will come of the seance and their lack of respect to both Seylan and Haley, as well as the actual spirits themselves, confirms as much. If Jemma knew the threat or believed in the possibility of a threat arising from the seance she likely would have behaved very differently. But just as a person who thinks the potential consequences of going outside are 'no more than the flu' risk endangering their entire family, Jemma's dismissal of the potential of a threat results in a virus-like agent entering the secure room, and spreading through the group.

Host takes a hard-line stance to this form of rejecting 'science'; after Seylan is removed from the call, Haley tries to take control and complete the seance to close the connection with the other side. She has attended seances in the past with Seylan, and presumably knows the basic process. She instructs the others to visualise the rope to their doors and cut it, while having to deal with an angry Jemma complaining that Haley doesn't know what she's doing. What is important here is that Haley performs the correct actions but it doesn't work. It's not enough to have the group do as they should; if there has been one failure, one breach in the sealed room, then it is already too late. In this respect, *Host* acts as parable for the dangers of disrespecting or ignoring the voices of those 'in the know'.

As I have outlined in this chapter, *Host* is a found footage horror film of the 'explorative' type, in keeping with my previously outlined definition of the subgenre. At the start of this thesis, I outlined the principle academic theories concerning horror cinema with the requirement of finding a school of thought that explains why horror (stories understood to be fictional) is effective (provokes a corporeal reaction). The phenomenologically biocultural approach both explains why horror scares – the mind and body read the narrative events as essentially real – and opens the way to a possible explanation as to why being scared by horror can be a good thing for some viewers. Knowing how horror scares and why that might be a good thing, and the specific ways found footage horror scares, our understanding of *Host* can be laid out as such; *Host* is an explorative found footage horror film that uses familiar constructions (extra-diegetic sound, pareidolic framing, etc) to incite fear in an audience relatively unique in its commonality; just as all humans are humans and will (with some rare exceptions) likely react to evolution-grounded horror stimuli in similar ways, nearly all viewers of *Host* will have

experienced first-hand the very same pandemic/lockdown environment that lead to and influenced the film's production. While the direct scares, such as the screaming visage of 'Jack', prompt immediate survival-oriented bodily reactions, it is possible that the environmental context of the locked-down viewer may contribute to feelings of dread or discomfort at the less-direct themes of the film such as the fear of contagion and anxiety of anti-intellectualism. Horror and fandom scholar Matt Hills reads the 'Emily Cook' era of *Doctor Who* as being "…a source of ontological security for fans…"; for example the story *'The Terror of the Umpty Ums'* as being a meta-narrative that tells (mostly younger) fans that feeling scared during the COVID-19 pandemic is ok[206]. The ontological security that *Doctor Who* is trying to reinforce is what is being directly targeted by *Host,* whether intentionally or not. The COVID-19 pandemic forced people to reimagine their social and work spaces, their approaches to communication and consumption, their understanding of their own assumed health and wellbeing. This ontological insecurity would seem to be exacerbated by a film that invokes stress and terror using this conceptual framework, but as the preceding thesis argues, addressing these concepts via horror cinema could prove to be beneficial to the audience, whether by helping them recover from or psychologically prepare for whatever comes next.

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[206] M. Hills, 'Doctor Who and the thirteenth Doctor during UK lockdown: Paratexts of hope and care', [Lecture]2021, unpublished).

Chapter 5 Conclusion

"Creating an experience with the right amount of fear to push boundaries and leave people feeling confident, with the right amount of fun to leave them feeling wonderful, and all within a context that is not exploitative or insensitive, is a tough challenge—one that many, many places have failed at. But I saw and learned firsthand it was worth doing." – M. Kerr on VHANE activities.[207]

As should be clear by now, we fear the threats of horror films on a direct and literal level in a process that could well be grounded in our capacity to survive 'near-misses' and internalise these events. In this way, found footage horror makes for an interesting site of investigation with its often more direct and literal engagement with the viewer. Found footage horror as a subgenre is a fascinating area of study; as the technology through which the human race mediates the world around it continues to evolve and change, so too will the stories that we tell foregrounding our relationship to that technology, and in doing so the timeline of found footage horror acts as a timeline of such technologies and our attitudes to them. In this thesis I have proposed a new, and quite possibly controversial, approach to found footage horror. I have outlined *how* found footage horror scares, but there is a lot more to discuss. Further study to be undertaken from here should concern how found footage horror differentiates from the (rare) found footage film from other genres, how the found footage aesthetic is either directly (*The Descent* (Marshall, 2005)) or indirectly (*Sinister* (Derrickson, 2012)) appropriated in non-found footage films, and perhaps most importantly, matters of social representation. In the course of my research for this project, I have assembled a wealth of notes on the problematic, toxic or outright hostile ways in which women are presented in found footage horror, the manners in which concerns over consent and bodily autonomy are routinely dismissed and – disappointingly but perhaps not surprisingly – how rarely non-white, non-cis and non-heterosexual people appear in found footage horror. As has been established in this thesis, horror has the potential to make people feel better, but as with all areas of the film industry in the US and UK, there is a lot more work to be done before it can be said that horror cinema is a force entirely for good.

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[207] Kerr, *Scream: Chilling adventures in the science of fear*, 193-194

Host as a film may not reflect the reality of living in lockdown Britain, nor can much useful information on surviving a pandemic be found in its sub-hour run-time, but if there is one thing that can be confidently stated based on the various elements that comprise the phenomenologically biocultural approach to horror it is that *Host* has the capacity to make people feel better. Whether in providing vicarious near-death experience via infection, invasion, disease or interpersonal violence, or in the multiple bodily interactions during horror film viewership (what Kerr would call VHANE) that can impart positive sensations, or even in the communal aspect of *Host's* release and the subsequent community that rapidly came together in its wake to celebrate its release; being scared could well be just what the doctor ordered.

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